

December 5, 1963

PRISCILLA JOHNSON'S RECOLLECTIONS OF  
INTERVIEW WITH LEE HARVEY OSWALD  
IN MOSCOW, NOVEMBER 1959

(Miss Johnson's own thought at beginning)

I have frequently thought about Oswald in connection with doing an article on defectors to the Soviet Union. Most of the defectors who came to Moscow while I was a correspondent there (1958-1960) came because of personal troubles they were having at home. They did not come or purport to come for reasons of ideology. Oswald was such an exception to the general run of defectors that I had been thinking about him ever since. I thought that the unideological quality of most of the defectors was a symptom of what had happened to the Soviet Union itself. It no longer seems to appeal to potential defectors for ideological or idealistic reasons. The type of person who is attracted to Soviet Russia today reveals a good deal about the Soviet Union itself. The Russians had wanted one or two defectors from the United States exhibition of 1959 to counter the negative propaganda they had been suffering from the more or less frequent defection of East bloc persons to the West. But they were not eager to have such defectors as Oswald. They can take them or leave them and at a moment of history like 1959 (the spirit of Camp David), could even be embarrassed by them. The motives of a man like Oswald might be jejeune but they are more idealistic than those of most defectors nowadays. Precisely because

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they are realistic, however, people like Oswald are tricky and hard to handle. The Russians don't fully understand or trust the person who comes to them out of self-styled idealistic motives. This may be a mark of the Russians' own low self-esteem. But above all, it shows how Soviet society itself has changed since the 1920's or early 1930's. From experience, Soviet officials know that such a person can become bitter and turn against them. A defector like Webster who came only because he was trapped in an unhappy marriage at home and fell in love with a Russian waitress is easier to deal with and not so hard on the hosts' self-esteem. Those were the thoughts I had about Oswald after I had interviewed him, considerably after I interviewed him, but years before the assassination; they were ideas I had noted down with the aim of writing a piece on how the changing profile of the defector was a clew to the changing profile of Soviet society itself. I thought, however, that I had not fully comprehended Oswald. As he was the key to the piece and the inspiration of it, I had not written the article. But I had thought of Oswald often.

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The interview took place about November 12th or 13th, 1959, on what I believe was a Monday night.

Lee Harvey Oswald, 20, of Fort Worth, Texas, born in New Orleans, went to the United States Embassy on October 31, and

dissolved my American citizenship as much as they would let me at that time--I did request that my citizenship be dissolved. The Embassy officials did not allow me to swear an oath renouncing citizenship. They refused to allow me to take the oath at that time. They said they would not allow me to act without confirmation of my Soviet citizenship. I relinquished my passport and they would not act unless my Soviet citizenship was confirmed.

This is what he said first. I asked him about the official Soviet attitude and he said:

The Russians had confirmed that I would not have to leave the Soviet Union or be forced to go even if the Supreme Soviet refuses my request for Soviet citizenship. They have said they are investigating the possibilities of my continuing my education at a Soviet institute.

And then he said at 17 he had entered the Marine Corps and been discharged in September, having spent 14 months in Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Formosa, that he was a radar operator, and that he had finished his high school education in the Marine Corps. His birthdate was October 18, 1939. He said he had been in the Marines 2 years, 9 months, 3 days, overseas 1 year, 2 months, 24 days. He said he had been born in New Orleans, spent his childhood in Louisiana and Texas, spent 2 years in New York, and then gone back to Louisiana, enlisted in Dallas. He said his father died before he was born. "I believe he was an insurance salesman." (This, in response to my question as to

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what his father did. I was struck by his vagueness.) He said he had one brother, that the Marines had given him a good conduct medal, and that his mother was alive and living in Fort Worth. Then he said he had started learning Russian a year ago "along with my other preparations" for coming to the Soviet Union. He said he had been able to teach himself to read and write Russian from Berlitz but that he still had trouble speaking the language. (I believe he spoke very little Russian at that time.) I asked him what method of Berlitz was he using, was he using text books, or was he actually attending classes, and he said he had both practice in speaking the language and a teacher, but he was either being vague or elusive as to how he learned Russian. Perhaps he was bored with just telling me about that. I asked him how he financed his trip to the Soviet Union and he said he came on money which he saved while in the Marine Corps. I asked him if he had made or was going to make any formal statement about his defection and the reasons for it, and he said he would not. He said that if the Embassy had not told people about his defection (the American Embassy) he would never have said anything to anybody. But since they had, he was giving me an interview because

I would like to give my side of the story--I would like to give people in the United States something to think about.

