

Oswald's R

Chicago Tribune

Lake

Wednesday, January 27, 1993

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Literati probing Oswald's days in Minsk

By James P. Gallagher
Chicago Tribune

MINSK, Belarus—A handful of people here have suddenly become minor celebrities, all because they befriended a lonely American named Lee Harvey Oswald more than 30 years ago.

Oswald lived in Minsk for more than two years. He worked in a sprawling radio factory and married a local woman before returning to the United States in 1962, some 18 months before the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Oswald was arrested in the

shooting; two days later he was shot and killed by Jack Ruby at the Dallas city jail.

Until recently, the Minsk phase of Oswald's life has been largely off-limits to foreign researchers. But the barriers fell with the collapse of the communist system, and Oswald's former friends are being besieged for new details of his time in this drab city.

Norman Mailer, the American author, is the most prominent of those digging into Oswald's past. For the last few months, Mailer has been living on and off in

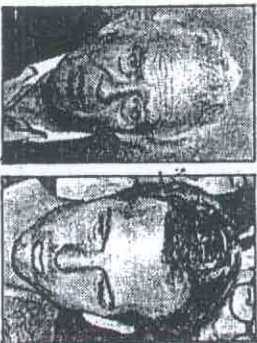
Minsk. He confirmed in a telephone conversation that he is working on a book about Oswald but declined to be more specific.

"I never discuss a book I'm working on, because I might jinx myself," Mailer said.

Mailer even tried to move into the one-room apartment with a view of the Svisloch River where Oswald, then in his early 20s, lived under constant secret police surveillance.

"He offered to send my wife and me on vacation in the south for a

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Norman Mailer (left) is the most prominent writer looking into Lee Harvey Oswald's life in Minsk in former Soviet Union.

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couple of months," recalled the apartment's current occupant, Mikhail Kovalevski, a 66-year-old retiree.

"I explained to him we couldn't just get up and leave because my leg is no good, and my wife is sick. He seemed kind of disappointed, but I told him we go to Moscow every summer, and he's welcome to stay here then."

But with the economy on the skids—and with filmmakers, historians and journalists hungry for tidbits about Oswald's past—some of those who used to know him are more eager to cash in on their brief brush with history.

Pavel Golovachev, 51, who worked with Oswald at what is now the Gorizont TV and radio complex, said Mailer paid him \$50 for an interview. And requests to photograph former Oswald acquaintances are often countered with demands for payment.

"As the old saying goes, 'Thank you' is fine, but it doesn't put vodka in the glass or butter on the bread," Golovachev said.

Ernst Titovets, a biology professor, has gone so far as to write his own book about Oswald—in English, of which his command is good but not perfect. He said friends in the U.S. are looking for someone to publish the manuscript.

"Norman Mailer was here to see me," he said in his office at the Belarus Institute of Neurology. "Look, he hung his coat on this very hook. When he offered to pay for an interview, I suggested a very high price. Now we are negotiating, trying to make a deal."

Titovets said he was first drawn to Oswald by the chance to practice his English. "It was hard to imagine back in those days, a real American living in Minsk," he said. "It was like having someone here from outer space."

Titovets touts himself as the only one in Oswald's circle with whom the American could communicate freely in English. That gave him special insights, Titovets insists.

"It's the vogue now in Minsk to say you knew Oswald," he said, "but it's possible I was his best friend here. When I first knew him, I had this ready image of an American, highly educated and cultured, and for a while I saw him through this veil."

"Gradually, though, I scaled him down to size. I found out things about him. For example, he would suddenly explode on certain provocations. But I'm not going to say any more than that, I deal with it all in my book."

Those who knew Oswald best generally speak highly of him.

Ella German, who said she was briefly engaged to him, described him as "a pleasant-looking guy with a good sense of humor. He was not as rough and rude as the men here were back then."

"We went to the movies, the theater, symphonies. He was easy to be with. He didn't demand anything of me. We kissed, but we did not sleep together. We never became lovers because, in the end, I decided I did not love him."

German said she broke off the engagement shortly after New Year's, 1961. A few months later, Oswald and his wife Marina were wed.

"He was certainly very lonely here," Golovachev said. "Maybe he just wanted to get married to anybody."

More casual acquaintances, however, remember Oswald less fondly.

Leonid Botvinik, who still works at the Gorizont plant, said most of his fellow employees had a bad opinion of Oswald.

"Honestly, he was not a good worker," said Botvinik, 64. "He would bring all kinds of magazines to read at work, and he was always dissatisfied. . . . At first, we were curious why an American would suddenly appear in our midst, and some of us felt sorry for him. But after a while, most people came to regard him with a kind of antipathy."

To Leonid Tsagoikov, another former co-worker, Oswald was "a lazybones who always put his feet up on his worktable," a shocking breach of office etiquette.

The fact that Oswald was given a prestige job making production prototypes, along with the higher salary he was paid, did not go down well, Tsagoikov added.

But regardless of their personal opinions of Oswald, almost all of those who knew him do not believe he killed Kennedy, as the Warren Commission concluded.

"Oswald shoot Kennedy? Come on!" Tsagoikov exclaimed. "Oswald could not shoot at all. I went hunting with him once, and when he saw a rabbit, he got so flustered he shot up in the air. There's no way he was capable of the precise marksmanship it would have taken to hit a moving target from up in that building."

Vadim Bakatin, who briefly headed the Soviet KGB in late 1991, writes in his recently published autobiography that the secret police maintained a steady watch on Oswald after he arrived in the Soviet Union as a tourist in 1959 and told authorities he wanted to defect.

But Oswald never denounced his U.S. citizenship, and he gradually became disillusioned with the hard life in this country, friends said. Bakatin wrote that by the time Oswald departed with his new wife in the spring of 1962, the KGB was convinced he was not a spy.