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After 17 years of silence, FBI Oswald agent speaks up

The FBI agent responsible for monitoring Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas has remained silent since the assassination of President John F. Kennedy 17 years ago. Now he has decided to tell his side of what happened "because one of these days they are going to have to face up and tell the public the truth."

By EARL GOLZ

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Documents referring to Lee Harvey Oswald's trip to Mexico City, where he met with a Soviet agent for assassination and sabotage two months before President John F. Kennedy's death, were secretly removed by the FBI from Oswald's internal security file in Dallas hours after Kennedy was shot, says the agent who monitored Oswald's activities in Dallas.

A file of the FBI's pre-assassination investigation showed Oswald met with Valeriy V. Kostikov in the Soviet embassy in Mexico City less than two months before the assassination, former FBI agent James P. Hosty Jr. said. But nothing he saw at FBI headquarters or other bureau field offices before the assassination indicated Kostikov was a KGB agent responsible for assassination and sabotage, Hosty said.

This is the bombshell Hosty said he would have dropped if the House Assassinations Committee had permitted him to testify in 1978.

The Warren Commission in 1964 could not determine what happened at the meeting between Oswald and Kostikov because the CIA apparently did not know and still does not know. The Soviets were not about to tell — if they knew.

"The true identity of the man (Kostikov) Oswald was in touch with was never given to me," Hosty

said. "They just didn't want to dwell on that."

Hosty learned of Kostikov's espionage work when an intelligence source tipped him three years after the assassination.

Neither the FBI's domestic intelligence division, where Hosty was assigned, nor bureau headquarters "authorized an intelligence investigation into possible foreign complicity in the assassination," the House Assassinations Committee said last year. The FBI "failed to cooperate fully" with the Warren Commission and provided "misleading" and "incomplete" information, the panel said.

Hosty's story bolsters reports FBI director J. Edgar Hoover became committed very early to defending the idea Oswald was a lone nut who shot the president.

The loner theory insulated the FBI from criticism. Lone nuts are not within the purview of the FBI, but former defectors to Russia who deal undercover with the likes of Kostikov are.

Hoover sent President Lyndon B. Johnson a background report on Oswald the day after the assassination, omitting reference to the FBI's security case against Oswald in Dallas.

Three weeks later, the FBI submitted its report on the assassination, concluding Oswald was the assassin and acted alone. One day later, Hoover secretly censured 17 FBI supervisors and agents, including Hosty, for negligence in the surveillance of Oswald, whom Hoover said should have been placed on the FBI subversives security index.

In 1964, the FBI gave the Warren Commission a summary of 69 items in Oswald's file in Washington. Only one item mentioned Kostikov, "who functioned overtly as a consul in the Soviet embassy" in Mexico City and who also was "known to be a staff officer of the KGB." Kostikov was a member of the KGB's "thirteenth, or 'liquid affairs' department whose responsibilities include assassination

and sabotage," the report said.

Hoover told the Warren Commission 10 days later he had been "unable to find any scintilla of evidence showing any foreign conspiracy or any domestic conspiracy that culminated in the assassination of President Kennedy."

Hoover "resented criticism to a degree greater than any other person that I have known," former Deputy Atty. Gen. Nicholas Katzenbach told the House Assassinations Committee in 1978. If the FBI "made any mistake or anything for which the public could criticize the bureau, the bureau would do its best to conceal the information from anybody," said Katzenbach, who was Atty. Gen. Robert Kennedy's top aide at the time of the assassination.

At least four Mexico City documents were removed from the Dallas file during the afternoon of the assassination, Hosty said. At least one of the items was checked out by his supervisor, Kenneth C. Howe, he said. They were taken without Hosty's knowledge from his workbox after he was instructed to attend Oswald's interrogation by Dallas police the afternoon of the assassination.

Howe, retired and living in San Diego, Calif., said he has "no recollection of anything like that."

"There was nothing taken out of his box as far as I was concerned except something I may have taken out as a supervisor which I was entitled to do," Howe said. "If I did so it certainly would be in connection with business and not surreptitiously."