(In retrospect, that is an important remark. It may have some bearing on his motives in the assassination. Also it reveals his sense that the

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Embassy might be persecuting him, might be spreading unpleasant reports about him.) He said,

Once having been assured by the Russians that I would not have to return to the United States, come what may, I assumed it would be safe for me to give my side of the story.

(So long as he felt there was any chance that he might have to go back to the United States, he apparently did not want to jeopardize his chances of staying in the Soviet Union by talking to a foreign correspondent.) Until they assured him that he could remain in the Soviet Union, "there was always the possibility that my visa would not be extended." The Russians had told him that a special law had to be passed by the Supreme Soviet making him a Soviet citizen. There had been a Supreme Soviet session in late October. It had taken no action on Oswald's citizenship and he appeared disappointed by that and worried. He said that Soviet officials had warned him that

It is not my wish nor even that of Soviet officials, but the over-all political atmosphere, that will determine whether I can become a citizen. My citizenship may take years but I am safe in the knowledge that I can have a prolonged stay.

Then I asked him what position the American Embassy had taken on his defecting and he said:

They warned me about the trouble I could get into: (1) At first they tried to discourage me; (2) I asked to be allowed to take oath renouncing citizenship and they made excuses so as to refuse to let me take the oath. They said I should come back fully knowing that I cannot get into the Embassy without a passport;

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(Oswald had handed in his passport to the Embassy, in fact he could get into the Embassy as an obvious foreigner without the passport but this whole passage is indicative of his bitterness at the Embassy)

(3) at the time I became a Soviet citizen then "my government" (the Soviet government) will handle my renunciation through the usual diplomatic channels.

Then I guess he said he was bitter that the American Embassy refused to take his oath.

I was there on Saturday, October 31st. They refused to take the oath on the ground that the consular officer needed time to get the papers together. I told them I wanted to go through with the formalities then and there. I can't be too hard on them but they are acting in an illegal way. He (the U.S. Consul) is supposed to carry that formality through. On November 1st I wrote a letter of protest to the American Ambassador on the way Snyder carried out his duties and I get this letter back.

And then he quoted me the letter:

It is a principle of the American Government that the right of expatriation is a natural and inherent right of any person and that the manner prescribed by law for the renunciation of American citizenship is the execution of oath before a diplomatic or consular officer of the United States in the established form.

You are again informed that you may appear at the Embassy at any time during normal business hours and request that the Embassy prepare the necessary documents for the renunciation of citizenship.

(I don't know whether he showed this letter to me or cited it from memory.) Next, I asked him the attitude of the Russians. Were they encouraging him or were they discouraging him to defect? He replied:

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The Russians are treating it like a legal formality. They don't encourage you and they don't discourage you. They do of course warn you that it is not easy to be accepted as a citizen of the Soviet Union. But even if I am not accepted I would not consider returning to the United States.

I then asked him about his finances, whether he had bought the \$30 a day Intourist vouchers and whether he had been able to afford it. He said he had bought ten days' Intourist vouchers. He said,

I am paying the standard room and food rate. I want to make it clear that they are not sponsoring me (financially).

And he repeated "they are investigating the possibility of my studying."

He had indicated that he had been impatient to get out of the Marines to come to Moscow and I asked him whether he had ever been tempted by the idea of deserting the Marines. He said,

I didn't desert because (1) it is illegal; (2) for financial reasons; and (3) you can't get a passport while you are in the Marines.

I asked him why he hadn't resigned from the Marines since he was in such a hurry to get to Russia, and he said "you can't resign of course (he laughed rather bitterly at this point) -- that is for officers." He said, "I never seriously considered deserting." Then I asked him (I guess I had in mind that he might be a publicity seeker), would you mind if anybody ever knew about your deciding to defect? He replied:

My family and my friends in the Marines never know my feelings about communism even though I spent 2 years preparing to come here. These preparations consisted mostly of reading. It took me two years to find out how to do it.

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I asked him how he found out. He said it wasn't hard. I asked him if anybody helped him. He refused to name any person or institution who had helped him.

