

Interview With Suspect Oswald in Moscow in 1959

'The Stuff of Which

The author was Moscow Correspondent for NANA in 1959. A few years before, in 1957, she had been research assistant on Viet Nam for John F. Kennedy, then a senator. She is perhaps the only person to have been good friends with both the late President and his suspected assassin. She is today a free-lance writer on Soviet affairs.

By PRISCILLA JOHNSON

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass.—For two years now I have been waiting to do this one thing: To dissolve my American citizenship and become a citizen of the Soviet Union.

The time was November, 1959. The place was my room on the third floor of Moscow's Hotel Metropol. The speaker was Lee Harvey Oswald, prime suspect in the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

With his suit of charcoal gray flannel, dark tie and tan cashmere sweater, Lee looked, and sounded like Joe College with a slight southern drawl. But his life hadn't been that of a typical college boy.

His father, an insurance salesman sitting alone in his hotel room, died before he was just one floor below mine at home. Based in Texas and the Metropoli. He had no Louisiana, the boy spent two friends in Russia and he didn't years in New York during his speak a word of the language. early teens. At 17, he en- The only sightseeing he'd done listed in the U.S. Marines. was to "Detsky Mir," a child- "I did it," he said, "because don't store one block from our we were poor and I didn't want hotel. He'd managed to buy to be a burden on my mother," an ice cream cone there, he later, he spent 14 months as told me proudly, a licensed radar operator in the Far East.

As we sat in my hotel room all evening and into three-year hitch nearly done, the early hours of morning, the Marines gave Lee a de- he talked quietly about his they discharge. Just one plans to defect to Russia, month later, after an exhaust- However, I soon came to feel- ing trip by land, sea and air, that this boy was of the stuff he arrived in Moscow to pe- of which fanatics are made. tion the Supreme Soviet, Soviet legislative body in the USSR, for Soviet citizenship, warned him Soviet citizen- ship was not easy to obtain, Lee was

Saw Fanatic

For days, Oswald had been thrashing, referring to the

Government as "my govern- he "had a chance to watch American militarist imperi- ment." But," said Lee, "Even if I am not accepted, on no ac- count will I go back to the United States. I shall remain here, if necessary, as a resident alien."

All Soviet officials would promise at the time was that Lee could stay on in Russia whether or not he became a citizen. Meanwhile, they were "investigating the possibility of sending him to a Soviet higher technical institute."

At an age when angry young rebels all over the world find release in aping the beatniks, what brought this serious, soft-spoken southern boy to Moscow with no other ambition but to spend the rest of his life as a Soviet citizen? Evidently, it was a combination of poverty, the plight of the U. S. Negro, and the U. S. Marines.

"My mother," said Lee, "has been a worker all her life. She's a good example," he added, "of what happens to workers in the United States." He declined to elaborate.

"At the age of 15," he added, "after watching the way workers are treated in New York, and Negroes in the South, I was looking for a key to my environment. Then I discovered Social literature."

Lee was struck, in particular, by Marx's "Das Kapital." He concluded that, as an American, "I would become either a worker exploited for capitalist profit; or an exploiter or, since there are many in this category, I'd be one of the unemployed." Lee became a Marxist.

Later, as a Marine private in Japan and the Philippines,

Year's Planning

Fully a year before, Lee began getting ready to go to Russia. Using a Herlitz grammar, he taught himself to read and write Russian. Never, said Lee, a nice-looking young man with gray eyes and brown hair, did he consider deserting the Marine Corps.

Did it occur to Lee that Soviet officials might be embarrassed by his efforts to become a citizen of their country at a moment when Russia was cultivating good relations with the United States?

Russian officials, he said, "don't encourage and don't discourage me." They warned, however, that neither Lee's wish, nor theirs, would determine whether his citizenship application was to be accepted. They said it depended on the "over-all political atmosphere at the moment." Meanwhile, they offered Lee the sanctuary of a prolonged stay in the U.S.S.R.

As for officials at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, they were torn between their desire to give Lee time to think it over, and their legal obligation to hear his oath renouncing American citizenship if he insisted.

Lee was bitter at U.S. Consul Richard Snyder, who, he charged, stalled him when he asked to take the oath on Oct. 31, the only time Lee had been at the Embassy. As a result, Lee wouldn't go back there. He would let the Soviet government handle legal details.

JOHNSON (PRISCILLA) EXHIBIT No. 3

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19

Fanatics Are Made

izen of the Soviet Union's shortcomings in Moscow, Lee he answered when I knocked at his door and why, a few hours later, he came to see me in my room, I never learned.

I asked Lee if the ordinary don't recommend it to every- Russians he met expressed sur- ore. It means coming to a prize at his desire to defect, new country, always being the "Well," he said, "they're very outsider, always having to ad- curious and they ask me why, just. But to me, my reasons But materialist Muscovites," are strong and good. I believe he added, "under and when I'm doing right."

That was why Lee wouldn't that brought me here. And answer the phone when his mother was calling from Ft. Worth, trying to plead with him to return home. He had refused to speak to any Amer- ican correspondents. Just why

'Never Go Back'

Regardless of any material

As our conversation drew to a close—we ate nothing, and had been sipping only tea—I had a terrible feeling of futility. Disillusion, I was sure, awaited him.

As he was leaving I asked him to come see me again. The Russians, Oswald told me, had warned that he mustn't talk to Americans. But he promised, before closing the door, that

he wouldn't do anything deci-

sive without at least letting

me know.

Two days later I went to the

second floor "dezhurnaya"—

the woman who sits near the

elevator and hands out keys to

each room—and asked for Mr.

Oswald. Her hands flew up in

a know-nothing gesture. "He's

gone," she said.

I'd wondered what had hap-

pened to him since. Now I

know.

JOHNSON (PRISCILLA) EXHIBIT No. 3—Continued