

COMMENTARY ON THREE OSWALD INTERPRETATIONS

J. P. CHAPLIN

University of Vermont

Every attempt to reconstruct the motives of a man who cannot speak for himself necessarily rests on a combination of factual background evidence and careful conjecture. It was in this spirit that the Warren Commission included in its report a study of those events of familial and other relationships which they felt may have influenced the development of Lee Harvey Oswald. Because of the widespread publicity given to the alleged assassin's background following the death of President Kennedy, the world knows Oswald as a young man whose meager life was one of continuous deprivation, failure, and frustration. But many millions of the world's peoples lead such lives through bitter necessity, yet do not become assassins and murderers. The fundamental question remains: What unique combination of personal elements led Oswald to discharge his frustration in the tragic crime at Dallas? This is the question to which the psychologists in the preceding interpretations address themselves, each according to his special point of view. To the historian and student of systematic psychology the interpretations are of special interest, since they represent the three classic schools of depth psychology, the psychoanalytic, the Adlerian, and the Jungian.

CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS FACTORS

Reduced to its essence Dr. Katz' psychoanalytic account is a frankly speculative attempt to reconstruct Oswald's unconscious. He interprets the assassination as a kind of Oedipal tableau, a matricide which could never have been carried out directly, since it would have involved an act toward the mother "too much akin to penetrating her sexually"—an impulse which in psychoanalytic theory is the heritage of every male child. By implication Oswald had never been able to resolve his Oedipus complex because of the absence of a father or father surrogate, and the forbidding personality of his mother. Thus the President of the United States became the victim of the primal sacrifice.

The Ansbacher-Shiverick interpretation places the motivation for the murder on Oswald's hostile style of life and severe inferiority

feelings which culminated in the killing of the President as an act of incredible enormity which in the distorted perception of the perpetrator would suddenly transform him into a powerful and grandiose figure. In one brief moment he would make up for years of frustration and defeat. The world would at last recognize Lee Harvey Oswald. In contrast to the Katz interpretation which centers on unconscious factors, the Ansbacher-Shiverick account is based on rational or ego psychology.

Dr. Progoff's interpretation also emphasizes Oswald's life-long frustration and search for meaning. Unable to resolve his rejection of his old way of life because he felt defeated in his search for a new integration in his abortive flight to Russia and his unhappy marriage to Marina, he exploded into a great act of violence to emerge out of the chrysalis of nothingness into a new life. The death of Kennedy thus symbolized the death of Oswald's old self. In the Progoff account both conscious and unconscious factors are emphasized.

How the three schools stand on this issue is well illustrated by the different interpretations of the events in Oswald's life relating to Russia. For the Freudian, Oswald's voyage to Russia is "to return to the Motherland and to mother herself," clearly an interpretation resorting to the unconscious. In the Adlerian view, Russia, preceded by the study of Marx's writings, is a concretization of Oswald's goal of perfection, in the sign of which he applied himself to the study of Russian to such an extent that he could speak it fluently. Certainly rational and cognitive factors are largely involved here. According to the Jungian, the renunciation of American citizenship and the acceptance into the Soviet environment represented Oswald's search into the depth of his psyche for a new context of meaning. This change is interpreted symbolically as the destruction of his old values and initiation into a new social identity, involving both conscious and unconscious factors.

LARGER MEANING

It might be noted that the Katz and Progoff interpretations also look toward the larger meaning of the act. Dr. Katz likens the assassination to the murder of Christ and the hypothesized murder of Moses. He points to the mass reactions of guilt and mourning, the hasty establishment of memorial symbols, the quick repression of the original guilt reaction by a business-as-usual reaction. Dr. Progoff sees the act as a formative mythic drama breaking into the

world at what may turn out to be a crucial point in our history, as great myths have tended to spring into existence at similar periods in the past. Both interpreters are to be commended for attempting the difficult task of a larger interpretation of the meaning of the event. Dr. Progoff's interpretation should be read in the light of his paper on "The Integrity of Life and Death" referred to in his article.

It is to be regretted that the Ansbachers and Shivericks did not attempt a more general interpretation of the significance of the event. It would seem entirely possible to do this by invoking Adler's concern with the development of social interest in mankind and the rejection of power for its own sake. We live in an age dedicated to unlimited power, and we have yet to master violence. In this sense Oswald was a symbol of man's general failure to employ the rational principles advocated by Adler and more recently by Fromm in order to create a sane society.

