

State of Affairs



Questions from Abroad

Moscow.

I HOPE that the Presidential commission investigating the assassination of President Kennedy is fully aware of the widespread feeling throughout the world that this was not the simple act of a madman but some sort of sinister plot. Wherever I have traveled in Europe, whether in London, Moscow, or Budapest, the first question usually put to me has been: "Who murdered Kennedy?" Clearly, people very much doubt the facts and findings published to date. There are those who refuse to believe, as one of the Soviet Union's leading writers put it, that an American President "can be shot like a pig in the presence of his wife," and that there was therefore no political motive behind this monstrous act. There are those whose suspicions were aroused by some of the more imaginative stories that have appeared in the American and European press, and there are the veteran readers of detective novels who are applying their own expertise to the confusing facts and missing links.

In London a Cabinet minister asked me whether anyone in the Dallas police had so far been prosecuted—at least for negligence; and a well-known stage director wondered why the Federal Bureau of Investigation gave so much publicity to the chase after Frank Sinatra's kidnaped son, and so little to what it did to investigate the President's murder. It is perhaps not surprising that the wildest rumors of a conspiratorial nature are current in the Soviet Union. Here, it is most frequently the CIA or the FBI who are under suspicion: the former, because Oswald's mother, one is reminded, has said that her son was in the employ of the CIA; the latter, because Ruby's motives were never sharply questioned in public—an omission, it is often suggested, deliberately arranged at the request of the FBI. But that is not the limit to the way imagination has run wild here.

Interest here in the case is still so vivid that the other day in Leningrad a Russian scientist during a discussion drew me a plan of the scene of the murder that was as accurate as I would have sketched it (and I was there at the time of the shooting).

President Kennedy's assassination is almost as passionate a subject of discussion as the Sino-Soviet conflict, which

can now be debated in public since publication of the Suslov speech laying bare the depth of the split between Moscow and Peking. Russians in and outside the government, I think, had come to feel that the late President was a reasonable man when he did not push the Cuban crisis over the brink. They were convinced then that he did not want war or total victory. Never before, perhaps, had a Soviet Government based certain premises of its policy on a single personality. It was for this reason that President Kennedy's removal from the scene was such a shock to Khrushchev. The Soviet Government always takes quite some time before it is able to weigh an American President. In Kennedy's own case they had, I think, reached this point; thus disappointment ran deep when he was killed.

President Johnson is very much of an unknown here, but it is generally hoped that he will continue the foreign policy for a gradual *détente* laid down by his predecessor. For the time being, however, there is still a profound nostalgia for the dead President.

But to come back to the Oswald matter. The only fresh evidence about his character I found here merely confirms the verdict of the psychiatrists. One of



the Intourist guides told me that when Oswald came to Moscow, several of them tried to teach him Russian. They had liked him and were sorry for him. And when winter came and he had no money to buy himself even a fur cap, they got up a collection among themselves and presented him with one. But when they saw him again in Moscow several months later, he completely ignored them—didn't even speak to them. Naturally they felt hurt and thought him ungrateful. But this kind of behavior, of course, was true to type, for he had, for some reason or other, hated everyone who felt sorry for him and had helped him.

Oswald's case, I found, is often easier to explain to Europeans than Ruby's. The latter's behavior and background, in the minds of most people, is the most convincing proof of all that this was a carefully calculated plot. In Western Europe he is usually seen as a tool of the Mafia that, so the argument runs, had to square an account with the Kennedys for exposing their operations; and in the Soviet Union he is regarded as the chosen instrument of certain John Birch Society adherents. In Leningrad, for instance, photostatic copies of the threatening full-page advertisement in the *Dallas News* that appeared on the day Kennedy arrived in Dallas are in circulation. But it would be wrong to assume simply that Soviet propaganda used this case to prove to people here that there is a strong fascist movement in the United States, or that the U.S. is not really a civilized country. There are still too many "missing links," too many coincidences that need explanation, too many contradictory facts that are bound to arouse anybody's suspicion. There is a feeling that the responsible authorities are in possession of information that has not yet been given to the public, that they have not shown the kind of zeal that might have been expected in pursuing every possible lead.

