

Epstein book probes Lee

BY ALLEN PUSEY

Staff Writer

For those who travel the rugged, convoluted trails of the Kennedy assassination, times are getting tough.

Separated from the events of Nov. 22, 1963 by 14 years, an agonizing war and a disgraced presidency, the reading and listening public has become inured with the assassination. Memories of those who once bore clues to the crime have become numbed by time, extinguished by death or foiled by fact to the point where theory and fantasy have melted together into an industry supported by people ready to believe anything.

So when Readers Digest publications approached Edward Jay Epstein to do yet another book about the Kennedy assassination, Epstein claims he politely declined.

"I wasn't even interested in talking to them on that basis," said Epstein, in Dallas this week to plug *Legend: The Secret Life of Lee Harvey Oswald*, the book he ultimately agreed to do. "It was old hat, and I had already done two

books on it myself.

"In talking with members of the (Warren) Commission and their staff, they all agreed that some important witnesses had not been talked to. What I thought would be interesting was to trace Oswald's life through the people who might remember him, to dig up persons who knew him in the service or in school and just see what they had to say about him," said Epstein.

"That's what my idea of the book was — but that, of course, changed greatly."

What was finally published was far from a biography of Oswald, in any traditional sense. Neither would the book satisfy conspiracy theorists. What it did do was amplify the growing evidence that the CIA, the FBI and several other intelligence and investigative bodies withheld or simply destroyed potentially embarrassing evidence about their contact with Oswald.

In their readiness to believe that Oswald had no contacts with either the KGB or the DGI — the Russian and Cuban secret police — they distorted

the record upon which the Warren Commission conclusions were reached.

As documents gleaned from records recently released under the Freedom of Information Act have shown, there apparently was considerable evidence about Oswald's past contacts and behavior that never was submitted to the Warren Commission.

Underlying those omissions, Epstein concludes, was an interagency struggle between the CIA and the FBI, as well as an internecine struggle in the CIA that ultimately led to a high-level shakeup in the agency in 1974.

Certain high-level authorities in the CIA, for instance, had considerable doubts about the reliability of Yuri Nosenko, a KGB defector who showed up in time to assure the Warren Commission in 1964 that Oswald had never been contacted on any official basis by the KGB.

"This information was really convenient for everyone," said Epstein. "If Oswald had, the FBI would have been forced to explain why it hadn't kept

Harvey Oswald's 'secret life'

him under surveillance in Dallas as a defector who returned to the U.S. as a possible agent."

Ironically, said Epstein, a number of CIA authorities, including chief of Domestic Intelligence James Angleton, believed that Nosenko had been encouraged to defect by the KGB to, among other things, cover up potentially embarrassing KGB contact with Oswald.

"I don't think they even thought Oswald had been sent to assassinate the President," said Epstein. "A man like Oswald would never have been chosen for something like that. But the KGB did put up a screen over Oswald's activities during his years in Russia that was impossible to penetrate. There must have been a reason for that."

The suspicions against Nosenko were dismissed outright by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, said Epstein, and the CIA was bureaucratically bound to keep silent.

Moreover, Nosenko had been the only major intelligence contact maintained by the CIA in the years 1962 to 1964, said

Epstein, and to conclude that Nosenko was a KGB plant, was to conclude that those contacts had been compromised.

In fact, the CIA was more concerned that Nosenko had been sent to cast doubts on the reliability of yet another Russian informant who had warned of a "mole" — a high-level plant — within the hierarchy of the CIA, he said.

As one of the first authors to effectively debunk the work of the Warren Commission, Epstein has felt that the assassination theory business has yielded to hawkers and geeks.

In fact, although his work severely stabbed at the sloppiness and shallowness of the commission investigation, Epstein has come to believe its ultimate conclusion: that a single rifle fired the bullets that killed John Kennedy and wounded Texas Gov. John Connally; that they were fired from the fifth story window of the Texas School Book Depository; and that they were fired by Lee Harvey Oswald who acted alone.

"I think that a lot of sophisticated observers of assassinations realized the in-

stant it happened that one man had done the job, even if it was a conspiracy. Because in these sort of shootings if you have more than one man involved, you increase your chances of getting caught in advance."

The crucial element left unexplained, said Epstein, is why Oswald was never debriefed by the CIA or the FBI on his return from Russia. As one of the nation's few defectors, it would have been uncharacteristic for either agency not to, Epstein said.

"Frankly, I think they did (contact Oswald)," said Epstein. "That is why the note that Oswald sent threatening to blow up the Dallas office of the FBI was never turned over to the Warren Commission. It would have indicated prior dealings between Oswald and the FBI. Who knows, maybe they tried threatening to have his wife deported or something and that set him off. I don't really know."

"But I see all that as the missing ingredient: the missing contacts between the FBI and Oswald," Epstein said.