OBJECTIVE FACTORS

None of the interpretations presented here is in serious disagreement with the known events of Oswald's life. Indeed, both the Progoff and Ansbacher-Shiverick accounts follow closely the chain of frustrating circumstances that plagued Oswald from the moment of birth. Both interpretations find common ground in assuming that the act of assassination was a violent compensatory gesture which was the culmination of constant and unsuccessful attempts to achieve compensation through a hostile style of life. Katz, too, finds that frustration lies at the heart of Oswald's act, but with a difference. He narrows the explosive act of killing itself down to sexual frustration, even though he implicitly admits that Oswald's background may be important in understanding his development.

All interpreters emphasize Oswald's unfortunate childhood, lacking as he did a father and finding himself the inescapable victim of a rigid, opinionated and neglectful mother with whom he was in constant conflict even to the point of overt physical violence, as numerous witnesses before the Warren Commission have testified (3, pp. 487, 489; 4, pp. 147, 149, 226, 301, 372). Again there is disagreement in the significance to be assigned to Oswald's mother by the several interpreters. Katz' interpretation is in terms of the classical Freudian Oedipal drama, while the Ansbachers and Shivericks stress Adler's emphasis on the mother as the most important figure in developing social interest in the child with failure in Oswald's

case. Progoff finds the mother a deeply significant factor in hindering Oswald's normal development, since lacking a father figure he tended to identify with her to his detriment.

If, as Katz suggests, Oswald's aggression was directed against Kennedy as a substitute mother figure, it leaves unexplained the long history of his overt aggression toward a variety of other people who could not possibly all be mother symbols, including his brother John Oswald (1, p. 647), the wife of his half-brother, John Pic (4, p. 372), his schoolmates (1, p. 383), his wife, Marina (4, p. 293), a Marine sergeant (1, p. 386), General Walker (1, p. 404) and officer Tippit. Indeed, his sadistic treatment of Marina to the point where she was driven to contemplate suicide and his sexual inadequacy (4, p. 291), have, surprisingly, been neglected by Katz who might have made a stronger psychoanalytic interpretation by including them.

More generally, in studying the report of the Warren Commission and the testimony of those who knew Oswald at various stages in his life, this reviewer could not help but be overwhelmed by the massive sense of frustration and failure that this human being must have suffered. He not only felt that "his mother never gave a damn for him" (3, p. 487), but in an interview with the social worker at the Youth House in New York City he also expressed the feeling that nobody in the world cared about him and he in turn cared about no one (3, p. 499). In Russia, when he was refused citizenship, he tells us in his "Historic Diary" that "my fondest dreams are shattered." When he asked Ella Germain, a Russian Jewess, to marry him, she laughed at him. "I am stunned. She snickers at my awkwardness in turning to go. I am too stunned to think" (2, p. 101). A few entries later (2, p. 103) he admits that he married Marina only to spite Ella.

It would be supererogation to repeat the endless list of Oswald's failures in school, at work, in his political, social and marital life—indeed, even in killing the President in that he did not live to enjoy the limelight into which he had thrust himself. The only evidence that this reviewer could find of genuine pleasure in Oswald's life was in his relationships with children. All witnesses agree that he enjoyed playing with little children and tried after his own fashion to be a good father to his own (1, pp. 416, 721; 4, pp. 252-253). Perhaps, pathetically, in his own dim way he was seeking compensation for his own tragic childhood.

SUMMARY

Utilizing the conclusions drawn by the Warren Commission and the supplementary material in the *Hearings before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*, this commentator is of the opinion that the Adlerian interpretation best fits the known facts of the case, with the Jungian interpretation running a close second. Neither interpretation makes full use of the materials available, but it must be admitted that had this been done, the case would have been strengthened, not weakened.

The present writer fails to find any objective evidence in the sources mentioned to support the hypothesis that Oswald's act was symbolic of a desire to satisfy a frustrated libido towards the mother. However, in fairness to the Freudian position, it must be acknowledged that direct evidence could only come from Oswald's unconscious, a source no longer available to anyone.

For the systematic psychologist, the three interpretations provide excellent capsule reflections of the original points of view which they represent. Freud looked to the past for the explanation of the present, and utilized unconscious determinants. Adler, who emphasized goals, conscious as well as unconscious, looked to the present and the future. For Freud, the individual is inevitably a victim of his past. For Adler, the individual is striving toward a future goal which can be changed. Finally, Jung who was strongly drawn toward polarities emphasized both deeply buried unconscious factors as determinants of behavior but at the same time recognized that man is constantly striving and searching for meaning in the present and the future. The interpretations presented here are valid exemplifications of the parent theories.

In conclusion, the interpretations presented in this symposium should constitute a valuable addition to the literature on "the most tragic crime of our century."

REFERENCES

1. *The official Warren Commission report on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964.
2. *Hearings before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*. Vol. 16. Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1964.
3. *Hearings before the President's Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy*. Vol. 21. Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1964.
4. *The witnesses*. Selected and edited by the *New York Times*. New York: Bantam Books, 1964.