

INTERVIEW

WHY LEE HARVEY OSWALD'S WIDOW HAS BROKEN HER LONG SILENCE

Now I know my husband didn't kill Kennedy

THE POLICE knocked on Marina Oswald's door an hour and a half after John Kennedy was shot. Her husband had been arrested, they said. She had to come immediately. When she protested that she must go to the lavatory first, a policeman accompanied her and stayed there, holding the door open with his foot.

Nearly 30 years on, the indignity of it still disgusts her. But it was merely the first of many humiliations to be heaped on the woman who became, on November 22, 1963, an unwilling player in world history.

Lee Harvey Oswald had killed President Kennedy. The woman who married him and mothered the children of this century's most famous assassin became automatically an object of loathing.

The stigma has been hard to bear. Today the force of her pain pervades the fuggy Heathrow hotel room where, just two hours off the plane from Dallas, she sits wearily smoking the first of many cigarettes.

She has always been a woman of mystery, and her face betrays no more today than the inscrutable mask she presented to the world in the immediate hours following her husband's arrest.

Millions shuddered when they saw her on television, a cold fish with high cheekbones and icy blue eyes. She was spat as a 'Commie bitch', and told to go back home to Russia. America hated her.

WHEN she smiles now the switch from chill to charm is disarming. But mostly she just seems bone-tingly sad. 'You wouldn't believe, she says softly, 'how many times I silently scream inside. I'm 32 and I haven't lived yet. I want to salvage at least a little time in some kind of peace with myself. If it was true that Lee was guilty then I could accept that. But he was not.'

This was not what she felt at the beginning. Then she said he was the killer, but gave the impression he had also been a loving father and a good husband.

Now she admits: 'We had problems. He was violent, he physically abused me. He lied. He went away all the time. I never thought he was having an affair, it never crossed my mind. He went away because he was involved in all sorts of strange political organisations.'

He told her he had tried to shoot General Walker, who had been ranked by Kennedy for distributing right-wing, anti-Kennedy literature to his troops. The attempted assassination was well documented, in April 1963. The bullet missed, and no arrests were ever made.

So when the police, and later, the Warren Commission, told her Oswald was the killer, she believed them. 'He had lied to me before, he told me he had shot at the general, and I knew he had a rifle.'

Still, that did not cushion the shock of learning that, 48 hours after his arrest, he too had been shot dead, by Dallas nightclub owner Jack Ruby.

'I still haven't got over it. The first thing I asked was whether he died instantly. And this probably sounds callous, but when they told me he had, I was relieved. I was a newly-arrived Russian immigrant and I didn't understand anything about American law. I never knew there would have



Marina, left, 29 years on from the Kennedy assassination. 'If it was true that Lee was guilty then I could accept that. But he was not.' TOP: Marina leaves Russia with Oswald. MIDDLE: The fatal moment of assassination in Dallas. BELOW: A gun-toting Oswald.



by SANDRA PARSONS

been a trial and so on. I thought he would simply be electrocuted. So I actually thought it was a blessing he was shot.'

She was interrogated, using Russian interpreters. 'For days and days and days.' When the Warren Commission report concluded that Oswald alone had killed Kennedy she accepted it 'without question', and began thinking of how she could repair the remnants of her young life.

Over the next 15 years she remarried, had another child, and produced her own book, Marina and Lee. It sold badly and is now out of print. The woman who ghost-wrote it, Priscilla Johnson MacMillan, told her not to read any of the multitude of conspiracy theory books being published every year. It would only clutter her mind, she said.

Marina read none of them. She had been in America

barely a year when Kennedy was shot; she hardly spoke the language and was grateful to have been allowed to stay there and keep her children after her husband was killed. The alternative theories as to who did it — the Mafia, Texas oilmen, the FBI, the CIA, combinations of all four — washed over her. She settled into married life with her husband, businessman Ken Porter, raised her children and worked on her book.

She believes now that Priscilla's purpose as co-author was really to 'debrief' her. Why? Was Priscilla CIA? 'No, no, don't have me saying that,' she says, her Russian accent thickening in alarm. 'She is very powerful.' It is clear that she is terrified of the CIA and regards them as a deadly organisation.

