A Man Who Knew Oswald

Councilman Robert J. Fitzpatrick reminisces about his meeting with Lee Harvey Oswald a few months before Kennedy's assassination

By BLAINE TAYLOR

Next Thursday marks the tenth anniversary of the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, allegedly by Lee Harvey Oswald. At least one man in Baltimore believes that Oswald was indeed the lone assassin — contrary to the many volumes (and now a movie, "Executive Action") attacking the veracity of the controversial Warren Report.

That man is Robert J. Fitzpatrick, dean of students at Johns Hopkins University and 2nd District city councilman, who bases his belief on a chance meeting he had with Oswald and his wife Marina on July 27, 1963, almost four months to the day of the tragedy in Dallas.

At the time Fitzpatrick was studying Russian at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Ala., where he was friendly with Eugene John Murret, who was Oswald's first cousin.

"Gene mentioned one day that his cousin was just back from Russia with a Russian wife," Fitzpatrick explains," and that it might be possible to have him give a brief talk to some interested students about his experiences in the Soviet Union. So we set it up for late July with Oswald, his wife and their only child, Junya."

The talk was one in a series of concerts and lectures that were organized for summer school students as a change of pace.

Fitzpatrick spent about six hours with Oswald and his wife after their arrival in Mobile.

"They came around noon. The pictures of him that I was to see months later in the papers were exactly the way he looked that day — no smile and a hard expression on his face. What struck me most about him, I think, were his eyes. He had the most incredibly intense gaze. Although I don't remember the color of his eyes, I'll never forget their impact. When you talk to most people, they don't just stare you in the face — but he did."

Despite Oswald's lack of formal education, Fitzpatrick found him both intelligent and articulate.

"His Russian was much better than mine, but one of the things that struck me was that he made grammatical mistakes that indicated it was a language he'd learned by talking to people, rather than by a formal structure of teaching. He seemed to be very fluent in it, however."

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Because the Oswalds' Spring Hill College visit was really a family affair — a trip to see his cousin Gene, with a lecture tacked onto the schedule for good measure — Fitzpatrick took the couple on a sight-seeing tour of Mobile.

"Marina didn't speak any English," Fitzpatrick says, "and I was asked to spend some time particularly with her since there was nobody besides Lee with whom she could converse.

"Judging from recent pictures, she's much prettier now than she was then. When I met her, her hair was pulled back and she was wearing what I would call a typical European women's dress — nothing very fancy.

"Oswald wore a sport shirt and slacks. He was a secretive kind of person, trusting no one and not very sociable. Gene had mentioned to me that his cousin had had a difficult childhood and that he didn't seem to fit any place in society. He had no job, no skills, no education.

"One of the things that was

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Six Hours with

strange was that Oswald had never let Marina learn any English. When she went to the supermarket, he would give her a list of the things he wanted. He wouldn't allow her to make any friends. She lived in a prison-like atmosphere, even when he was with her. It was as if he weren't going to let you participate in his circle. This was his — and it was like an island against the rest of the world.

"At one point I wanted to compliment him on his beautiful wife. My Russian was clumsy, and I used a term that implied a kept-woman rather than a wife. Well, Marina though it was hilarious and said she realized it was only a mistake in expression. But Oswald didn't think it was funny at all. He demanded an immediate apology."

After that initial "joke" disagreement, Fitzpatrick recalls that Oswald warmed up a bit and told how he and Marina had met at a dance in the Russian factory where they both were employed.

Oswald's session with the Spring Hill students took place late in the afternoon.

"I think everybody who saw and heard him was impressed in a way they weren't going to forget," Fitzpatrick says. "He was eloquent, giving a good account of his experiences in the Soviet Union, and there was an incredible intensity about it all. What kept coming through was a sort of frustrated idealism."

"One of the questions we asked him was why he had gone to Russia and why he came back. He described problems that he'd seen in this country — poverty, racism and the class struggle. He had thought that Russia would be a sort of promised land, but it didn't live up to his expectations.

"So he returned—not because he really wanted to, but because he said it was less painful to live in the United States . . . also because he had no other place else to go.

"All of us had the impression that the guy was homeless, dissatisfied and extremely disappointed. He was intelligent enough to recognize social problems that existed in both countries, and yet didn't have the education to understand any of the solutions, or the fact that the solutions to social problems can take generations to work out.

"He talked about his life in Russia . . . the way the party structure worked and the dichotomy between what he understood Karl Marx to be saying and what he actually found in Russia. He said, 'The full principles of Marxism are not lived up to in Russia. Capitalism doesn't work. Communism doesn't work. In the middle is socialism, and that doesn't work, either.'

"I saw him as someone terribly deceived. He thought that when he went to Russia he would find what he'd read about in Marx's philosophy. He spoke of getting books on Marxism from the public library and reading how the social system was supposed to work. He saw Russia as the carrying out of that system but later became frustrated at what he found at the factory level and in political life. He didn't impress me, however, as a revolutionary . . . just somebody who wasn't going to make it in society. He trusted no one, not even his own wife.

"At the end of the day Oswald gave me a recording of 'Swan Lake' by the Leningrad Orchestra, a way of saying thanks for the invitation to come and speak."

Fitzpatrick never saw the Oswalds again.

November 22, 1963 is a day clearly etched in his memory.

"It's hard for me to separate my reactions about President Kennedy and about Oswald on the day of the assassination. I'm a native of Canada and had become an American citizen in 1962, mostly because of Kennedy.

