

MEMORANDUM

July 2, 1997

To: File (Interviews)

By: Michelle Combs

Subject: Interview with John Anthony McVickar

On June 30, 1997, John Anthony McVickar, a consular officer at the American Embassy in Moscow from June 1959 to September 1961, was interviewed at the Federal District Courthouse in Boston, MA by Jeremy Gunn, Michelle Combs, and Tom Samoluk. This interview, of approximately two and a half hours, was recorded on two audio tapes labeled John McVickar, Interview with ARRB, 30 June 1997. Mr. McVickar also submitted a six page affidavit and a drawing of the ground floor of the American Embassy in Moscow to the ARRB. This memorandum roughly follows the order on the audio tape.

- Mr. McVickar outlined his professional career in the Department of State. He stated that never, at any time in his life, had he been employed by the Central Intelligence Agency. Mr. McVickar noted that he was never asked to carry out any action; nor, to his knowledge, did he ever participate in any operational activity for the CIA. Mr. McVickar said that he assumed some of his reporting from Moscow and other embassy posts was routed to the CIA through normal channels.
- When asked if he had any knowledge of the U-2 flights over the USSR and China prior to 1960, Mr. McVickar said he had no real knowledge of the U-2 plane until the Francis Gary Powers incident in May 1960. He recalled an enigmatic mention at an embassy staff meeting some weeks prior to the Powers incident which he believes related to the U-2.
- Mr. McVickar explained that in 1959 and 1960 he shared an office on the first floor of the embassy with Vice Consul Richard Snyder. He noted that he never had an office upstairs on the non-public secure floors of the embassy though he did visit various offices upstairs one or two times a day for consultations. He also reported that Mr. Snyder never had an office on the upper floors. Due to renovations of the ground floor of the embassy, he and Mr. Snyder had separate offices in 1961 when Lee Harvey Oswald returned to the embassy with Marina Oswald seeking help returning to the United States.

- In describing his tour in Moscow, Mr. McVickar reported that he lived 2 km from the embassy and usually walked to work in 20-30 minutes. He noted that he loved to walk around the city and frequently explored different sections of the city on weekends. Mr. McVickar observed that the Metropole Hotel was a good fast half-hour walk or a subway/ taxi ride from the embassy.
- Mr. McVickar discussed the basic layout of the ground floor of the embassy. He noted that in the summer of 1959, there was a reception desk in the embassy lobby which was staffed by an American wife whose name he did not remember. He does not believe this desk would have been there in October when Oswald arrived as it was only in place and staffed during the summer.
- Marie Cheatham was the first of the consular secretaries Mr. McVickar remembered. He said that Mrs. Verna Deane Brown, the wife of the Assistant Agricultural Attache was the consular secretary for most of the time he was in Moscow. Mr. McVickar did not remember when Ms. Cheatham was replaced by Mrs. Brown.
- Mr. McVickar described the general layout of the embassy. He described the building as having eight or nine floors. The top three secure area floor were accessed by one elevator stop on the middle of the three floors. Marine guards controlled the access to the upper floors at the point where the elevator stopped. Mr. McVickar said that the offices of Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson and the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM) Edward Freers were on the middle of the three floors. The offices of the military attaches were located on the top floor. The secure "bubble" was also on one of these three floors.
- On being shown the October 1959 diplomatic list for Moscow, Mr. McVickar had only vague memories of Joan Hallett as one of the embassy wives manning the reception desk. He remembered Oliver Hallett as a military officer. He remembered Security Officer Russell Langelle only by name and never discussed Lee Harvey Oswald with him. Mr. McVickar remembered Idar Rimestad as the admin officer who was actively involved in the American Exhibition at Sololniki Park in the summer of 1959. He knew George Winters as an economic attache and John Abidian as the security officer for most of the time he was in Moscow.
- Mr. McVickar knew of no specific CIA officers in the embassy. He had no sense or understanding of who at the Embassy might have been a CIA officer. He also had no personal sense or information that Mr. Snyder might have worked for the CIA.
- In describing his work relationship with Mr. Snyder, Mr. McVickar said that while they were

both consuls, Mr. Snyder was the senior by date of appointment (by a few months). While their duties overlapped, Mr. McVickar said he dealt mostly with Russians, especially on immigration and visa issues, because he was more fluent in the language. Mr. Snyder dealt more with Americans, both visiting and resident, and their problems. Mr. McVickar noted that during the summer of 1959, a third consular officer, with the last name of Wise, was sent to the embassy as an extra person to help with the American Exhibition at Sololniki Park. Mr. McVickar agreed that this consular officer was probably Samuel G. Wise who was later stationed in Moscow.

