

THE CASA DE LOS AMIGOS

by
Jerry D. Rose

On January 19, 1964, as the FBI was continuing its investigation of Oswald's alleged "associates" in Mexico, there came to the Mexico City Legat of the Bureau some information via the Bureau's San Francisco office. A female student at the University of California, Barrie Milliman, told a "confidential source" that on a Christmas visit to Mexico with her fiancé Amo Algozar, a student at the University of Mexico, Algozar told her he had met an "unknown American" at the Friends Service Center, also known as the Casa de Los Amigos. [1] Later, he saw the same American at Sanford's restaurant, this time in the company of Oswald, and the pair told Algozar "that they were working together to get visas for travel to Cuba and that they planned to go there together." Given the Bureau's propensity to try to associate Oswald with Friends groups like the New Orleans Council for Peaceful Alternatives, [2] this "information" aroused the intense interest of headquarters, which conveyed this information along with directives to interview Algozar and give the appropriate attention to the matter in view of the fact that "Mrs. Ruth Paine of Irving Texas, who has befriended Oswald and wife, has been prominently associated in activities of Friend's organizations."

The next day, the Bureau telephoned the Casa de Los Amigos to try to locate Algozar. [3] The Casa referred them to Algozar's brother, who promised to have him get in touch with the Bureau. On January 22, the Bureau interviewed the Acting Director of the Casa de Los Amigos, Von Peacock, who expressed doubt that Oswald was ever on the premises of the Casa, nor that he had any other connections with Friends Society members in Mexico. [4] He also gave some clues to the whereabouts of Algozar, hereafter referred to as Homobono Alcaraz or just Alcaraz. Concerning an "unknown American" in the area at that time, Peacock could only think of the name of Robert Kaffke from San Francisco, who had been staying at the Casa when Oswald was supposedly staying at the nearby Hotel del Comercio. Much more about Kaffke will follow.

In the same report as that describing the interview with

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Von Peacock, the Bureau reports the initial interview with Alcaraz, who appeared at the Legat office. He verified much of what he reportedly told Milliman, adding that he mentioned to her the possibility that Oswald may have been associated with one Steve Kennan, a "pro- communist American" who had been in Mexico in 1962 and 1963. He "stated emphatically," however, that he had never seen Oswald in the company of Kennan. Asked about Kaffke, he did vaguely remember seeing him "around the premises" of the Casa de Los Amigos.

The matter apparently rested there for a month until, on February 27, Robert Kaffke appeared at the Protection and Welfare Section of the U. S. Embassy. [5] His choice of an agency to which to talk indicates his motives. For unspecified reasons, Kaffke thought the Mexican Security Police were after him and requested financial aid in leaving Mexico by air—a train trip would be too slow! He "explained" that he had been one of a group of 58 students who went to Cuba in 1963 in defiance of a State Department ban on travel to that country. [6] Having stayed at the Casa de Los Amigos in 1963, he stayed there one night after his arrival "a few days ago" and heard talk around the place that Oswald had "a lot of money" on him when he had been there, for what reason Kaffke was unable to ascertain. He also said "that persons at the Casa de Los Amigos are really scared when the name of Oswald is mentioned."

When Kaffke's "information" was conveyed by the Embassy to the FBI, the Bureau should not have been surprised. Kaffke was "known to the Bureau," a phrase used frequently to identify its informants. A report of December 10, 1963 had identified Kaffke, an officer of the Bay Area FPCC, as a Bureau informant, [7] and another report of March 3, 1964 refers to a San Francisco memo of 5-17-63 in which Kaffke "had been a source with respect to a meeting at Kaffke's home of persons who were interested in the projected student trip to Cuba." [8] Kaffke may have found just the bait he needed to get himself out of Mexico. He was home at any rate by March 20, when he was still giving out his "information," this time to the San Francisco office, including the first reference I have found to an Arnold (LNU) who may have been the "unknown American" seen at both the Casa de Los Amigos and Sanford's, "advising" Kaffke that he had had dinner with Oswald. [9]

