

Chi
Trib.
11-22-83

The dreamer who killed a president

By Priscilla Johnson McMillan

Theories still swirl around that High Noon in Dallas three decades ago today. To an extent that is truly remarkable, conspiracy theorists and many of the rest of us still refuse to look closely at the other central figure of the Kennedy assassination.

One reason why Americans still wonder whether Lee Harvey Oswald killed President Kennedy and if so whether he acted alone is the incongruousness between victim and assassin. To accept the reality that a president who was young and high-spirited and full of promise could have been cut down by a small, gloomy runt of a man is too much for some of us to bear. To accept this is to accept that we are, every one of us, at the mercy of chance, and that life is a random thing indeed.

To look at Oswald, however, is to acquire a different perspective and to see that if Kennedy's career was carefully programmed, Oswald's life, too, pointed him consistently in one direction. Lee Harvey Oswald had two obsessions—politics and violence—that made the assassination, or its emotional equivalent, the inevitable outcome of his life. But he went through life creating so many false trails around himself—through both design and ineptness—that despite his desire to go down in history as the assassin, his own actions have added to the confusion that still surrounds the event.

He was a frail-seeming boy when I interviewed him for a newspaper story in Moscow in November, 1959, a few weeks after his 20th birthday. He was trying to defect to Russia, become a Soviet citizen and live there for the rest of his life. He hated the United States—and its political system—so much that he had offered the Russians such radar secrets as he might have acquired during his three-year tour in the U.S. Marines.

Oswald told me he had become a devotee of politics at the age of 15, when, as a high school student in the Bronx, he was handed a pamphlet about Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who had been executed the year before as atomic spies for the Soviet Union. After that he read Marx's "Das Kapital" and became a critic of capitalism. Not only did he hate what he called "the exploitation of the worker under capitalism," but he hated racism in the U.S. as well. After he and his mother left the Bronx and returned to New Orleans to live, Oswald regularly rode to and from school in the back, or blink, section of the bus, an act which took courage as well as conviction in the South of those days.

Oswald enlisted in the Marine Corps the day after his 17th birthday in 1956, not because he had become an American patriot but because he was following the same route his brothers had chosen to escape from their mother, Marguerite Oswald. In his barracks at El Toro, Calif., at Subic Bay in the Philippines and, again, in Japan, Oswald made a display of his study of the Russian language. As soon as he was able, he quit the Marines, hopped on a freighter bound from New Orleans to Le Havre, and made his way to Moscow.

By June of 1962, Oswald was aboard ship again, this time headed for the United States. During his two-and-a-half years in the Soviet Union, where he worked as a machinist in the town of Minsk, he went on picnics, dated girls—and talked politics ceaselessly. He wrote a long essay, "The Collective," that chronicled his disillusionment with Russia. He criticized harsh living standards, the ubiquitousness of the secret police and the hypocrisy that pervaded Soviet life.

On his return to the United States, Oswald at first impressed a group of White Russians whom he met in Dallas and Ft. Worth as being very critical of the USSR. But as the months went by and his criticisms of Soviet Russia faded, he again became critical of the United States. "A plague on both your houses," he wrote in one of his essays, and indeed it seemed that no matter what was closest to him, that was what Oswald hated most.

Hatred is the right word for Oswald. His KGB file, parts of which have surfaced in recent years, describe him as "zloby," Russian for "mean-spirited" or "full of hate." This is the same Russian word Marina Oswald used to describe her husband when I interviewed her for a biography. And, rather early, Oswald turned to violence to express his hate. He turned it first on himself, shooting himself in the elbow during his Marine Corps stint in Japan. He again turned his anger on himself in Moscow in the fall of 1959, when he slashed his wrist in a second suicidal gesture.

Back at home in 1962, he found jobs hard to find and harder to keep. On April 10, Oswald lashed out in a political way by firing a shot at Major General Edwin A. Walker, former head of the John Birch Society and a man who opposed racial integration. The shot missed Walker's head by an inch, but Lee Harvey Oswald walked away with a feeling that something in his life was incomplete.

All this time he was living in a world of fantasy about political life at the top. While they were still in Russia, he tried to rush his and Marina's visas to enter the United States so that the baby they were expecting could be born there. As the delay dragged on, he said, "Too bad. If the baby is a boy, he won't be able to become president." And when an attempt was made on the life of Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in early 1962 outside Minsk, where the Oswalds were living, Lee said, "If this had happened in the United States, everyone would know from



Kerry Whigham

radio and television who did it, and why, and how."

Back in the United States, Marina learned to recognize a certain posture he had—he would lie on his bed and gaze at the ceiling—as a sign that he was once again dreaming, as he put it, of becoming "president or prime minister," or "making a president of my son." (The Oswalds had a daughter born in Russia and another, born in Dallas in October 1963.)

In July of 1963, Oswald read William Manchester's book about John F. Kennedy, "Portrait of a President." Afterward he spoke to Marina about the Kennedys. Joseph P. Kennedy, the president's father, he said, had paved the way—"money buys everything here." But he explained that John F. Kennedy was as good a president as capitalism was capable of producing. He himself wanted enough children "for a whole football team," the way the Kennedys had. And when the Kennedys' son, Patrick, died a few days after his birth in August, both Oswalds grieved and took Patrick's death as an omen that the baby they were expecting, too, might not survive.

After a year or so of life back in the United States, Oswald returned to his old enthusiasm for communism. He preferred backward communist countries that would one day be strong, such as Cuba and China, to the more powerful Soviet Union, but he nonetheless entered into correspondence with the Soviet Embassy in Washington, as well as with the American Communist Party and the Socialist Workers' Party in New York. He subscribed to their newspapers, *The Daily Worker* and *The Militant*, and, during the summer of 1963, schemed to hijack a Miami-bound airplane so that he could fly to Cuba.

After his capture on Nov. 22, 1963, Oswald was interrogated for 13 hours before he himself was shot to death on Nov. 24. During this interrogation, he proudly volunteered that he was a Marxist and had corresponded with the Soviet Embassy and the American Communist Party. Oswald's words were an admission—almost a boast—that he had indeed killed President Kennedy. He was saying that he had political convictions and was man enough to act on them. He had killed President Kennedy for a constituency that was real to him—but that existed only in his head.

Oswald was what we call a borderline personality. He held the fragile parts of himself together with difficulty, and politics and violence were part of the glue. When he learned on Nov. 19 that President Kennedy would be following a route in Dallas that carried him directly beneath the windows of the Texas School Book Depository in which he worked, Oswald, with his dreams of greatness, took the president's route to mean that fate had singled him out to strike a blow at capitalism at the very top, a blow from which it might not recover. The opportunity came at a moment when Oswald was deranged enough to want to kill President Kennedy—and coherent enough to pull it off.

In his desire to strike American capitalism a mortal blow, Lee Harvey Oswald failed. But in confounding American certainties and harming the fabric of trust that holds our society together, he succeeded beyond his dreams.

Priscilla Johnson McMillan, a fellow at the Russian Research Center and the Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University, is the author of "Marina and Lee," a 1971 biography of Lee Harvey Oswald and his wife.