QUESTION: Did Intourist know of his plans to defect at the time he arrived in the Soviet Union?

ANSWER: "I won't say."

But he said he had had an interview with an official of the Soviet Government a few days after his arrival in Moscow. He would not say who the official was or what agency he represented. Oswald said he had left New Orleans September 19th, he thought. Anyway it was a Friday, by ship. He had spent 12 days sailing to LeHavre, from there he booked a flight to Helsinki where he bought vouchers at \$30 a day. (This implies he got a visa in Helsinki.) From Helsinki he went by train to Moscow where for the first 10 days he had been living on Intourist vouchers.

For the past 2 years I have been waiting to do this one thing. /Here he raised his voice and gestured./ For 2 years I was waiting to leave the Marine Corps and get enough money to come. I have had practical experience in the world. I am not an idealist completely. I have had a chance to watch American militarist imperialism in action.

He told me he had become a Marxist when he was 15. (My query -- why?)

I had discovered socialist literature at that time. Then I spent 5 years reading socialist literature observing the treatment of minority groups in America: Communists, negroes, and the workers especially. Watching the treatment of workers in New York and observing the fact that they are exploited. I had read about it in socialist literature and I saw that the description given in this literature was quite

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correct. I saw I would become either a worker exploited for capitalist profit or an exploiter, or, since there are many in the category, I would be one of the unemployed. My decision was unemotional, and not set off by any fight with my wife since I have no wife. [Perhaps either I or Embassy officials had told him that most defectors had personal problems at home.] At 15 I was looking for something that would give me the key to my environment. My mother has been a worker all her life. All her life she had to produce profit for capitalists. She is a good example of what happens to workers in the United States.

I asked him what her work was and he refused to say. Trying to ascertain what he meant by his last remark I asked whether his mother was old beyond her years or worn out, and his reply was "that is the usual end of people in the United States, isn't it?" He added:

It's the end of everyone in every society. The question is why they end up that way, for whom and under what system they work; surely it is the duty of everyone to work.

(Here he expanded on the idea that it is better to end up worn and tired working in the Soviet Union for the benefit of all of society than to end up the same way in the United States working for one private employer. He prefaced his remarks with "I don't claim to be an intellectual genius.") Then he went on in his philosophy:

I believe that sooner or later communism will replace capitalism. Capitalism is a defensive ideology, whereas communism is aggressive. Communism is an ideology which implants itself in every system and which grows.

In the next sentence he raised his voice:

I cannot live in the United States. I shall remain here, if necessary, as a resident alien.

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I asked him what was this socialist literature he had read. He said rather wearily, "Marks and Engels." Which works by Marks and Engels? "The standard works." I specifically asked if he had read anything by Engels and he could not name any. Then he said he had read works by American Communists. So I asked him to name what works and he again refused to say which works. (I have the impression, in retrospect, that he had made a point of not naming anyone who might have inspired him, either in person or by their books, to defect, but that he had at least had advice from somewhere. He seemed almost to hint at this.) Then I asked him whether he had ever seen anything of the American socialists or thought of trying to reform American society through them? His reply was:

The American socialists are to be shunned by anyone who is interested in progressive ideology. It is a dormant, flag-waving organization.

Nor had he had any contact with the American Communists, he remarked. He said emphatically: "I never saw a Communist in my life. Only through reading Communist literature and observing American reality did I conclude that Communism was best for me personally."

Then the conversation turned to reasons for his hatred of the United States. These reasons were:

(1) Segregation. I was brought up like any southern boy to hate negroes. Then (2) socialist literature opened my eyes to the economic reasons for hating negroes. It is so that wages can be kept low. (3) My experience in Japan and the Philippines, where Americans are categorically hated for their militarist imperialism. You'd expect to see it in

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Japan. But if you've ever seen the Naval Base at Subic Bay in the Philippines you'd know what I mean.

He said he had sympathized with Communist elements there and with their hatred of Americans.

Americans look upon all foreign peoples as something to be exploited for profit. The only Filipinos who are well off are those who cooperate with the Americans.

He said he had been part of an Indonesian invasions force in March 1958 when there had been a

Communist inspired social turnover. We sat off the coast loaded with ammunition and that was enough for me. Also in the Suez crisis in 1956 we were told we might have to go in.

