

I met him at his hotel room, Ritz-Carlton, expecting to spend up to one-and-a-half hours with him. I was there for more than two and a half. Naturally he knew that I was doing a piece for the Phoenix and we chatted briefly before I turned on the tape-recorder. (Unfortunately I had only two hours of tape.) I mentioned that I had done some free-lance and had applied to several programs in broadcast journalism. It didn't take long for him to see that I was fairly well-informed (At one point he said that I seemed to know Inquest better than he did.) Although I challenged him frequently and he was occasionally flustered, the tone throughout was civil.

What follows are rough notes from one playback. On a few occasions I noted lengthy quotes. I regret that I didn't pin him down in more areas. I probably tried to cover too much. He was also very adept at rambling on or blurting out a quick response and change the subject.

-Reader's Digest came to him with a proposal for a book on the JFK assassination. After some discussions, he suggested the Oswald book. "John Barron arranged the Nosenko interview." (I didn't get a chance to hit him with what he said in New York, namely that the CIA put him onto Nosenko. I guess that goes to show that Barron and the CIA are synonymous.) Barron is reported to be very unhappy with Epstein's book. So is the entire Washington bureau of Reader's Digest. Nosenko is one of Barron's "close friends."

-He said the Nosenko transcripts were obtained under FOIA: ("for the most part") (I trust that someone will pass this on to Harold Weisberg.) He also got a synopsis of the 900-page report on Nosenko. He acknowledged that aside from a few memos (and I'm not convinced these were new) he relied on the recent releases and that he had "piggybacked on others' FOIA requests." He called the recent FBI releases "garbage" and rambled on about what he really wanted to see in the FBI, naming Voloshin, Kostikov, etc. He acknowledged that the FBI continues to withhold significant documents.

-We spent considerable time discussing Mexico City which he labelled "an area of mystery". I questioned him about the taped phone calls. He agreed there was a problem and noted that the CIA had said that it was very bad Russian on the tape of Oswald which is "inconsistent" with LHO's known proficiency. He said the camera stuff was "very weird".

He told me of his efforts to locate Robert Webster and the tale of the psychiatrist (in his book) who couldn't remember whether it was Webster of Oswald that had been debriefed. He said it was "very curious" that the two looked so much alike and recounted an episode from Priscilla's tale where Oswald asks, "How's Webster doing?" The distinct possibility that Webster was on an intelligence assignment and the striking parallels to Oswald's case led me to question him on his case for LHO as KGB and ask whether we couldn't easily flip the coin and see LHO as US intelligence.

Epstein interview (cont.)

Epstein responded, "It doesn't flip over that easily, although I would say that you could get the coin to flip over if you said after he returned he was recruited by US intelligence." We then discussed the pros and cons of the case for LHO as US intelligence. ("Webster would be a much better candidate for this kind of thing.") He felt the basic reasons to send a defector to Russia were: 1) To learn Russian techniques in handling defectors, "just procedurally" and 2) to pass disinformation. He said it was "inconceivable that the CIA didn't want to debrief Oswald" and ran off 3-4 good reasons. He said that the only answer he could perceive as a possible explanation is that they viewed him as "hostile" in which case they would seek an opportunity for "unwitting debriefing". Enter George DeMohrenschildt. ("This is what he told me he did." He said the Paines were also candidates, "but they came into the picture too late"). Epstein said job at Jaggars-Stovall was designed as a "provocation" so LHO would seek out his contacts.

-He said LHO took tax returns from Jaggars to "prove his bona fides, that he had worked there", to show to the Cubans. Denied that he knew of other records that LHO may have taken. We debated intelligence value of what he may have seen at Jaggars. "Pretty classified stuff. All the satellite photographs of Cuba. More than one would expect Oswald to get access to. He was there during Cuban missile crisis."

-We discussed "Oswald security case". Earlier he had told me about his efforts to get the ONI net damage assessment report on LHO, written in '59 after his defection. Told that it had been destroyed. Then I asked him about Otto Otepka and State Dept. security file. He interviewed Otepka but seemed surprised when I told him that Otepka had apparently kept a file on Oswald when he was in Russia. Epstein said Otepka was putting together another net assessment report on Oswald and was "seeking additional information on Oswald" but after the assassination Bobby Kennedy sent some people to "break into his safe and take his file." Otepka never saw the file again. (This area is obviously very murky. Unfortunately I got sidetracked in a discussion of why the State Dept. was so interested in helping the Oswald return from Russia and didn't get back to Otepka.)

We spent considerable time debating the intelligence value of what LHO had to tell the Russians about the U-2. "Even the slightest bit of information would have helped them. But was it shot down? After some sparring, he acknowledged that there was "nothing technically wrong" with theory that the plane had been sent over deliberately to cause an incident and undermine the summit. He said this was another area of mystery, since at the very least there was reason to question why the plane was sent just two months before the U-2 program was due to be phased out, when they hadn't launched a plane in some time and months after Oswald's defection with these so-called military secrets?

