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CIA Tapped Oswald

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Russ Talk

He Wanted to Make Deal in September, 1963, Call

BY RONALD KESSLER

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON—In late September, 1963, eight weeks before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Lee Harvey Oswald telephoned the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City and tried to make a deal.

In exchange for unspecified information, he wanted a free trip to Russia.

The conversation was intercepted and recorded by the CIA at the time. But it was not then turned over to the FBI, which has responsibility for investigating possible spies, and it was not later turned over to the Warren Commission during its investigation of the assassination.

The existence of the CIA's interception of Oswald's telephone conversation in Mexico City and the contents of the still-secret transcript have been verified by the Washington Post. The Post has also verified that the CIA did not turn over the complete transcript to either the FBI or the Warren Commission.

Instead, the CIA gave the FBI only a brief report in October, 1963, saying Oswald had made contact with the Russians. It gave the Warren Commission a transcript of the taped conversation but for unexplained reasons did not include in the transcript Oswald's offer of information and his suggestion that the Russians would want to pay his way to the Soviet Union.

The Post has also determined that the CIA, for unexplained reasons, told the Warren Commission that it learned of most of Oswald's activities in Mexico City only after the assassination. But the CIA monitored and tape-recorded his conversations with both the Russian and Cuban embassies in Mexico City in the fall of 1963, before Kennedy's death.

It was the CIA's belief that the two embassies were heavily involved in spying and that they were operational bases for intelligence activities directed at the United States.

So, with the full cooperation of the Mexican government, CIA wiretaps were installed on telephone lines going into both embassies.

The CIA was especially interested in U.S. citizens who made contact with the embassies.

Thus, when Oswald showed up in Mexico City in late September and telephoned the Russian embassy, his conversation was picked up from the wiretap. A transcript was made and circulated in the CIA offices in the American Embassy in Mexico City.

The station chief at that time was

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the late Winston M. Scott, who personally reviewed all transcripts emanating from wiretaps on Soviet- bloc installations.

The Oswald transcript, according to a CIA translator who worked with Scott, aroused a lot of interest.

"They usually picked up the transcripts the next day," he said. "This they wanted right away."

What that transcript contained is a matter of some dispute, and the CIA says it routinely destroyed the tape before the assassination. But some people who saw the transcript or heard the tape before the assassination recall that Oswald was trying to make a deal.

One of them is David A. Phillips, a former CIA officer who now heads the Assn. of Retired Intelligence Officers and is a leading defender of CIA activities. Phillips was stationed in Mexico City at the time.

The transcript disclosed, Phillips recalled, that Oswald told the Soviet embassy: "I have information you would be interested in, and I know you can pay my way (to Russia)."

The stenographer who typed the transcript and the translator who prepared it had a similar recollection.

"He said he had some information to tell them," the typist said in an interview in Mexico. "His main concern was getting to one of the two countries (Russia or Cuba) and he wanted them to pay for it. He said he had to meet them."

The Warren Commission later concluded that the Russians and Cubans were not much impressed by Oswald. That view is supported by Sylvia Duran, a Mexican citizen who worked in the Cuban embassy at the time of Oswald's visit. She talked to Oswald on Sept. 27, 1963, and recalls the meeting in some detail.

In an interview in Mexico City, Miss Duran said Oswald told her that he wanted to travel to Cuba and Russia and displayed documents to show he was a "friend" of the Cuban revolution.

Miss Duran said she informed Oswald that in order to travel to the Soviet Union he would have to obtain permission from the Russians. Oswald

change for a free trip to Russia or of his attempts to travel to Cuba and Russia.

"On Oct. 1, 1963," the teletype message said, "a reliable and sensitive source in Mexico reported that an American male, who identified himself as Lee Oswald, contacted the Soviet Embassy in Mexico City inquiring whether the embassy had received any news concerning a telegram which had been sent to Washington."

That was strictly a routine handling of the matter, and similar to the standard reports made to the FBI at that time on other contacts with the Communists by American citizens in Mexico.

Even after Kennedy's assassination, the CIA did not give the Warren Commission the full transcript of the intercepted telephone conversation it had made in Mexico City. Oswald's offer of information to the Russians in exchange for passage was omitted from the transcript, and the CIA said it did not know of most of Oswald's activities in Mexico City until after the assassination.

The significance of the CIA actions is difficult to assess. The FBI in the fall of 1963 was already showing intermittent interest in Oswald and may or may not have intensified that

interest if it had been told of Oswald's conversations.

Whether the new information would have affected the Warren Commission's deliberations is also an open question. The commission investigated the possibility of a foreign conspiracy and concluded that there was no evidence to show Oswald acted on behalf of a foreign power.

Nevertheless, there is yet no explanation for the CIA's handling of Oswald's conversations. The CIA still refuses to comment, saying that it would not be appropriate in the light of an impending investigation by the House Committee on Assassinations.

When asked if they could explain the agency's actions, some CIA officers stationed at the time in Mexico City said the CIA might have had a relationship with Oswald that it sought to conceal. The CIA has denied that.

David W. Belin, who was an assistant counsel to the Warren Commission and later executive director of the Rockefeller Commission's investigation of the CIA, said that if the Warren Commission had known of Oswald's conversations and other new information, it would have been less sure that the assassination was not part of a foreign conspiracy.

left and returned later in the day to inform Miss Duran that he had obtained the necessary permission. Miss Duran said she called the Soviet Embassy and was told Oswald's application for a visa would take three to four months to process. Informed of this, Miss Duran said, Oswald "got really angry and red. He was gestulating." Miss Duran said she had to call for help from the Cuban consul, who got into a shouting match with Oswald and told him to get out. Miss Duran said she never saw him again.

Her story covered only the first day of Oswald's five-day stay in Mexico City. Oswald later referred in a letter to "meetings" he had in the Soviet Embassy.

How interested the CIA was in Oswald's dealings with the two embassies is uncertain.

The translator and typist who handled the transcript of the intercepted conversation recalled that the level of interest was high. But the agency waited until Oct. 10, 1963, to notify the FBI of Oswald's activities. And its teletyped report made no mention of Oswald's offer of information in ex-

Sen. Richard S. Schweiker (R-Pa.), who led the Senate intelligence committee's investigation of the assassination, said its investigation would have taken on an "entirely different direction and perspective" if the committee had been aware of Oswald's conversations.