

Assassination clues settle in one place

By Deborah Papier
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If a political leader has been killed anywhere in the world, chances are Bernard Fensterwald has a file on it.

Mr. Fensterwald is the founder and director of the Assassination Archives & Research Center. The archives, in five dusty rooms in a building on F Street NW that has seen better days, contain an astonishing repository of information.

There are about 1,500 books in the permanent collection, with another 500 duplicate copies that are lent to members of the center. Books on John F. Kennedy alone fill two bookcases.

There are volumes on the Mafia, Fidel Castro, Malcolm X, terrorism, U.S. and Soviet intelligence, and mind control. There is even a book justifying assassinations, entitled "Killing No Murder."

There are 2,000 audiotapes, including 22 by a Dallas Morning News reporter who worked for years on President Kennedy's assassination. There are 80,000 pages of FBI documents on Kennedy which fill eight file cabinets. Fortunately, the center was able to obtain an index to the FBI documents — which is not the case with its 11 volumes of CIA material on Kennedy.

But the "guts" of the collection, according to Mr. Fensterwald, are 16 file cabinets containing research, about half unpublished, on various aspects of various assassinations. There's a file on just about every country, since nearly every country has a history of assassinations. There's one drawer on Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald's trip to Mexico.

And all of this material is computerized. Building on the work of Jeff Meek, an assassinologist who had put together an index of 10,000 cards, the center now has a master data base with 32,000 listings.

The center has about 200 members, who pay yearly dues of \$25 or more. Use of the center is not restricted to members, however.

"Anyone who is at all serious can use the facilities," Mr. Fensterwald says. "We encourage research rather than discourage it."

Mr. Fensterwald, a lawyer whose private practice largely subsidizes the center, got interested in assassinations after the shooting of Kennedy. Mr. Fensterwald had been a classmate of Kennedy at Harvard, and worked on Kennedy's 1960 campaign as a speech-writer.

Finding the Warren Commission Report on Kennedy's death unsatisfactory — "baloney," he says — Mr. Fensterwald began pursuing his own research and forging links with others doing the same. In 1969, he formed the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, which coordinated the efforts of researchers working on the deaths of Sen. Robert Kennedy and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, in addition to that of President Kennedy.

About five years ago, the emphasis of the CTIA changed from investigative to academic, and the Assassination Archives & Research Center was born. "As the major research got older, we found it was just disappearing," Mr. Fensterwald said. "We thought it would be well to get these collections under one roof."

He hopes a local university will be impressed sufficiently by these holdings to take the center under its wing. Such an affiliation would be financially beneficial to the center, which has been unable to obtain funding from foundations. Its only salaried employee is a secretary.

"The subject makes grant people very nervous," Mr. Fensterwald says. "It has an aura — that anybody who deals with the subject is nuts."

"I'm the first to admit there are a number of nuts in the field. It's a subject that attracts a lot of paranoids. ... I think anybody that becomes an aficionado of the subject has a degree of paranoia. It's certainly an obsession with most people."

Many of the stranger people who visit the center wander in off the streets, attracted by the sign in the lobby. These visitors, Mr. Fensterwald says, are dealt with as kindly as possible. "But if we didn't ease them out, they'd sit here for days."

Aside from discouraging street people from moving in, the center does not make judgments about the quality of its researchers or research. Pertinent books are added to the collection regardless of the wildness of their premises, and would-be authors are welcome no matter how bizarre a line they are pursuing.

Assassination research is gaining respectability, however. According to Mr. Fensterwald, there are about 20 college courses offered on the subject. With this academic base, he hopes to start a scholarly journal, which would be published quarterly by the Assassination Archives & Research Center.

All this takes money, of course. But Mr. Fensterwald and his colleague, lawyer James Lesar, say the major problem is not funding but "the recalcitrance of the U.S. government."

The FBI, they say, is generally cooperative; and at times so is the State Department. But Mr. Lesar says that "nobody involved in the field has gotten an ounce of help from the CIA, National Security Agency, the Defense Department."

Mr. Fensterwald adds, "The CIA won't give you anything unless you go to court, and they'll fight it tooth and toenail."

Mr. Fensterwald contends that "false pride" has prevented the country from discovering the truth about assassinations. When a political murder occurs in the United States, he says, there is a massive effort to prove that it is a "lone nut" killing.

"We accuse Latin American countries of instability because they have coups and assassinations all the time. We call them Banana Republics. We [America] don't have coups, so assassinations have to be by a lone nut. They can't be by anybody who wants to change the policies of the country."

"The outstanding Banana Republic of the '60s was the United States," he adds.

Mr. Fensterwald says that the major venture of the Committee to Investigate Assassinations was lobbying for the creation of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, which existed from 1975 to 1979.

According to Mr. Fensterwald, the House committee "fell on its face." They concluded there was probably a conspiracy in the case of JFK and Martin Luther King, and then they didn't look to see who the conspirators were. They shut down and locked all the documents up for 50 years."

Despite these difficulties, and the fact that the passage of time would seem to make it less and less likely that any new revelations would emerge, Mr. Fensterwald is confident that the King and two Kennedy cases will be "solved" someday.

"I'm convinced that the solution is within our premises here," he says.