- When asked, Mr. McVickar said he had no awareness of the legal traveler program. He said he had never been asked to report in any way on a U.S. or third national visitor to the embassy. He had never done any work for or had any particular contact with any American students in the Soviet Union.
- In describing life in Moscow, Mr. McVickar noted that no special attention was paid to mail sent to the Embassy, but that it was assumed that all mail was opened by the Soviet security services. He stated that Soviet surveillance focused on Russian speakers, particularly those who were out in the city a great deal. Mr. McVickar said he drew attention because he was a bachelor and he liked to explore the city on early morning walks. He also traveled a great deal and, though traveling alone was discouraged by the embassy, he did it because he thought it was a good idea to learn the country.
- Mr. McVickar had no memory of a visitors book or log in the embassy but thought the desk ladies or the secretary might have kept one. He had no responsibility for examining any such book.
- Mr. McVickar said he remembered Oswald making only one visit to the American Embassy in 1959, after the fair (the American Exhibition) had ended. Mr. McVickar remembered Oswald's visit because he said the embassy was very surprised and shocked by this man and his attitude. He noted that the two earlier defectors had come in while the fair was ongoing. He remembered Nicholas Petrulli as darker, Italian and Robert Webster as blondish. Mr. McVickar said he believed that Webster had come into the embassy more than once.
- When asked how Oswald could have had his passport at the embassy in 1959, Mr. McVickar said the custom was for Moscow hotels to hold a person's passport until that person checked out. He thought that Oswald had left his passport at the embassy when he stormed out after speaking with Mr. Snyder.
- Mr. McVickar remembered that in speaking to Mr. Snyder in 1959, Oswald sounded as if he

was saying thing he had been told to say on why he wanted to renounce his citizenship and why he liked the USSR. McVickar said that Petrulli and Webster appeared to be angry and spontaneous in renouncing their citizenship but that Oswald was different. McVickar said that Snyder tried to help Oswald.

- Mr. McVickar noted that Mr. Snyder would have gone to the military attaches with the information that Oswald had radar experience and wanted to give it to the Soviets.
- Asked to describe Oswald's appearance at the embassy in 1959, Mr. McVickar described him as presentable but informal, dressed in maybe a tie and a windbreaker, not formal. He said Oswald was not trying to make a good impression at the embassy. Mr. McVickar said that none of the three defectors were scruffy.
- Mr. McVickar said that the receptionist would have been the first person to see Oswald in 1959 and would have brought him to Snyder's desk. He said it was conceivable that Mr. Snyder could have taken Oswald upstairs to the secure part of the embassy but that he did not remember Mr. Snyder doing so. Mr. McVickar noted that Mr. Snyder would have kept Oswald's passport if it was left at the embassy.
- Mr. McVickar said he told Priscilla McMillan about Oswald's visit to the embassy because he thought she might help the situation in some way. He said he thought Ms. McMillan might find out Oswald's "story" or get more out of him.
- Mr. McVickar said that he usually dealt with the issue of Russians wanting to marry US citizens and that US visas were usually granted to the new spouse unless there was evidence of significant Communist Party participation. Mr. McVickar remembered Marina Oswald as a pretty straightforward young person.
- In discussing his testimony before the Warren Commission, Mr. McVickar said he had been interviewed by the State Department lawyer Abram Chayes and by the FBI. Mr. McVickar said he was never put under any pressure to tell a particular story or to give any information a particular emphasis.

Attachments: Tape recording and correspondence (w/map)