The mysterious "Arnold" begins to assume human shape and identity on March 31, as "Steve Kennan"

moves into limbo. On that date, inquiry at the Casa de Los Amigos ascertained that an Arnold Kessler of Detroit had been at the Casa in February of that year, a "journalist" who stopped over in Mexico City on his way to Brazil. [10] Since he worked briefly for a Mexico City newspaper, the Legat was directed to make inquiry at that newspaper about his whereabouts. Based on a letter received by a newspaper employee, the Bureau was able to locate Kessler in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

Actually, it took until April 30 for the Bureau to locate and interview Kessler. Meantime, the FBI was getting background data on Kessler, learning on April 10 that he had dropped out of school at the University of California on September 19, 1963 "for lack of money." [11] This information led the San Francisco office to urge that Kessler's local draft board in Detroit be notified, as he had lost his student deferment rights. Detroit reported his leftist activities while a student at Wayne University, as well as leftist affiliations of his father, Sam Kessler. Inquiry at the local draft board showed Kessler had actually requested and been granted permission to go abroad between September 19, 1963 and April 19, 1964, after which he was to return to U.C. Berkeley. For some reason, a May 19, 1964 order for his pre-induction physical was already scheduled to be sent to him in Detroit. Also on April 10, San Francisco obtained a copy of his passport data and photo, the latter to be shown to the "original source" (Kaffke) to determine if this were the "Arnold" he knew in Mexico. [12] On April 14, Kaffke immediately identified Kessler as the Arnold in question. [13] When Kessler was finally interviewed in Sao Paulo on April 30, he denied categorically that he had ever had any association with Oswald. [14] Actually, Kessler said, it was Alcaraz who told Kessler that he had been introduced to Oswald. Having already received his order for a pre-induction physical, he planned to leave Brazil in time to comply with this order on May 22.

Faced with these discrepancies in the stories of Kessler, Alcaraz, and Kaffke, the Bureau went back to the people at the Casa de Los Amigos who knew all three of them. [15] Agnes Coggeshall, Director and Von Peacock, now Assistant Director, described Kessler as a "stable and truthful individual" whereas Alcaraz was cited for his unreliability and weak character, both officials doubting the truth of Alcaraz' claims. As for Kaffke, Von Peacock says that Kessler told him he spent an evening with Kaffke whom he saw as a "boastful and unreliable individual."

In a wrap-up memorandum of May 21 on the whole affair, Legat Mexico concluded there is "no real basis for inquiry" and "no further investigation is being conducted" on the matter. [16] In summarizing the developments in the case, there are a couple of intriguing references to a "someone" in California who may have stirred up the whole mess of accusations in the first place. Alcaraz complained that Milliman misunderstood what he said about Oswald and the "American," after she had "discussed his conversation with someone in California." In a second interview, Alcaraz suggested that "a false alarm" apparently had been initiated by some acquaintance of his fiancé Barrie Milliman in Berkeley, California." With Robert Kaffke living across the Bay in San Francisco, can there be much doubt of the identity of this someone/some acquaintance: an FBI informant in a bad situation who apparently expected to give the Bureau what it "wanted"—the image of an Oswald associated with a Friends group in Mexico City? While I'm generally not a great fan of FBI "investigation," I can only applaud the Bureau in this instance for not taking the bait offered by one of their own, Robert Kaffke. [17]

Notes

1. FBI Record #105-3702-211. Archives Record #124-10003-10391.
2. See: Jerry D. Rose, "The Pursuit of Leonard Reissman," *The Fourth Decade* 4#4 May 97, pp. 8-11; and Hugh Murray, "The NOPD and the NOCPA: Surveillance State or Keystone Coppery?" *The Fourth Decade* 3#5 July 96, pp. 3-11.
3. FBI Record #105-3702-212. Archives Record #124-10003-10390.
4. FBI Record #105-3702-222. Archives Record #124-10003-10380.
5. FBI Record #105-3702-376. Archives Record #124-10233-10429.
6. For an extensive discussion of this episode, see: Jerry D. Rose, "Red Summer of '63," *The Third Decade* 9#6 September 93, pp. 37-43.
7. FBI Record #105-82555-952. Archives Record #124-10014-10298.
8. FBI Record #105-3702-373. Archives Record #124-10233-10426.
9. FBI Record #105-82555-2697. Archives Record #124-10035-10266. In a 3/24/64 memorandum from headquarters to San Francisco (FBI Record #105-82555-2697), San Francisco was asked, quite logically, why Kaffke did not report his information