So I asked him if this was how he felt about the Marines, why had he joined in the first place? He said, "I went into the Marines because we were poor and I didn't want to be a burden on my family."

I asked him his impression of living standards in the Soviet Union and whether his first-hand observations had in any way effected his convictions about socialism. And his reply was, "They don't have as many hot water heaters and meat pies here but they will in 20 years, through an economic system which is leaving the United States far behind. Any material shortcomings I might see here cannot influence me to return." Then I must have asked him whether it was Soviet social theory or Soviet successes, such as Sputnik and rapid industrialization, that had attracted him most. He replied: "It is the social system, not the successes, that attracts me." "At the same time," he added, "the Soviet

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Union would undoubtedly surpass the United States in terms of economic success." (During the course of the interview I had been struck by the fact that he seemed to spend his days sitting alone in his hotel room. He told me he had not wandered around the city very much, and the only expedition he had made by himself had been to Detsky Mir, a children's department store two blocks away, where he said he had bought an ice cream cone or tea. He was impressed by the size of the crowds there, and seemed rather proud that he had been able to manage even so small an excursion. In other words, I got the impression throughout the interview that he felt rather helpless in Moscow, had seen very little of the city and in fact was markedly uninterested in learning about everyday life, conditions or people in the country he had striven so long to get to.)

I asked him what had struck him most in the Soviet Union and what he had seen there. He had been struck by "the love of art for art's sake" in the Soviet Union. As for what he had seen, he said he had seen the usual tourist attractions, had been in peoples homes and seen the whole city of Moscow. But he declined to name anything specific and my impression was he had seen very little, so I asked him his overall impression of Moscow.

Moscow is an impressive city because the energy put out by the Government is all used toward peaceful and cultural purposes. People here are so well-off and happy and have a lot of faith in the future of their country. Material poverty is not to be seen here.

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I, knowing many Russians who would have given anything to live in the United States, asked him the reaction of any Russians he had met when he told them his decision to defect. He said:

The Russians sympathize and understand. But they ask me why and are very curious. But they understand when I speak of the idealistical [sic] reasons that have brought me here, whereas an American would not understand.

He stressed that these Russians that he had met were extremely interested in the material situation of workers in the United States. (I suspected a little that he wanted to be treated as something rather special and so I asked him if the Russians he met paid him any special attention or made a big fuss over him. His answer was "No. They don't treat me as any celebrity.")

These are my own observations in the course of the interview:

He had repeatedly referred to the Soviet Government as "my Government." He said that because of his annoyance with the American Embassy he would not set foot in the Embassy again. I must have suggested at some point in the interview that he was defeating his own purpose, that by refusing to set foot in the Embassy out of pique, he was unable to take the oath renouncing citizenship. He justified his refusal to set foot in the Embassy by saying:

I have already axed [sic] them to prepare the papers. I am sure that if I did enter the Embassy they would just give me the same run-around as before."

(It was in fact his refusal to go back to the Embassy to take the oath that, so far as I know, made it possible for him later to return to

the United States. I doubt that he was consciously aware that he was leaving himself this loophole but he may have had some semi-conscious awareness of it.) He stressed that it would be an honor to acquire Soviet citizenship. I must have asked him why in his view the Embassy would be trying to give him what he called the run-around. He called it "a prestige and labor-saving device." Again I asked him the difference between exploitation of the wage earner in the Soviet Union and the United States since both countries needed capital for industrial investment and he had already agreed that industrialization was a good thing. He replied that people in the Soviet Union, as in the United States, get a wage. But the profit they produce is used to benefit all the people, and not just a single employer. They have an economic system that is not based on credit or speculation.

My own note to myself in the stage of the interview which was toward the end that he has a very primitive understanding of economics. Referring to his defection, he said "my reasons are very strong and good to me." He said he had given his passport to the American Embassy along with both verbal and written statements. He said he did not recommend defection for everybody. He said it meant "coming into a new country, always being the outsider, always adjusting, but I know now that I will never have to return to the United States. I believe I am doing right." He said he had been a Marine private, had to get out before his three years were over, had been discharged September 11

because of dependency, that his mother was ill, that her situation was the climax of that of the working person in the United States, that her health was poor and that she was living in Fort Worth with his brother. He said that she had been trying to phone him in his room at the Metropole hotel, begging him not to defect, but that he just let the telephone ring.

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