Epstein interview

-Angleton. I asked him about Angleton's reported feeling that there is no Sino-Soviet split and there has never been a legitimate Russian defector. At first Epstein said about no Sino-Soviet split, "if he believes that, he's crazy". But later he acknowledged that Angleton believes the Russians are "very sophisticated in deception" and they could fake something like the Sino-Soviet split. He said Angleton is suspicious of most defectors although there have been legitimate ones (gave one example - Golitskin (A)) Epstein said Angleton was not the only source on Nosenko, naming his assistants, and said "Angleton was probably more sympathetic, from '64-'67, to Nosenko's position than other people in the CIA." (????)

-I asked what all this says about the CIA? "I think it says some serious things. First of all, it says the CIA is a massive charade. That it has three or four, sometimes one or two, sometimes none, so-called moles, which are Soviet agents like Nosenko and Fedora that whisper in the ears of the CIA counter parts.... Completely unreliable reports get passed up to the president as super-secret sources. I think the whole CIA is based on a very fragile straw and that it has been consistently wrong in all its evaluations of Soviet strength." The Nosenko affair is seen as a "travesty of hubris and pride that the people who won eventually, the Far Eastern people, the Vietnam people, the Colby people, would rub it in the face by pulling Nosenko out from North Carolina and bringing him into the CIA. The Russians as a matter of policy - even if every Russian believed that Philby is Philby - don't take foreign agents into (their) intelligence service. It just shows the utter corruption of the whole thing."

-He commented, in passing, on "the massive leaking business going on, which my book is one example of, Sy Hersh is another example of, and Colby's book is a third example. At least a half-dozen CIA officers, not to mention Bill Sullivan at the FBI, were willing to give out the whole case on Fedora, which is a live operation.... It wasn't like Fedora was dead.... here they are talking freely with a journalist about a case that's going on."

I asked him about any sources that he hadn't named; restrictions placed on any information and whether his interviews (eg. with all the Marines) would be available. I hit him with the quote (Thanks to P.Hoch) from Agency of Fear about naming his sources and commenting on motives, contradictions, etc. This led him to assure me that he would make available the transcripts from his interviews (eg. with all the Marines) and we later discussed how we could arrange for this. (I have his phone number in NY, and told him about the AIB connection at the end of the interview. I will definitely press him on this point.)

-One unnamed source was Ray Rocca, "as a personal favor to him", "but he was easily identifiable." He added, "I wish I had done a large appendix like in Agency of Fear, talking about personal relations with people like Rocca, Angleton and Scotty Miller. I think that would have been very helpful." The other unnamed source ("a main source") was the Deputy chief of the Soviet Russia Division. "He's easily identifiable. He's even in Agee's book.....he just wanted to keep his name out of print."

"I think that anything done to obscure a source makes it impossible to read or to check on it or understand the position. Especially in this. You have to get the Angleton viewpoint, Colby viewpoint, Helms viewpoint to understand where these guys stood in the CIA. They all tell partial stories. Its not a question of Angleton being honest or dishonest, I can't think of an instance of his being dishonest, but he'll tell you one thirtieth of what there is to know, which is a way of being dishonest. You don't have to lie, you just tell a person part of the story.....I agree with your point, I think one day I'll write a long appendix on the sources.

He said Helms believed the CIA had been destroyed because of the CIA assassination-plot-revelations. He said he thought "Bay of Pigs thing" was a euphemism for the assassination plots, although he didn't specifically ask Helms about this. Said Helms thought Waldeman book was "Bullshit".

- I asked him about the unaccounted time (Oct.20th-Nov.4th'62) in LHO's Dallas/Ft.Worth period. He said it was still a mystery. "Its like he(LHO) had disappeared off the face of the earth." Said he had taken Gary Taylor and Alexandria all over the D/Ft.W. area trying to jog their memory. Nothing.

The Walker shooting. "I've never been satisfied with the Walker shooting. Its another area of mystery." I confronted him with the bullet controversy, (Thanks to P.D. Scott), since he had said bullet was "unidentified". After some discussion he said, "I made a mistake. I should have made a footnote on the controversy over the bullet. I wasn't even aware of it." He asked me whether a 30.06 bullet could be fired from the Mannlicher-Carcano. I reiterated the discrepancies in the accounts surrounding the identification. He then said, "I've always had the theory that Oswald may have used another rifle in shooting at Walker." This was after we had discussed the other good reasons to believe that LHO and the Mannlicher (supposedly buried) were not involved. Amazing.

- I asked him about the photo, allegedly signed by Marina and Oswald that had been given to Dem. He said the handwriting analysis had been performed ("in Nov. or Dec.") by Jay McManus, ex-FBI analyst. Confirmed it was Marina's handwriting. What about Oswald? He mumbled "yes", but I question whether this was actually confirmed because later in the discussion he said, "maybe people doubt it was LHO's writing on the photo." Certainly not the words of someone confident that it was LHO.

