

# Paul Gregory

AN OU ALUMNUS AND RUSSIAN SCHOLAR BREAKS DECADES OF SILENCE ABOUT HIS FAMILY'S CONNECTION TO THE OSWALDS.

By Emma Keith



COURTESY PAUL GREGORY

Paul Gregory as an OU student. Oswald gifted Gregory with the English-Russian dictionary Oswald used while living in Minsk.

**PAUL GREGORY'S NEW BOOK** opens with a startling scene: He's in Oklahoma Memorial Union watching breaking news about John F. Kennedy's assassination. As the suspect's picture is broadcast to the nation, Gregory realizes he knows the man who killed the president of the United States.

Gregory's recollection of the 1963 assassination, *The Oswalds*, is the first major foray into telling his unique story. A child of Russian immigrants raised in Fort Worth, Texas, Gregory recalls a part of his life that remained quiet for a half-century: How he connected with Lee and Marina Oswald; spent time with the family as Marina tutored him in Russian; and testified before the famed Warren Commission, all while a University of Oklahoma student.

The narrative of Gregory's book represents a small slice of his upbringing in Fort Worth's tiny, tight-knit Russian community, a background explaining his study of the language and the country. The two-time OU graduate became a noted economist, academic and author specializing in Soviet economics and history.

"OU played a role by directing me toward Russian studies and language, which served me well throughout my life," says Gregory, now 81. "Intellectual excitement about the study of Russia, fostered by professors Robert Vlach, Herbert Ellison and Nikolai Rzevsky, left a lasting imprint on me."

While he picked up some Russian at home, Gregory received his first formal Russian lessons at OU. His studies were bolstered by an unusual source.

Gregory and his father, Peter, met the Oswalds in the summer of 1962. The Gregorys were interested in connecting with Marina, a Russia native who'd married Lee while he lived in Minsk. In 1962, she was raising their infant daughter and spoke little English, leaving her in virtual isolation. Lee visited Peter Gregory in his office; shortly after, it was agreed that Marina would tutor his son.

Paul Gregory formed a friendship with Marina during lessons, delivered via conversational Russian as he regularly drove the car-less Oswalds around town. Gregory believes now that he was Lee's concession to Marina—a companion she could talk to and spend time with, but one he assumed was in no danger of revealing how poorly Lee provided for their family.

But Gregory unwittingly did just that.

He and his parents introduced the Oswalds to their Dallas Russian friends during a dinner that resulted in the couple's move to Dallas, where women of the Russian community showed Marina that Lee wasn't offering her a decent standard of living.

"[The Dallas Russians] would want to meddle, to help out, to tell Marina the facts of life about America and her husband," Gregory writes in *The Oswalds*. "Marina's Dallas Russian friends would become a constant source of friction and conflict. They also gave Marina an escape. If life with Lee became intolerable, they would offer her shelter and protection."

In the days after the assassination and Lee's murder by Jack Ruby, Peter Gregory became an important figure in Marina's life, translating between Lee's widow and Secret Service investigators questioning her about a possible conspiracy. Both Paul and Peter Gregory testified before the Warren Commission.

Yet, Gregory says, his family didn't talk among themselves—and surely not among friends and neighbors—about the assassination.

"We wanted to keep our involvement with Lee Harvey Oswald as quiet as we could," he explains. "Fort Worth was a very



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Lee, Marina and baby June in a photo booth at the Fort Worth bus station, where Paul Gregory dropped them after they shared Thanksgiving dinner with his family in 1962.

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conservative place, very patriotic, as was the Russian community.”

While he told some fellow OU students about his connection to the Oswalds, word surprisingly never spread around campus. With his parents now gone, Gregory’s immediate family likely heard the full story the first time they read his book, he says.

Gregory attaches little cathartic significance to the retelling of events, but believes his account is an important part of the historical record. Few people who knew the Oswalds are still alive.

“One factor [in my decision to write the book] is the encouragement I got from fellow academics who said, ‘You’ve experienced history, and it’s your obligation to write it down.’ There’s hardly anyone living who had the experiences that I had.”

Gregory’s story and his later contributions to Soviet studies are examples of “the remarkable lives that our OU students go on to lead,” says Emily Johnson, OU’s Brian E. and Sandra O’Brien Presidential Professor of Russian and co-director of the university’s Romanoff Center for Russian Studies.

Gregory has written 12 books and held positions from director of the University of Houston Law Center’s Russian Petroleum Legislation Project to chair of the international advisory board at the Kiev School of Economics. He is currently a research fellow at Stanford University’s prestigious Hoover Institution.

“OU alumni go on to reshape fields,” Johnson says. “Paul Gregory is a good example of that.”

Gregory says he doesn’t want to reopen a debate on the assassination; he’s not interested in addressing a multitude of conspiracy theories. Gregory’s memories paint Lee as a legend in his own mind, a man eager to prove his exceptionalism to himself and his wife, with whom he was openly controlling and abusive.

“Everything that I saw says, ‘This guy couldn’t have organized an assassination—and he wouldn’t have been brought into an assassination plot,’” Gregory says. “What he did, he was perfectly capable of doing.”

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