about "Arnold" at his interview at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City on February 27—if his meeting with "Arnold" occurred prior to that time. Since the finally-identified Arnold Kessler was at the Casa de Los Amigos until February 29, it is possible that Kaffke's meeting with Kessler followed his meeting at the Embassy.

10. FBI Record #105-3702-546. Archives Record #124-10239-10103.
11. FBI Record #105-3702-627. Archives Record #124-10227-10211.
12. FBI Record #105-3702-682. Archives Record #124-10227-10266.
13. FBI Record #105-3702-722. Archives Record #124-10240-10001.
14. FBI Record #105-3702-880. Archives Record #124-10079-10360.
15. FBI Record #105-3702-863,864. Archives Record #124-10079-10339.
16. FBI Record #105-3702-1027,1028. Archives Record #124-10163-10304.
17. Until my visit to the National Archives earlier this year, I was unaware of Robert Kaffke except as a name on the list of 58 students who made the controversial trip to Cuba in the summer of 1963. In browsing the FBI's "3702" file (Legat Mexico file) for information on the Bureau's investigation of Oswald in Mexico (a major story in itself), my attention was attracted to Kaffke as an informant who was also one of the notorious 58, and that his "information" was consistent with a broader pattern of post-assassination attempts to associate the American Friends Society with Oswald. Then there is the further unexpected information that Kaffke was staying very near the Hotel del Comercio when Oswald was supposedly there — making him a candidate, perhaps, for involvement in the likely chicanery of Oswald impersonation in Mexico City. My point in adding this note is to offer a comment on a procedural issue for assassination research. Given the totally inadequate indexing of documents released to the Archives under the 1992 Act, and in view of rumors that the Archives may shortly put an end to researcher "browsing," the terrible prospect starts to appear that a great deal of material important to assassination research will remain practically inaccessible to retrieval for research purposes.

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COUP D'ETAT: A CRITIQUE

by
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One of the most persistent, and to me illogical, theories of the Kennedy assassination is the idea that in the weeks and months leading up to November 22, 1963, powerful U.S. Government insiders, let us call them the "high-cabal", conspired to have JFK assassinated. These same conspirators, we are told, later arranged to have documents destroyed, x-rays and photographs altered, false clues planted, and so on, in order to cover-up their own guilt and make an innocent Oswald the patsy. The objectives were to reverse certain foreign and/or domestic policies begun by JFK, and possibly to enhance the careers of certain politicians. This conspiratorial explanation is usually referred to as a coup d'etat (or coup). It is the theme of many books, and is expressed with artistic flair in Oliver Stone's 1991 movie JFK.

Seven years after JFK this theory continues to thrive. In his 1998 book Assassination Science, James H. Fetzer, Ph.D., implores us to take seriously the hypothesis that: (JFK's) "death was the result of a coup d'etat involving the CIA, the Mob, anti-Castro Cubans, and powerful politicians, such as LBJ, Richard Nixon, and J. Edgar Hoover, fully financed by Texas oil men and elements of the military-industrial complex." [1] Similarly, results of a recent poll among subscribers to the JFK/Deep Politics Quarterly showed that: "The CIA led all groups as the planners of the assassination." [2]

This article makes no effort to defend the hapless lone-gunman theory, long ago discredited by conspiracy theorists. Instead, my intent is to argue against a coup d'etat interpretation on the grounds that an effort of the magnitude proposed by coup d'etat theorists would have entailed prohibitive logistical problems for the high-cabal in the planning stages. With a recognition of these problems, open-minded students of the assassination can properly discard this ponderous theory, and move on to more plausible conspiratorial explanations. In preparation for this task, we first need to define our term and see what relevance, if any, it might have had as a technique applicable to the high-cabal in 1963.

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