Epstein interview

-Oh yes, I forgot to mention that he said he had investigated a report that Oswald had sold a rifle to a "Robert Taylor at a gas station". Nothing came of it. Also I asked him whether the examination of the photo given to DeM. had been of the original. "It might have been a copy."
"I guess there isn't much evidence that Oswald actually did the shooting (at Walker), except for Marina's story."
"The reason I believe the photograph is real is because Marguerite Oswald said she and Marina destroyed it. Marguerite would never lie in that direction." "DeM. thought that his wife (Marina) was using the photograph to blackmail him."

-Had he given anything to the HSCA? "They asked for a copy of my book."

"I asked him (Thanks to J. Policoff) about his categorical statement (made in 1967-68) that the autopsy report had been changed. At first he backed off, saying, "I don't know whether the autopsy report was changed." But later he says, "When I wrote Inquest in 1964, since then a lot of the material has become available, although maybe not everything, and some of it has shown that they did forge it, eh, I mean, forge may be too strong a word, but the points and dots they made on those autopsy pictures just aren't consistent with where the wounds entered Kennedy's back." He also added, "the autopsy report might have been changed later by Arlen Specter" (to conform with the single bullet theory).

-When I confronted him with one of the many errors in his appendix on the so-called status of the evidence, this one in his footnote of the article by Wecht and Smith as being "conclusive in defining the direction of the bullets" and then read him the actual quote from Wecht's article where Wecht postulates gunmen firing from two locations from behind, he said "We might be talking about two different articles." When I showed him that it was the one he had cited, he mumbled about wanting to simply demonstrate that all the shots had come from behind and later admitted, "I didn't really read that passage". He equivocated continually, saying that it was impossible to disprove that there were two gunmen and then saying, "It didn't seem to me possible from the evidence to prove two riflemen, if there were two riflemen, fine, I mean.....if someone can prove it, let them prove it. I can't prove it. I don't think the autopsy proves it, maybe it does."

-We had a long rambling discussion of what happened in the shooting. When talking about what can be determined of the angles of entry in Kennedy and Connally, Epstein began questioning the judgements of his own expert - Wecht. It became ridiculous.

-As for his absurd suggestion about the oak tree being defoliated and hence allowing an earlier shot, I had him cold. "Maybe I'm wrong. I was told it was a deciduous tree."

Epstein interview

Finally, I asked how he was able to change his position over the years from having once believed the lone assassin theory untenable (thanks to J. Policoff for pointing out the relevant quote from his Realist piece.) to now putting forward the lone assassin theory. His response:

"It seemed when the Warren Report came out that one person couldn't have accounted for all the shots. I still think its unlikely... maybe you've been persuaded that its possible that one person can fire that number of shots, maybe you don't think that one person can fire within 7 seconds. You still may not think its likely, but suddenly you start to think that these things are possible. As I got more and more into the fact that Oswald had a disposition to take these shots at Kennedy.... I got into his character being a revolutionary and everything else and it seemed plausible that he did, and I just decided that I couldn't resolve the questions of the bullets. I couldn't figure out the sequence and I didn't address myself to it. Its not a question of coming out and saying there can only be one assassin. I can't say that. I can say that I'm convinced that the bullets came from behind Oswald (read JFK) and that at least two of them came from Oswald's rifle, eh, from behind Kennedy. Eh, that's it as far as I can go with the facts. I just didn't address myself to that question. Its not a question that I think can be resolved anymore from the evidence. I think the Warren Commission and the FBI and autopsy doctors just left it open and it just can't be figured out. If you can figure it out or if someone else can figure it out.....but then bullets are only one indication of a conspiracy.....I don't think anyone is ever going to be able to prove that there were two assassins, or only one assassin, from the number of bullets fired, unless they find a bullet that doesn't match the other bullets, that of course....."

I asked why he was less willing now to acknowledge this problem (of the lone assassin theory). He said, "I just acknowledged it, you know, its a problem. What I'm saying is what I'm not willing to do is say I can resolve it."

-The tape ran out at this point, but we continued talking for another 40 minutes or so. We returned to a number of points that we discussed earlier. Epstein admitted that he felt it likely that the CIA had asked, or at least encouraged, the Russians to send over a defector who could state that Oswald was not KGB. (Very interesting in light of the book's line.) Also he presented what I found to be a fairly convincing case for Friscilla as CIA. (he had to leave before I could press him further on what this says about Marina, although the implications are obvious.) He admitted that there was a good case to be made for LHO as FBI informant (and this would most certainly explain many of the Bureau's actions, eg. destruction of note) He pretended to be unaware of Spas T. Raikin's work as an informant for various intelligence agencies, then said he had heard such talk. Confirmed Sullivan was his source on Hoover and Fedora. One final note: during the interview he received a phone call in response to some answers he was seeking about Colby's dismissal. His contact told him that Kissinger had asked to pass along the word that he liked Epstein's book. (Epstein beamed but said he doubted Dr. K had read it.)