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THE UNSINKABLE MARGUERITE OSWALD

If the cocksure rogues who fingered Lee Harvey Oswald as the lone assassin of Kennedy had known his mother better, things might have been different. Certainly, they would have taken pause - perhaps looked around for another patsy.

Now they have her on their backs, and they snarl with mockery and menace. Their ^{PR}publicity men cannot write three lines about her without suggesting that the proper place for this aging Antigone who cries justice for her murdered son is an asylum or a grave.

Yes, there is a touch of the unschooled prima donna about Marguerite Oswald as she gleans some egoistic comfort from her isolation. Here and there she responds to the icy deafness of the dominations and powers with extravagant suspicion and speculation. But if Ibsen is right and the strongest is the one who stands alone for integrity and honor, then Marguerite Oswald is the strongest woman in America.

I first saw her in action on Saturday, June 27. With two friends, I came to Dallas to review the landmarks of the Kennedy assassination, and a telephone call to Oswald's mother in Fort Worth brought an invitation to guide us on a tour of Oak Cliff. That is the part of Dallas where Patrolman J.D. Tippit was killed and Lee was captured three quarters of an hour later, an hour and a half after sniper bullets had blasted the President.

The first surprise was her voice. Not a trace of the gruff paranoid harridan so often described by the press. What I heard instead was a pleasant ladylike welcome, no cautious ambiguity in the courtesy that carried only a faint suggestion of loneliness.

Marguerite Oswald is 56 years old but with hardly a wrinkle on her round pink-checked face. Short, plump, even dumpty, her face and figure are lively souvenirs of what must have been a pretty vivacious girlhood, which added weight, horn-rimmed bifocals, and salt-and-pepper hair pulled back into a knot have only turned into an agreeable matronliness. Mrs. Oswald was a \$10-a-day practical nurse when the President's murder turned her into the feuding defender of the Oswald family honor (she was fired a few days later). It is easy to imagine her busy about a sick room, cajoling, consoling, chatting, and standing for no nonsense about taking one's nux vomica.

The part of Oak Cliff where Lee Oswald lived and J.D. Tippit died is a decaying neighborhood whose large houses have turned into so many rooms for low rent. Our tour came several days after the papers reported how Oswald was only restrained from starting a homicidal career with Richard Nixon by his wife locking him in his room. We went to the rooming house where Lee and Marina lived at the time. Marguerite was admitted with sympathetic deference and she went from room to room, pointing out that none of the doors had ever had locks on them. Before leaving, she photographed the fence against ~~the~~ which Lee was supposed to be standing when he had his picture taken for future reference, holding a rifle, a gun, and a Bolshevik newspaper. "Look here," she said, and pointed to the bottom of the fence, obviously very different from what appeared on the dubious cover of Life.

After we located the spot on E. 10th Street where Tippit was found dead, we walked about a block and a half to the home of Helen Louise Markham. She is the one who, the reports say, was the lone witness to that shooting. Oak Cliff almost becomes a slum there. Mrs. Markham lives in a small apartment over a barber shop and she was pacing back and forth, her infant granddaughter in her arms, when we arrived.

No, she could not talk to us now, she had to mind the baby. We offered to pay for a baby-sitter. No again, but could we return at 2:15 when her husband would be home and we could talk freely. Helen Markham is still young but shabby, beaten and spiritless. She jumped when Mrs. Oswald reached for the baby.

At 2:15 p.m. we plowed through the Turkish-bath afternoon Texas heat, carrying six-packs of Coke against the anxious hour we foresaw in the hot stale air of the Markham apartment. Two Dallas police station wagons were parked outside the place. Just as we approached, they pulled away.

Mrs. O. guessed what the police were there for. Up the stairs she charged ahead of us, and there we confronted the most pitiful spectacle. Mr. Markham stood in the doorway and behind him the alleged witness to the Tippit murder covered to one side. The man was a quivering wreck. Every muscle in his undernourished frame was a-tremble, his mouth twitched uncontrollably, and his teeth were actually chattering from fright.

"Please," he groaned like a whipped coyote, "please go away, please don't come back."

"You've been ~~threatened~~ threatened, haven't you," Mrs. Oswald said.

"Yes. Please go away."

Outside, Mrs. Oswald's eyes grew red fighting back the tears that welled up. "That poor man!" she kept repeating. She wanted to go to Washington at once to report the incident to the Warren Commission. "What right do they have to threaten him? This is still America, by God," she cried. "We're going to see if they can get away with this."

Bill Markham, 27-year old son of Helen Markham, followed us outside. His mother and stepfather, he said, were too scared to talk to us but he wasn't.

We got into our car and began to talk. A chilling contempt for his parents showed in every word. Also clear was his desperate need of money.

