

The Real Lee Harvey Oswald

By PRISCILLA McMILLAN

On that Friday of November, 1963, we tried to believe that the course of democracy in America would go on as it always had. Our Founding Fathers had foreseen the possibility of violence and had secured the succession.

But besides altering history, the assassination of President Kennedy changed our view of ourselves. Beginning in November, 1963, we lost in less than five years three of our national leaders, three who tried more than most to call forth the very best that is in us. Losing them, we have lost some of our faith in ourselves.

In the sense that he made a mark upon history, Lee Oswald succeeded far beyond his hopes. For in spite of his postures Oswald was not a conceited man. It is consonant with his own abased view of himself that his impact upon history should have been a negative one.

Oddly enough, Oswald liked John F. Kennedy. He approved his course in civil rights. He followed the personal lives of several of the Kennedys. He knew a surprising amount about Kennedy the man. To use the jargon of the psychiatrists, he "identified" with the President, just as Marina "identified" with Jackie. In the view of both the Oswalds, there were even parallels between their family life and that of the John F. Kennedys.

It would be true to say that Oswald did not much want Kennedy to be dead. He gave no thought to the consequences of such a death. He merely wanted to kill him. Nor did he want to do so very badly.

The evidence is that Oswald did not plan his act far ahead. Indeed, he may only have begun thinking of it seriously during his lunch break on Wednesday, November 20. The next morning he had still not made up his mind and as late as that evening, the eve of the assassination itself, his conversations with Marina make clear in retrospect

that the decision was very much a revocable one, dependent on events in his marriage.

Oswald would likely have tried to kill someone during that autumn or winter. But he probably did not care enough about killing President Kennedy to have made the short bus trip from Dallas to Fort Worth to do it. He would not have walked across Dallas to do it. Oswald murdered the President because circumstances afforded him the opportunity. In his disordered scheme of things, the fact that he worked in the Texas School Book Depository, along Kennedy's route, signified to Oswald that his star fated him to do the deed.

To say this is by no means to say all. Oswald's few years as an adult already contained a good many turning points. At 17, he had joined the U.S. Marines. At 19, misleading both his mother and the Marine Corps about his intentions, he defected to the U.S.S.R. At 22 he accomplished the difficult feat of defecting back to the United States with a Russian wife and a baby. At 23 he tried to kill Major General Edwin A. Walker and failed. At 24 he tried to kill President Kennedy—and succeeded. In all he made at least four suicidal gestures. Examined closely, all of his acts betray surprising emotional consistency. It would not be far off to say that Oswald's life was notable for a single decision, taken over and over again.

John F. Kennedy died, then, because circumstances placed along his route a man whose life destined him to enact, and re-enact, a particular emotional drama.

Nor is this by any means all. President Kennedy also died because in an emotional sense he signified so many things to so many men. Because of his youth and his dashing ways he was not a mere father-figure President. To the fantasies of some, he presented himself as a brother, a sibling rival. To others he was a lover. To others

still he had several roles to play. Precisely because his attractiveness gave him a role in the fantasy lives of so many, the pool of potential assassins for John F. Kennedy may have been larger than for a President whose image is more simply that of a father.

Nor did it help from the standpoint of vulnerability that so much of what Kennedy stood for was good. On the contrary, the political figure who evokes strongly positive feelings appeals, by this very token, to the most deep-seated longings and hopes. In some, he stirs ancient memories, childhood memories, memories of disappointment.

It is no accident that although Oswald also shot at General Walker, a political figure he did not approve of, the leader he actually murdered was President Kennedy, whom he showed no outward sign of hating at all.

In our time and country, Presidents do not die, or have not died, because the policies they pursued were controversial. President Roosevelt was highly controversial but he was shot at only at the beginning, before his policies became apparent. So far as we know no one has actually made an attempt on the lives of Presidents Johnson or Nixon, controversial as their policies have been.

And what of the assassin? Why is it that no one has dealt seriously with Lee Harvey Oswald or his motives?

In the summer of 1964 a young member of the Warren Commission remarked sadly: "There's a little bit of Oswald in every one of us."

It is easier to seek conspiracies outside than to look to the Oswald within.

Priscilla McMillan, an Associate at the Russian Research Center, Harvard, is completing a biography of Marina and Lee Harvey Oswald. She lived with Marina for six months in 1964 and has devoted the past five years to studying the Oswalds.

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