No evidence indicates the excised Dallas documents ever reached the Warren Commission, although Hosty said they were reinserted into the file after he testified five months later before the commission. By that time, possibility of the commission demanding to see the Dallas file had faded. One day after Hosty's testimony, Chief Justice Earl Warren urged other commission members to refrain from examining the FBI headquarters file on Oswald on the

basis it contained classified material.

The Warren Commission concluded Oswald traveled to Mexico City and visited the Soviet and Cuban embassies in an attempt to get a visa to Russia. One month after he returned from Mexico — and 10 days before the assassination — he mailed a letter to the Soviet embassy in Washington recounting his efforts in Mexico City and noting he met "with comrade Kostin," who the CIA said probably was Kostikov.

In its 1964 report, the commission said Kostikov was a member of the Soviet consular staff in Mexico City and was "also one of the KGB officers stationed at the embassy. It is standard Soviet procedure that KGB officers be stationed in embassies and in consulates to carry on the normal duties (processing visas) of such a position in addition to undercover activities."

That was all the Warren Report had to say about Kostikov. The Oswald letter, intercepted by the FBI, was "no more than a clumsy effort (by Oswald) to ingratiate himself with the Soviet embassy," the report said.

The commission indicated Oswald would not have been a candidate for Soviet intelligence work because of his extensive Marxist exposure in the United States. Investigators with the House Assassinations Committee, however, have speculated Oswald's pro-Communist demonstrations made him ideal as a double agent for U.S. intelligence.

The CIA's handling of the Oswald case before the assassination "was deficient because CIA headquarters was not apprised of all information that its field (Mexico City) sources had" about Oswald, the house committee said. For example, the panel was unable to determine "whether Oswald had any associates in Mexico City," the committee report said.

Hosty testified before the Warren Commission in May 1964 he "was quite interested in determining the nature of his (Oswald's) contact with the Soviet embassy in Mexico City. I

had not resolved that on the 22nd of November (assassination date). We are still waiting to resolve that."

Samuel A. Stern, commission lawyer, did not ask Hosty one question about Kostikov because "they knew I didn't know," Hosty said.

Stern, however, said recently he has "no idea who Kostikov is . . . I asked him all the questions I could think of, and if I missed something it wasn't by calculation."

During a preliminary briefing with Stern and Hoover's assistant, Alan H. Belmont, one day before his 1964 testimony, Hosty recalled something that shocked and angered Belmont: Hosty remembered on the day of the assassination seeing in the Oswald file in Dallas at least three documents mentioning Oswald's contact with the Soviet embassy in Mexico City, including one that noted Oswald met with Kostikov.

Hosty said Belmont, in charge of the assassination investigation, muttered under his breath, "Damn it, I told them not to let you see that."

"That's when I got suspicious," Hosty said. "They were going to keep me completely out of any knowledge about Mexico City (before his Warren Commission testimony). They were upset that I even knew about it. They were trying to freeze me out completely."

Twelve years later, the FBI sent someone to a hospital to question the gravely ill Belmont about the quotes Hosty attributed to him. Belmont reportedly said he "couldn't remember," Hosty said. Belmont died about a week later.

Testifying before the Warren Commission the day after Hosty, Belmont said the FBI had "no indication that Oswald was in any way connected or within the service of a foreign government." The only testimony Belmont gave about Mexico City was Oswald's visits to the Soviet embassy "were evidently for the purpose of securing a visa, and he told us during one of the interviews that he would probably take his wife back to the Soviet Union some time in the future."

No comprehensive report devoted to Kostikov's KGB credentials was known to have been submitted to the Warren Commission until the CIA sent one to general counsel J. Lee Rankin one week before the Warren Report went to press.

The FBI agent-in-charge in Dallas during 1963, J. Gordon Shanklin, could not remember hearing the name Kostikov when he was contacted recently.

"If they had ever brought it to my attention, as highly placed as . . . the man (Kostikov) was, I probably should have remembered something," Shanklin said.

