

A quiet woman and her searir



MARINA OSWALD

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By Marian Christy
Globe Staff

Harvard-educated Priscilla Johnson McMillan is a tiny, 49-year-old Cambridge matron who speaks in a hushed whisper and, paradoxically, paints bold pictures of bigger-than-life characters who have altered the course of American history.

"JFK," she says sibilantly about the-then senator she worked for in 1953 as a Russian researchist, "had strong personal eccentricities. He was the wildest man I've ever known. When he checked into a hospital, he took along his own black satchel filled with his own medicines ..."

She clears her throat — quietly.

"This confused the doctor ... who got even more confused when they discovered that the hospitalized JFK had left a message at his bedside that he could be reached evenings at El Morocco ..."

McMillan, a Russian linguist whose lineage is Mayflower, has written a searing psychological portrait of Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, and his Russian wife, Marina, an illegitimate child, in a book titled, "Marina and Lee."

She believes Oswald acted alone in killing Kennedy, and discards the theory of a conspiracy.

"I authored this thing for Kennedy," she whispers. "I wanted to explain to him why Oswald did it. JFK had an insatiable curiosity. He'd certainly want to know why a young punk like Lee Harvey Oswald had snuffed out his life ..."

Actually, she blundered into the book.

McMillan, an associate of Harvard's Russian Research Center, worked in Russian for the wire service, NANA. In 1959, when Oswald was 20, he became a Russian defector. "It was a story," she whispers about the Oswald interview she pursued and got.

New Orleans-born Oswald came to her room for what turned out to be a five-hour interrogation. She remembers the volleyball encounter well. "We tussled. And tussled. Lee wanted to talk Marxism. I wanted to talk about why he seemed to hate his father. ..."

Oswald, a man who spent money grudgingly and who smiled enigmatically, wasn't above telling untruths if they suited his purpose. And he did a lot of ranting and raving.

"He told me things that later proved to be blatant lies," says McMillan. "And American Embassy officials concluded he was un stable. They told me he put on a horrible scene — very, very nasty — when a consul suggested he seriously rethink taking the oath renouncing his American citizenship. ..."

Eventually, McMillan, wife of ex-Life reporter George McMillan ("Making of an Assassin — James Earl Ray"), wrote the Oswald feature that was sent over the wires. She recalls: "Oswald seemed to vanish for good." In a hush: "But ... but it was not so."

The day of JFK's assassination, Nov. 22, 1963, McMillan happened to be roaming through the Harvard campus when a stranger brushing by blurted that Kennedy had been shot! McMillan asked the question everyone was asking: Had anybody been caught?

"And the man started to say Lee Harvey ... and I gasped ... and I filled in the last name. Oswald!"

Boston Globe
Thursday, November 24, 1977

ig portrait of the Oswalds

A blur of Oswald impressions raced through her mind.

"I remembered how I thought he was the prototype overreacher. How he did menial jobs badly and big things — like defecting — so well. And he had a painful history of violence.

"He attacked a brother with a butcher knife. He hit his mother — of whom he expressed fondness. Two weeks before the Russian interview, he had slashed his wrist in a bungled suicide attempt."

She continues in that churchlike whisper:

"Oswald had done violent things all his life."

McMillan, Bryn Mawr graduate, went to see Marina, a part-time Dallas department store salesperson. And because she speaks fluent Russian, because she projects housewifely softness rather than brash aggressiveness, because she had profiled Oswald with canny precision, because she had worked for JFK, a man hero worshipped by Mrs. Oswald — Marina Oswald, a woman in search of a confidante, agreed to be quizzed.

The "talk," which evolved into many talks, lasted seven months. Early on, McMillan discovered that Lee, a loner, had a strong penchant for beating Marina — pregnant or not, with provocation or without.

Marina had rotting teeth, hand-me-down clothes and their babies, June Lee, now 16, and Rachel, 15, slept in bureau drawers. Lee was too cheap to invest in a crib.

"Marina was and is not typically Soviet in her utterances," says McMillan. "Marina is very introspective. And she

thinks she's totally worthless. She thinks the assumed worthlessness somehow makes her different and, therefore, 'special.' Lee affected the same pose...."

Talking in Russian, McMillan didn't stint on intimate questions: "I probed into their sex life. At first Marina wouldn't talk. She was very hurt. Lee's personal diary, which she hadn't known existed, was published. It showed that Lee had married Marina to spite another woman he really loved. Marina was hurt...."

Despite repeated beatings, the Oswalds' sex life was nearly always blissful. "When Lee died," recapitulates McMillan, "Marina stated that if she could have Lee back, she'd let him beat her every day."

Ponders McMillan: "Sounds masochistic."

On Nov. 24, 1963, nightclub owner Jack Ruby shot Lee in front of whirring television cameras. "Ruby was uninged by JFK's assassination. He was just an ordinary man who went crazy. He loved his dog. He sent grocery money to his stripper friends. And he went mad."

Marina Oswald now "lives with" ex-husband Kenneth Porter, a sewing machine repair shop owner from whom she was divorced in 1974. She didn't read the McMillan book until one month ago. "She cried a lot over it."

More on Marina, who has a son from Porter, Mark, 11:

"She doesn't drive. She lives in a farm town — Richardson, Texas. She does domestic work. Marina is unhappy with her fate. But she doesn't know how to change her lifestyle. She feels trapped."



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