After it was published she began to read the others. Once she began she could not stop. Today, the assassination

dominates her life. She has now read every book and trawled all the evidence. It took ten years before she was sure. And then, in 1980, she went on American TV to pronounce her verdict: Oswald was innocent. 'I don't want people to think I am easing my conscience. The hardest thing is to prove to myself that Lee was innocent.'

Now there is yet another theory as to what really happened. It comes from Matthew Smith, a university lecturer living in Sheffield. His book 'JFK: The Second Plot', is in two sections. The first examines the most glaring errors and inaccuracies of the Warren Report. The second concludes that Oswald did not shoot the president.

ACCORDING to Smith, Oswald was not only a CIA agent but a patriot and all-round good guy. The day Kennedy was shot, Oswald thought he was going to Cuba on a new mission.

Police officer J. D. Tippit, doing an unofficial favour for the CIA, was supposed to drive him to the airport. But Oswald, argues Smith, was a fall-guy. Unknown to him, a

renegade section of the CIA had already planned an assassination of Kennedy. The agency blamed Kennedy for the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion sent to topple Castro, and had also clashed with him on Vietnam and Russia; they wanted rid of him, says Smith.

They intended that even before the plane took off, Oswald would be being sought for questioning. Once he arrived in Cuba, there would be no doubt in anyone's mind that he had killed Kennedy and Fidel Castro had sent him to do it.

The plan, however, went terribly awry. Oswald dashed out of the Texas School Book Depository — anxious, according to Smith, to make his rendezvous with Tippit.

But Tippit, who had glimpsed Oswald only once, was suddenly struck by the danger of picking up a man he assumed was a CIA agent when a very similar description of a young man was being circulated in connection with the assassination.

He hedged, sensing trouble, another CIA agent shot him dead. Oswald ran to a nearby cinema, hoping to meet his handler, but in his panic forgot to pay and was arrested within minutes. He was

charged with Tippit's murder, then Kennedy's.

Marina agrees with most, though not all, of this theory. Apart from anything else, it was simply not feasible, she realised, for him to have discarded the rifle and run down from the sixth floor where the shooting took place, to the second, in the few moments it took for police to enter the building.

She believes Oswald was definitely working for a government agency. 'When I look back on our life together he was not treated like an ordinary citizen. I think he did have some knowledge of the assassination party, but was not involved in it.'

SHE married Oswald within a few months of meeting him, in May 1961, in her home town of Minsk, then in Russia, now in Belorussia. For years there have been theories that she was a KGB agent. She is reluctant to say much more: 'I am sick, sick, sick of being asked about this. What does it matter how we met, or what colour my eyes are? I swear we met by accident, as a medical students' party. Nobody told me to meet him.'

'When you are 32 you have experience of life to draw on. But I was only 20. If I'd known he was a spy I would have walked away. But I came to the conclusion some time ago that he was sent to Russia by the American government.'

'When he said he wanted to go back to America I accepted it. He said he didn't want to live through another Russian winter. But I think now he had completed his mission in Moscow and he wanted to go back home.'

Today she insists she will not feel free to live an ordinary life until Oswald has been proved innocent.

She has been Mrs Porter now for 18 years, a housewife living in a ranch-style house 30 miles outside Dallas. Yet still there are people who goad her: 'What's it like to be the wife of a killer?'

'It has become easier, she says. In the early days it was terrible. Lee was dead, but I was left here to be blamed. I was like a bird in a cage.'

The last 20 years have made her a stronger character, she says. Of the effect it has had on her daughters by Oswald — Rachel, 28, and June, 30 — and 26-year-old Mark, her son by Ken, she says: 'Only time will tell.'

'All I want is for Lee's innocence to be proved. You know how people say that what you don't know can't hurt you? Well, they're wrong. I'm in a terrible limbo and I can tell you: what you don't know can kill you.'

'Please,' she says, 'don't make Lee out to be an angel. He was not. And I don't believe he ever loved me.'

Did she love him? 'I married him, didn't I? I live from the heart.'

She won't be pushed further, but simply glares forbiddingly.

'JFK: The Second Plot by Matthew Smith, published by Mainstream (£14.99)