Shanklin and FBI inspector James R. Malley of Washington, liaison between the bureau and the Warren Commission, deny knowing of any material on Mexico City being lifted from the FBI files on Oswald in Dallas.

"As far as any work related to domestic intelligence matters," Malley said, "that was being looked after in Washington by the people who were assigned to that phase of it . . . I never heard anything about any file (material) being removed at all. But I can't say that it did or didn't because I know absolutely nothing about that phase."

Hosty finally took it upon himself to drag the Kostikov ghost out of the FBI closet. Testifying for 30 hours before the Senate Intelligence Committee in 1975, he told of the Mexico City-Kostikov material removed from the Oswald file in Dallas. The testimony remains classified.

A former committee staff member recently recalled Hosty "saying things along those lines, and I do remember there being stuff to back him up. Our conclusion was that there was very little effort made to really follow up and investigate (foreign conspiracy leads) properly. They (FBI) were more concerned with not embarrassing themselves.

"The story he (Hosty) told us, we checked it out and tried to pin him down every which way and he was very straight with us," the former staffer said.

In its final report in 1976, the senate committee said it was "most surprising" Soviet experts at FBI headquarters in Washington "did not intensify their efforts in the Oswald case after being informed Oswald had met with vice consul Kostikov at the Soviet embassy in Mexico City.

"Further, the bureau's Soviet experts had reason to believe he (Kostikov) was an agent with the KGB's department that carries out assassination and sabotage."

The senate committee also noted the FBI report three weeks after the assassination concluding Oswald was the lone assassin was issued "on the basis of a narrow investigation of the assassination focused on Oswald without conducting a broad investigation of the assassination which would have revealed any conspiracy, foreign or domestic . . . Facts which

might have substantially affected the course of the investigation were not provided the Warren Commission."

The committee succeeded in getting the 1964 CIA document of Oswald's contacts with Soviets declassified in 1976, for the first time publicly identifying Kostikov as a member of the KGB's department for assassination and sabotage.

Hosty said the staff of the House Assassinations Committee twice called him to Washington in 1977 and 1978 but put off his testimony before the committee after he said he intended to tell what he knew of the Mexico City documents taken from the Oswald file and about the Dallas cover-up of FBI knowledge of Kostikov before the assassination.

"They didn't want me to talk to the congressmen," Hosty said. "They couldn't control it then."

G. Robert Blakey, chief counsel for the now defunct committee, said if Hosty had "a real bombshell, we (committee) would have talked about it" publicly. He said Hosty had "no new information to offer this committee."

Blakey has been strongly criticized by members of his staff for dismissing any possibility of a foreign or domestic intelligence connection to Oswald. Under Blakey's guidance, the committee concluded in 1979 a conspiracy probably resulted in Kennedy's assassination and the report pointed at certain organized crime figures and anti-Castro Cubans as the most likely conspirators.

Blakey said he could not "deny or confirm it (Hosty's story) because I am simply not free to do so." He declined to comment on why the committee report all but totally ignored Kostikov, stating he "cannot acknowledge to you anything about Mexico City."

When Blakey's committee in 1977 questioned lawyer David Slawson, who explored foreign conspiracy theories for the Warren Commission, he testified Kostikov was "certainly a very high ranking official in the KGB and perhaps the highest ranking such official in the western hemisphere. I don't remember whether he was placed in any particular division which would include assassinations or not."

Pressed repeatedly by committee deputy chief counsel Gary Cornwell about whether the Warren Commission received information from the CIA Kostikov's KGB responsibilities included assassination, Slawson said the Russian was "more important

than that.

"He was high enough up so that he was the central director, so to speak, for KGB activities in the Caribbean area which as I say was a very important area because it was kind of a spy clearinghouse and presumably as assassination clearinghouse, too," Slawson testified. "The principal objective of my work in Mexico was to find out what had gone on between Oswald and this very important KGB operative. Obviously it was a suspicious circumstance."

