

Oswald's Widow Reconsiders

She's no longer sure he killed John Kennedy

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Soviet Union only 17 months before. She had met Lee Harvey Oswald, an ex-Marine who had tried to become a Soviet citizen, in Minsk, where he was working. He had married her and brought her to Texas. She could not speak English and understood very little about America.

On Nov. 22, 1963, while she cared for her daughters, June, 21 months, and Rachel, an infant of 4 weeks, she watched television reports of President Kennedy's arrival in Dallas. At the time, she and her husband were living apart, he in a boardinghouse in Dallas near where he worked, and she in a suburban home. Suddenly, Porter recalls, her landlady told her the president had been shot. "I was crying and praying that God would spare his life," she remembers, "because he is a father." She also remembers worrying, when she heard that the shooting had occurred outside the building where Oswald worked, that her husband, who had made threats against politicians in the past, was somehow involved.

"As soon as I saw the police, I knew why they had come," she recalls. "The thought crossed my mind, 'I hope it's not Lee.'"

In fact, she was so frightened by the prospect of Oswald being tried and executed that, she reluctantly acknowledges now, she was relieved when Ruby shot Oswald two days after the assassination. "I'm ashamed to admit it, but I knew it would be better that way, that it was over with."

At that time Porter feared for her own life, as well as for the lives of her two daughters. "When I had to go to Parkland Hospital to identify Lee's body and was walking up the steps, every step was like a mile," she says. "I nearly fainted, I was so afraid. I thought we would be shot, too."

Warren Commission Testimony

Within months of the assassination she was called to testify before the Warren Commission, a governmental panel appointed to investigate the killing. The defendant's widow became the prosecution's star witness as she testified that Oswald had told her he fired a shot at a right-wing leader, former Army Major General Edwin Walker, in April



Marina Oswald with children June and Rachel and mother-in-law Marguerite Oswald after a Nov. 23, 1963, visit to Lee Harvey Oswald in jail.

His Role

1963.

The portrait Porter painted of her first husband was that of a secretive man who needlessly led a double life, spouted socialist political theories and physically abused her. Her testimony helped the commission reach its conclusions that Lee Harvey Oswald was a deranged killer who acted alone and that his subsequent killing was not tied to a conspiracy.

Now, Porter says, she believes the commission maneuvered her into giving testimony that would cast her husband in an unfavorable light. "I didn't realize how they led me. . . . I think the Warren Commission used me as a spokesman to advance their theory of a single gunman, because it comes out stronger; after all, 'the wife knows.'" She pauses and adds, "There was only a prosecution, no defense, and I buried him. I was introduced as a witness and I became his executioner.

"For years," she says, "I didn't think

about him; I just felt guilty. For years I blamed myself. I wondered if I could have changed things if our relationship had been better."

Changed Way of Thinking

But in the past several years Porter has begun to think again about the man to whom she had been married. And today she says she has a more mature and insightful view of Oswald's part in the Kennedy assassination. What does Marina Oswald Porter think is the untold story of that day in Dallas?

■ Porter now believes that Oswald was a government agent, at least for a time. "Now, looking back at his character, I can see that he had certain traits of professional training, like being secretive, and I believe he worked for the American government. And he was taught the Russian language when he was in the military. Do you think that is usual, that an ordinary soldier is taught Russian? Also, he got in and out of Russia quite easily and he got me out quite easily. How did this happen?"

■ She also wonders if Oswald had rational reasons for actions that seemed inexplicable at the time. On the night before the assassination, the Oswalds argued because she had discovered her husband was

living under an assumed name in the boardinghouse in Dallas. Today, Porter wonders if he had other reasons for his secretiveness. "Perhaps he told me so little because he was trying to protect me."

■ Porter points out, too, that Oswald admired and liked Kennedy. "Lee said he was good for the country," she recalls.

■ Porter also believes that George de Mohrenschildt, a friend of the Oswalds who occasionally visited their home, may have been part of the conspiracy. De Mohrenschildt, an aristocratic Russian exile who loved to talk politics with Oswald, killed himself in 1977 after saying that there was such a conspiracy. "His association with us, his befriending Lee, was very questionable," Porter says. "We were poor people. Why us? Was George de Mohrenschildt what he seemed? Maybe he was going between Lee and somebody else. Maybe he's the one who told my husband what to do."

■ In the months preceding the assassination, it was reported, a man, behaving erratically, tried to pass himself off as Oswald in several public places in the Dallas area. The object? Possibly to establish the identity of an unbalanced man so that the real Oswald could be set up later as the president's assassin. "I learned afterward that someone who said he was Lee had been

going around looking to buy a car, having a drink in a bar. I'm telling you Lee did not drink, and he didn't know how to drive. And afterward the FBI took me to a store in Fort Worth where Lee was supposed to have gone to buy a gun. Someone even described me and said I was with him. This woman was wearing a maternity outfit like one I had. But I had never been there."

J. Edgar Hoover's Role

Porter also wonders if there were people who knew more about Oswald's life and the assassination than they revealed. One, she suspects, who knew more than he told is the late FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. The FBI was also eager to find out what, if anything, she herself knew. FBI agents who visited her implied that if she did not tell all she knew about the assassination and her life in Russia she might have problems staying in the United States.

Porter, who says that Hoover kept her under surveillance for years, adds caustically, "J. Edgar Hoover knew everything. He knew when I was getting my next period and when to send me my next boyfriend." In the year following the assassination, in reaction to her ordeal, Porter went through a period of going to a singles club, casual

dating and having a few drinks on her nights out. During that time, she feels, some of the men with whom she had relationships were FBI agents and she was watched closely so that if she ever changed her testimony about Oswald the government would be able to discredit her.

Remarriage Two Years Later

But her marriage in 1965 to Dallas carpenter Kenneth Porter brought a greater stability to her life. The couple moved to a Dallas suburb, and within a year she gave birth to Mark, her third child. However, she and her second husband quarreled frequently, and in 1974 they divorced. However, they eventually worked out their differences and have lived together for the past several years, although they have not remarried.

The tall, soft-spoken Kenneth Porter says Oswald's two daughters "think of me as their father." June, 28, is a vice president of a Dallas construction company, and Rachel, 25, who bears a strong resemblance to Oswald, is a student at a nearby university. Porter and her daughters have never talked much about the assassination and, when asked what effect it has had on the girls, she says briefly, "You'll have to ask them."

Today, she spends most of her time taking care of her comfortable, roomy home, tending to her plants and looking after the family dogs, Pal and Charlie. "I have a nice life," she says. "I love my life and that Ken takes care of me. All I ever wanted was to be a wife and mother."

Sympathy for the Kennedys

But the assassination is never far from her mind. When Porter speaks of the slain president, his widow and family, it is apparent how much pain their suffering has caused her.

As she stands in her neat kitchen, talking intently, it is clear she is still, after all these years, preoccupied with the event that changed a nation's history and permanently transformed her life.

"You know how the bark grows strong around the tree, but inside it's still very tender?" she asks, her voice becoming softer. "I'm broken inside, let's put it that way."

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