Would we pay for information? It only takes an hour of independent work on the Oswald case to make one circumspect. He might be charged with bribing a witness, and how did we know that the boy was not every bit of the liar he said his mother was. The sullen teen-ager with the handsome tanned face topped with black curls admitted he had a police record. The police had gotten him fired from several jobs by so-called parole checkups. He wasn't working and he wanted, more than anything else, money.

"I need it, ma'am," he drained, "and I'm going to get myself some." Yes, the Secret Service had told his parents "there would be trouble" if they talked to outsiders. "But I'm not afraid, ma'am. I need money and if I don't get it one way, I'll get it another."

Why not go away to another state and start clean, Mrs. Oswald pleaded with him. "The police'll be after me anyway, ma'am, and I can't afford a lawyer. I can't afford anything."

"Please be careful," she said. "Oh Lord, poor people are so helpless. If you were middle-class, you wouldn't have these problems. And don't be so sure you can win against the police. My Lee was so sure."

As he was leaving the car, she took his hand. "You'll take care," she said, "and if you get into trouble and need help, please get in touch with me. I'll find some way to help you."

Two days later Marguerite called us to come over fast. She greeted us, holding up a newspaper in her hand. The Markham boy had been picked up for burglary and parole violation. It recalled the similar arrest a few weeks before of Abraham Bolden, the first Negro Secret Service man assigned to the Presidential bodyguard, on charges of cooperating with counterfeiters. There too the arrest was made after Bolden announced he had information relevant to the murder of the President. There too the charge was entirely based on the

testimony of two witnesses who themselves were under police charges.

"I keep thinking, maybe talking to us got the boy arrested," Mrs. Oswald said. "We've got to help him."

And for seven hours Marguerite Oswald was on the phone trying to get a lawyer for young Markham. She called Mark Lane in New York, Greg Olds of the Dallas Civil Liberties Union who made vague unfulfilled pledges, the Lawyers Referral Service, six attorneys in Fort Worth who begged off. Wouldn't one of them at least visit the boy in jail? Shadow images crossed her mind of Markham being killed in jail just as her son was. She offered to pay the legal expenses but it was no go. She got promises, recommendations, apologies, but no lawyer.

(Mark Lane finally managed to persuade a reluctant colleague in Dallas to see young Markham).

Mrs. Oswald is unemployed. No job has materialized for her since the assassination. Her income is based almost solely on the sale of documents. Life bought a picture of her and Marina for \$1000 and Esquire paid \$4000 for sixteen letters Lee had written her during his exile in Russia. Some foreign reporters paid for interviews. She lives in a one-floor three-room house (rent: \$30 a month), she spends little for food, her wardrobe is almost empty, and she hates to touch a dollar of the money she has put aside to fight her case.

What a contrast this makes to the fantastic concern shown for the alleged assassin's wife, Marina! The Russian girl, whom Lee married after he decided to return to America, has received some \$275,000 in donations and payments. She is the object of every tender solicitude, public and intimate, from the Secret Service. When the Fort Worth Council of Churches started a fund for the Oswalds, they soon made it clear their charity was not meant for the mother who was so unmotherly as to defend her son. Checks for the relief of Marguerite

were returned to the senders.

The reason for this discrimination, the lavish acceptance, almost seduction of Marina, the hostile ostracism of Marguerite, is obvious enough. Marina co-operates. She makes the proper noises for the Secret Service and the FBI. After first protesting his innocence, she now hardly lets a month go by without adding to the monstrous list of her husband's intended victims. Marguerite Oswald, on the other hand, is inflexible in defense of her son. "The money is running out," she says, but, like Micawber, she is sure something will turn up.

Almost every day she visits Lee's grave in Rosehill Cemetery, just outside of Fort Worth. She replaces the flowers snatched by souvenir hunters, weeds the grass and tends the sapling that wavers over his grave. In her car she carries a garden hose which she attaches to the spigot at the graveside and waters the grave. A hard brown walk had been beaten around the grave by the daily visitors, and keeping face before hundreds of curious watchers day after day has made her a bit of a showoff. Every inch of her bearing is a polite defiance of her situation and an awareness of history. She is proud, if not of her son, certainly of herself.

Mrs. Oswald is a Southerner, white and Lutheran. Like Madame Dreyfus seventy years ago, nothing but her position as the victim of an official fraud (Madame Dreyfus always called it a "judicial error") could have put her in touch with the handful of radicals who take up her cause. A parochial Texan, Mrs. O. is not altogether comfortable with the voluminous sympathy she gets from Europe. She is a bit uneasy about Mark Lane's crusade for justice to Lee in Paris, Rome, Budapest and London. She would prefer to see the case fought out between Americans, without interference from Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre, - but now and then despair grips her heart and she wonders whether she herself will not wind up in a European exile.

In New Orleans she was born, nee Claveria, and grew up. She raised her family in Fort Worth. The word "nigger" comes naturally to her lips, just as it did to her son's (but the least injustice against Negroes or Mexicans starts her indignation tank boiling again).