Despite Slawson's testimony, Kostikov is mentioned only once in the 307 pages about the Kennedy assassination in the house committee's final report last year.

The report merely states the CIA was "advised that Oswald had spoken with an individual possibly identified as Soviet consul Kostikov on Sept. 28, 1963," during his visit to the Soviet embassy in Mexico City. Nothing in the body of the report and accompanying references notes that Kostikov was a KGB agent.

The committee published a 300-page report, "Lee Harvey Oswald, the CIA and Mexico City," but it is classified.

Hosty notes Oswald and his wife, Marina, also were tight-lipped about Mexico City.

Before he was shot to death by Dallas nightclub operator Jack Ruby, Oswald did not acknowledge to Dallas police he had traveled to Mexico City less than two months earlier. Marina refused to admit under FBI questioning she knew her husband had been to Mexico City until seven weeks later when she testified under oath before the Warren Commission.

Oswald complained to the Dallas FBI office several weeks before the assassination about Hosty interviewing Marina. Hosty said he believes Oswald feared she might start talking about Mexico City.

Howard P. Willens, the Warren Commission's special liaison officer to the justice department, recalled in testimony before the House Assassinations Committee in 1978 the CIA was "keenly interested in the possibilities of either a Soviet or a Cuban involvement in the assassination."

The house committee concluded the Soviet government was not involved in the assassination "on the basis of the available evidence." The committee also said it had "no evidence that the Soviet government had any interest in removing President Kennedy, nor is there any evidence that it planned to take advantage of the president's death."

Back pay can't erase censured agent's years of pain

By EARL GOLZ

The man who many say J. Edgar Hoover made the scapegoat in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy has been partially vindicated after 17 years.

"Rather than come out and admit it (that Hosty was unfairly punished by the FBI), they (FBI) just gave me

my money back," said James P. Hosty Jr., the FBI agent responsible for monitoring Lee Harvey Oswald in Dallas.

After Hosty, 56, retired last year, the FBI returned more than \$1,000 of the salary withheld from him in 1964 when Hoover suspended him for 30

days and transferred him from Dallas to Kansas City.

Hosty, a resident of Kansas City, Kan., has lived with the burden of the assassination on his back — embittered but loyal to the organization he served for 27 years.

Silent, since the assassination,

Hosty decided to tell his side of the disciplinary action because "one of these days they are going to have to face up and tell the public the truth" about concealed information.

Hosty was the most severely reprimanded of 17 FBI men who were censured for the way they handled the

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I know that my retirement will make no difference in its cardinal principals, that it will always fight for progress and reform, never tolerate injustice or corruption. Always fight demagogues of all parties. Never belong to any party. Always oppose privileged classes and public plunderers. Never lack sympathy with the poor. Always remain devoted to the public welfare. Never be satisfied with merely printing news. Always be drastically independent. Never be afraid to attack wrong, whether by predatory plutocracy or predatory poverty.

Joseph Pulitzer

April 10, 1907

Oswald case in the days before the assassination. The others, at worst, received letters of censure and probation.

Hoover never told the Warren Commission of the censures. They were not publicly disclosed until 13 years later.

One of Hoover's top aides, William C. Sullivan, said Hoover disciplined his men in order to protect himself from blame.

Hoover calculated the censures as a means of "protecting himself against any indictment that he was at fault in the assassination," said Sullivan, Hosty's boss in the FBI's domestic intelligence division and another of the disciplined men.

"If he was charged with culpability in the assassination of President Kennedy," Sullivan said, "he could say 'these men are the ones responsible and I have already taken disciplinary action against them.'"

Hoover "did not want the Warren Commission to conduct an exhaustive investigation for fear that it would discover important and relevant facts that we in the FBI had not discovered in our investigation (and), therefore, it would be greatly embarrassing to him and damaging to his career and the FBI as a whole," said Sullivan, who was killed in a hunting accident in 1977.

Hosty doesn't point an accusing finger at Hoover or others. He views himself as a victim of an intelligence system that passes down information to agents only on a "need to know" basis, an old intelligence creed, he explains.