Americans have generally accepted the verdict that both Oswald and Ruby were individuals who acted entirely on their own crazy instincts and that they were not part of any kind of conspiracy. But it is important for members of the Presidential commission to realize that this is not the feeling outside the United States; that grave doubts do linger on and that it is immensely important for all possible facts to be marshaled in the final report so that the mystery still surrounding the case can be removed once and for all.

The commission's report will be read throughout the world with each of us trying to be his own Sherlock Holmes and—more than that—with an eye to whether the authorities have turned over every stone to get at the truth.

—HENRY BRANDON.

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THE PHOENIX NEST

Ben Hecht

Edited by Martin Levin

Absent Friends

THERE'S a thing that keeps surprising you about stormy old friends after they die—their silence. For a while an echo stays in your ear. You hear a laugh, a knowing phrase or two, a certain quality of enunciation. Then, nothing. Another death takes place—voices.

This is the technique of mortality—everything must vanish to make way for new things. The theory is that the dead souls float off into some heaven. I have not given much thought to this matter. It is difficult enough identifying the straggling realities of life, without trying to give shape and meaning to death. I concluded, when young, that my opinions of the hereafter were of no consequence, would have no influence on it, and were unnecessary to my well-being as an earthling. I remained, however, curious.

My friends (except Mencken) were full of some sort of conviction of life after death. Nearly all of them, particularly Gene Fowler, promised to get in touch with me if I was still around after their obsequies.

Not Mencken. Sitting in a saloon one evening, Mencken said, "The biggest hoax perpetrated by the human mind is its 'life after death' Valentines."

I asked him if he was sure. He said he was.

But the others—not a table rap from one of them, not a ghostly cackle in the night; nothing.

"One of the reasons I've joined the Catholic Church," Fowler informed me one evening in Hollywood, "is that I feel convinced that if anybody carries a reporter's pass in the Great Beyond, he's likely to be a Catholic. My intentions, once I pass the Pearly Gates, are to present my Papal credentials, interview the proper Personages or Forces, and get the story back to our blindfolded planet. You know I've always been a good reporter."

He was—the best newspaperman ever to caper through our old profession.

"You may expect a full report from me," Fowler said, "the first tidings from the valley of death. I'll get them back. I always got a story back."

As far as I know, Fowler muffed this one. I've heard not a peep out of him. Or out of Charlie MacArthur, another agile newsman.

"Keep your ears open," MacArthur in-

structed me on one of his last days, "I may have some surprising things to tell you."

When I was writing a book about MacArthur (*Charlie*) I lay awake nights certain that my old collaborator would pop into the room with some tidy criticism. On several occasions, I fancied I saw him. He appeared for a few moments and stuck his head out of the opened window and looked at the Hudson River, as he used to do when we were writing plays or movies together and had hit a snag.

But I knew it was no visitor from the other side. He was a ghost out of my own head, which has become as full of them as a Halloween party.

One wintry afternoon in my house, Maxwell Bodenheim, almost at the end of his rope, said, "I believe there is a God. And I believe that He is somewhat interested in improving His inventions after they have died and returned to His workshop. Yes, I believe in future improvements, especially for poets—who have found life exquisitely deficient."

No voices have sounded. My dead friends have stayed uncharacteristically silent. Only their books, music, and painting speak for them.

—BEN HECHT.

(Shortly before his death in New York on Saturday, April 18, Ben Hecht sent me the manuscript of "Letters from Bohemia," from which I was to cull essays and anecdotes for the Phoenix Nest. The above comes from the introduction to the book, which will be published by Doubleday this summer.—M.L.)

One More Shirley Temple

THE other day it was my privilege to take a young divorcée and her six-year-old daughter to lunch. I don't know much about little girls, but I know what I like. And I like well-behaved little girls with two front teeth missing who sit primly and sweetly erect in their chairs wearing a white party dress dotted with tiny pink roses, clutching a red plastic handbag with white-gloved hands.

So I ordered two Martinis and a Shirley Temple.

The waiter half smiled. That is, he raised the left side of his mouth, but not the right side—and he shook his head perceptibly. I could tell that something