Whenever we cast doubt on her prospects, she would reply, "This is America" or "This is Texas", something we coanopolitans from Philadelphia could not be expected to comprehend. Because "this is America", she waved aside our opinion that the Warren Commission would not vindicate her son and herself. She glories in the fact that all her sons were Marines, and Lee, she says over and over, was acting for the United States government from the day he joined the Leathernecks in 1956 to the day he was handcuffed and shot in a Dallas jail. Sometimes we get the impression that she was filing a claim for Gold Star Mother status.

The son of her first marriage, John Edward Pio, has spent 14 years in uniform and is now an Air Force sergeant. Robert E. Lee Oswald Jr., her second, was Lee Harvey's "big brother". She remembers Lee in his early teens studying the print off of Robert's Marine manual. One day she found Lee puzzling over the manual and beside it was a paper-bound Communist pamphlet. It was this brochure which was inflated in the post-assassination press until it could be passed off as Das Kapital, no less, always mentioned with the German title, mind you. Lee quit high school in the 10th grade to join the Marines, and his mother will tell you that even then he was contemplating undercover work for Uncle Sam among the Reds.

Lee Oswald never was a Communist and his mother is certainly not one. But, coexisting with a taken-for-granted patriotism in both, is a spontaneously radical point of a view that burgeoned out of a lifelong war with deprivation. Marguerite Oswald knows in her bones that the poor are a beaten and harassed

flock and that the polite equality of the law is usually a boon for the rich and a rawhide whip for the poor. "If my son had been wealthy, he might be alive today," she says. In one part of her heart she is a stalwart who believes, like I'll Abner, in the flag, the FBI, and the Capitol in Washington. In the other, she understands that this is a land where money and prestige rule the roost.

But if Marguerite Oswald is poor and keenly aware of the meaning of poverty, her poverty is still self-consciously genteel. "We were down and out," she says, "but we were never trash."

She kept her boys clean and neat, they ate their pork and beans napkin in lap, and her home, however bare, always manifested a middle-class taste. She was plainly elated when Lee's landlady in Dallas said that Lee was the only tenant who washed the tub out after he took a bath. The Oswalds paid their debts, lived on sandwiches when they had to, and saved their scrapings. One day she saw her nursing home employer browbeat an old patient and she quit her job in helpless rage. "I didn't know where my next meal was coming from," she told Jack Langguth of the New York Times, "but I have my principles and I've learned not to worry."

"Lee never lied to me," she said. When he was having a hard time of it keeping a wife and child on unemployment benefits or \$1.25-an-hour jobs, Mrs. Oswald asked him why he left Russia, where his job was easy and the pay regular, to come home to life as a virtual derelict. "Not even Marina knows that," he answered.

That Mrs. O. insists on as much as Lee's innocence is her proud conviction that Lee was an American secret agent. Day after day she studies the pictures and reports of the assassination. "Analyzing" she calls it. I saw her drive around Fort Worth and Dallas to find and question potential witnesses. I watched her on the phone tormenting Liebler, Redlich and Rankin of the Warren Commission

with a calm dignity. Interviewed on the leak of Lee's "diary" to the press, she held forth on TV like a dowager queen in court. Expressing gratitude for the publication, she serenely proceeded to quote and analyze. "They show, you see, what I have always maintained," she said, "that Lee was an American agent."

Before we left, she pointed out how Federal agents had twice violated the laws of Texas by absconding with evidence that may have proved her son's innocence. "They took the President's body out of Texas. The Dallas doctors thought he was shot from the front but the Federal men had a secret autopsy in Bethesda, Maryland, when it should have been done here for the court record. Then they rushed the President's limousine out of the state. They dismantled it before anyone here could examine it for bullet holes."

The journalists who earn their daily bourbon on assignment from Life, Time, and the news networks have never stopped portraying Marguerite Oswald as a domineering, paranoid showoff with frequent delusions of persecution. It reminds me of Freud's remark that there would be no such thing as a persecution complex if there were not real persecution. Mrs. O. won't play ball with the authorities. She is therefore authoritarian. She insists on the least of her rights and worries over the place of her family in the historical record. She is consequently an exhibitionist. She devotes every day to uncovering what she believes and millions believe is a real conspiracy in which her youngest son was the bono emissaire. As a result, she is held in scorn as a bitter old woman who sees snares and plots everywhere.

After Lee's arrest and she faced her uphill way alone, she said, "They turned their backs on me before, they will turn their backs on me again, but my faith will see me through." Marguerite Oswald is unbreakable. That is why the powers are offended.

Is Marguerite Oswald "emotional" and "unstable" as the Maedchen fuer alle

of the press say? We spent five days in her house and watched her under high pressure. If she is emotional, then Molly Pitcher was a hysteric. If she is unstable, then Mount Rushmore is putty.

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