Hosty was not told by FBI intelligence of Oswald's contacts with the man he terms a key to Soviet

espionage in the Western Hemisphere less than two months before the assassination. And when he learned of agent Valeriy V. Kostikov's KGB role in assassination and sabotage it was three years too late.

Pre-assassination information reaching Hosty in Dallas from the FBI in Washington and other government sources was enough to put him on alert, he said. But he had not been given the Kostikov documents or the required written approval from FBI headquarters to interview Oswald after his return from Mexico City. Not even the transfer of jurisdiction of the Oswald internal security case from New Orleans to Dallas had reached Hosty's workbook until the day of the assassination.

Hosty had to eavesdrop on another federal agency in Dallas to get his first word of Oswald's visit to the Soviet embassy in Mexico City. When he did, exactly one month before the assassination, he sent an "airtel" to FBI headquarters reporting the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service had received a communication classified "secret" from the CIA in Mexico City indicating Oswald was in contact with the Soviet embassy.

"The big thing was they didn't tell me anything," Hosty said. "They held back that information about our friend (Kostikov) down in Mexico City who Oswald was talking to. You can very well see how the whole thing could take on a different complexion if I knew who he was talking to.

"FBI headquarters had it and they sat on it. No, they weren't going to send it to us. . . Well, apparently they weren't going to send it to us. There's no indication they ever did or ever

intended to tell us."

When some Mexico City material did arrive in Dallas — most of it the day before or the day of the assassination — it disappeared from Hosty's workbook after he was instructed to attend Oswald's interrogation by Dallas police the afternoon of the assassination.

FBI inspector James H. Gale, who recommended the censures to Hoover, said the Dallas field office "should have intensified investigation in the light of Oswald's contact with the Soviet embassy in Mexico City and not held investigation in abeyance."

Gale said tighter surveillance was justified "since we did not know definitely whether or not he (Oswald) had any intelligence assignment (from the Soviets) at that time."

Alan H. Belmont, assistant to Hoover, told the Warren Commission: "Nowhere during the course of this investigation or the information that came to us from other agencies was there any indication of a potential for violence on his (Oswald's) part. Consequently, there was no basis for Hosty to go to Secret Service and advise them of Oswald's presence."

Robert I. Bouck, agent-in-charge of protective research for the U.S. Secret Service in 1963, said all the derogatory information known about Oswald by four federal agencies, including the FBI, before the assassination "would have added up to pointing out a pretty bad individual." But no federal agent "knew enough about Oswald to judge him to meet our criteria of presenting a danger to the president," Bouck testified before the Warren Commission.

Last year the House Assassinations Committee found Hoover's censure of Hosty and others "went beyond what was justified, and that the bureau's pre-assassination security investigation of Lee Harvey Oswald had been adequate."

Four months after the committee's report was released, the FBI returned Hosty's pay on the basis, he said, his September 1964 suspension was tantamount to "double jeopardy." He had received a letter of censure and probation in December 1963 for the pre-assassination acts.

The return of the money was approved by FBI director William H. Webster who based much of his decision on a 20-page bureau memo that has not been made available to Hosty, he said.

Paul Wallach, counsel for the Senate Intelligence Committee that first heard Hosty's side of the story in 1975, said Hosty "is quite frankly, from talking to other agents, a good FBI agent."

Richard D. Rogge, one of the first FBI officials from Washington who was sent to Dallas by Hoover to coordinate the assassination investigation, said "unfortunately I think a super quick judgment was made on his culpability and I don't think it was fair."

Nicholas Katzenbach, deputy attorney general at the time of the assassination, said he found the FBI discipline "incredible because I do not think that Oswald, under the criteria that then existed, would have been on any such list. I do think the agents were disciplined because history overtook them."

Of the \$1.5 billion dollar budget for the HSCA, about 3 million went to the JFK study. By comparison, LBJ's Inauguration in January 1965 cost \$4 million!