"There were a lot of people like me who were just finishing college at that point, and President Kennedy had captured our imagination. Despite the fact that, as historians are pointing out now, he didn't accomplish all that much physically and legislatively, there was a sense of possibility that he energized.

"It may not have been his idea to have a war on poverty, to create the Peace Corps, to have various civil rights and social action movements at the time, but Kennedy expressed them, became a spokesman for them in a way that would

Oswald

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be inconceivable now. He had a lot of my friends and myself willing to become involved in government service.

"I can't see Nixon talking about a peace corps and getting people to sign up. I don't think people would respond in the same way. In the early 60s there was a great sense of possibility, and many of us became involved in the civil rights movement, which wasn't too popular in Mobile, at the time. We wouldn't have done that if it hadn't been for Kennedy's influence.

"Those were some of the things that were in my mind when I heard about the assassination in Dallas.

"I remember several hours later the mention of Oswald's name. There was a deadly silence among the eight or ten of us watching TV because we'd all met Oswald. They hadn't shown his picture yet, but as soon as the name was given we just knew it was the same person.

"Nobody questioned that it couldn't have been Oswald. It's not that you could know by hindsight that he was capable of doing this and stopped it, but somehow the very irrationality and the frustration of the thing — which I think was essentially what an assassination like that indicated — seemed to fit Oswald perfectly. I don't think any of the people who met him when I did have any doubts to this day that it was Oswald and Oswald alone."

Fitzpatrick relates a chilling incident that occurred as he watched TV that Friday afternoon. "One of the things that I'd forgotten about Oswald's visit — but which came back to me as soon as I heard his name connected with President Kennedy's death — was that he had talked about rifle practice in Russia. It came up in a question as to how he spent his spare time. He said he went out for target practice on weekends."

Fitzpatrick saw Oswald on TV before he was murdered by Jack Ruby. "He was still the same person I'd known. He was like walking energy, intense."

A few days after Kennedy's death, FBI agents came to Mobile

to question both Fitzpatrick and Murret, as part of the Warren Commission investigation.

"They started checking family connections of Oswald's in New Orleans," Fitzpatrick says, "but I don't know how they got on to me. It may have been from a letter I'd written the Oswalds to thank them after their visit. I cringe when I think of that letter! One of the things I vaguely remember having said was that I admired his sensitivity and idealism, but totally disagreed with the conclusions he was drawing.

"I was questioned for hours. The agents were extremely thorough, and I was surprised that they knew so much about me, and about Oswald's itinerary when he was in Mobile. They seemed to have dug up an extraordinary amount of information in a very short period of time. They knew I was studying Russian, and how good or bad it was, plus the fact that I was receiving Pravda. They knew that I'd worked in a clothing store when I was in high school. They asked me what time the store closed, what kind of merchandise was sold and whether on not it was expensive. They were very detailed in their questioning."

What are Fitzpatrick's thoughts today on the assassination? "I've just never been able to accept the theory of a conspiracy—and I've read many books about the assassination, even though it is for me very painful. I think it would be more comforting to believe in a conspiracy. It would be easier to believe there was a plot to serve some sort of political purpose rather than to see it as a totally irrational act by a frustrated human being. It's hard for us to live with that kind of irrationality, but that brief contact with Oswald convinces me that that's what it was.

"I stress that it was Oswald alone because I don't think anybody who met him could see him working in a group and being trusted as part of it. The guy was just too unstable. I can't see — if you're trying to assassinate a President — making the whole thing rest upon a guy who has gone from country to country totally distrusting and frustrated. I don't see that he would inspire that kind of confidence.

"Take, for example, the other assassins in recent years — Ray, Sirhan and Bremer. One of the consistent things that comes through in terms of a pattern is the isolation of those individuals. They all seem to be losers. From what I've seen of Sirhan's writings, he had no real knowledge of Robert Kennedy — only that he symbolized something.

"When I thought back to everything I could recollect in Oswald's talks about the government in this country, I couldn't remember a single reference as such to President Kennedy, but there were a lot of references to an anti-government feeling — the feeling that the government as a whole had betrayed us.

"It could have been anybody other than Kennedy, except that with Kennedy you found someone who was acceptable, charismatic, wealthy and personable. More than that, however, I think Kennedy just happened to be the physical representation of something Oswald disliked."

What are Fitzpatrick's current feelings about the late President?

"Kennedy's death affected me more strongly than something within my family would. I don't think my father's death will have the same impact ... not because of any sort of hero worship or false adulation of the Kennedys, but because it was for me and many others the first indication of our own mortality, if you will. The sense of possibility was wiped out with his death.

"My wife, Sylvie, who is French, was in Berlin the night Kennedy was shot. All the lights in the city were turned off, and people put candles in the windows as a memorial to him. We all felt that way, then."

Fitzpatrick's sorrow over the death of the President has been eased by what he calls the lasting impact of the President's life upon our times.

"There's a whole generation of people in political life — like Barbara Mikulski and myself—who'd never have chosen politics if it hadn't been for John F. Kennedy, despite the ten years of deception we seem to have had since his death."

One casualty of Fitzpatrick's meeting with Oswald and what happened on November 22, 1963 was his study of Russian.

"Somehow when the assassination came," he says, "I just lost interest. I never made any direct connection between the events, but I decided to study French instead."