

LONG LEGS,
THE AMERICAN TOLSTOY,
OSWALD AND THE KGB:
A CONVERSATION WITH
LAWRENCE SCHILLER

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THE EDITOR OF *THE MAILER REVIEW* asked me to continue the series of conversations begun with Lawrence Schiller on his literary collaboration with Mailer, which extended over three decades. Schiller's conversation with Jeffrey Severs focused on *The Executioner's Song* (1979)—from conception to the Emmy-winning television mini-series (1982). My assignment was to interview Schiller concerning his foundational work on *Oswald's Tale* (1995), with a focus on the successful effort to obtain access to the long-sealed KGB records of Lee Harvey Oswald's time in Moscow and Minsk. Schiller graciously agreed to discuss the project and we met twice, once at his home in Woodland Hills California on September 18, 2008, and on June 7, 2009 at the Mailer home in Provincetown, now the headquarters of The Mailer Writers Colony. Our discussion ranged over the entire project, from Schiller's earlier Russian contacts made during the filming of his 1986 NBC mini-series, *Peter the Great*, through the complicated and exhausting negotiations with the KGB, the interviews Mailer and Schiller had with Marina Oswald after they returned, and ending with an assessment of the final work and its place in Mailer's literary legacy. Schiller and I tightened and organized the transcript of our talks, adding and correcting details but the final version, which follows, is generally faithful to the original conversations.

Lennon: I'm visiting Lawrence Schiller at his home in Woodland Hills, California on September 18, 2008. I'd like to talk today with you about *Oswald's Tale*, a book that you were deeply involved in. Can you give me the circumstances about your contacts with people in Russia that convinced you could get all those hidden KGB files dealing with Oswald?

Schiller: All right, you have to go back to about 1982 when Ronald Reagan called the Soviet Union the evil empire. That very same week, I had gotten a book called *Peter the Great* by Robert Massie. I thumbed through it; I didn't read very much of it, but read the chapter about Peter (he was the Czar of all of the Russian empire) plotting to kill his son. You see, his love for country and his desire, to paraphrase what Pushkin wrote, to hack a window open to the west, were more important to him than his son's life. In Peter's eyes, upon his death his son more than likely would take the Russian empire backwards. What a story. I had just produced and directed the film version of *The Executioner's Song* and was looking for my next project. Then I heard from Brandon Tartikoff, the President of NBC. He sent me a fax: "What do we do next?" Everything I had done up to that point had been based on my own life experiences, but here I thought was a great challenge for me, could I do history? Without going into the long story, which will be in my biography, I sold the project to NBC and an eight-hour mini-series was made, which was released in 1986 and won three Emmys, one of which I received for Best Mini-Series. The short and long of it is that in working on the film I interacted with the KGB and got to know several high members of the KGB, one guy who was in charge of coming and going into the country. I also met Gorbachev who said to me of *Peter the Great*, "It's a film that we're not ashamed of." It was a good film. I'd also met Evgeny Velikov, Vice President of the Academy of Sciences, and many others. The point is that by the late '80s, I had made another film there and I was pretty well known in the Soviet Union.

In 1989, I decided to make a third film on Chernobyl, with a screenplay based partly on Frederick Pohl's book [*Chernobyl*, 1987], which I'd optioned. Pohl is a science fiction writer, highly regarded. So, I'm in East Germany, before the wall came down, looking at all the photographs of Chernobyl, taken within 24 hours of the actual event. I'm thinking of how I'm going to recreate it—at the same time the Soviets are also giving me photographs of other plants in the Soviet Union. And my translator Ludmilla Peresvetova was there. The Soviets had assigned her to me on *Peter the Great*, but I fired

her after the first day, so now almost six years later, I don't know why, I decided to hire her again as my translator on the Chernobyl project.

Ludmilla had told me that her husband had worked for the KGB and had been assassinated on a train by somebody in the Soviet Union and she was now looking to figure out what to do with her life. After the Berlin Wall comes down, maybe a year or more later, I send Ludmilla a fax and asked that it be forward it to whomever is now the head of the KGB (the old KGB now had a new name, but for this interview let's just call it the KGB because really nothing had changed yet). The fax basically said, "I'd like to come, would you receive me? I'd like to discuss the following possible projects of interest to the American people: Alger Hiss, the Rosenbergs, and Oswald's years in Russia." Approximately four months later, an answer comes back to me: "Alger Hiss was not a spy. The Rosenbergs were, and your country knows all about it. We are prepared to receive you regarding Oswald." I don't remember how much time passed but I, then, go to the Soviet Union for a meeting with Vadim Bakatin who has just been appointed the head of the KGB. The day before going to see Bakatin, I devise a plan, a list of writers that the KGB would know of. When I met Bakatin, I said that I could deliver any one of these five famous American writers, if the KGB will help develop an authoritative book on Oswald's years in the Soviet Union. Some of the great names on the list I'm sure were probably not available. I think Seymour Hirsch was on it. But the one on the list I wanted was Norman Mailer.

He tells me that they are prepared to meet with the writers and me but explains that the files on Oswald are divided between Moscow and Minsk. You see Oswald spent a little time in Moscow, but after he was allowed to stay in the country the Soviets sent him to live in Minsk. The files dealing with Oswald's time in Moscow are in Moscow; all the files that pertain to Oswald's period in Minsk were sent back to Belarus. The KGB office there has those files. So, I come back to the States and go to see Norman. I don't call anybody else.

Lennon: This would be what year?

Schiller: Late '91. So I go to Norman and talk to him about it. I tell him I believe if we spend enough time in the Soviet Union we can eventually get the files. I explain to him how I met with Bakatin and Ludmilla. I said I was pretty sure that Bakatin would not have told me that the files were divided if he had no intention of cooperating with me. Also, I told Norman, that

there will be one immediate difficulty: most of the agents that dealt with Oswald had all retired years before. My plan, I say, is to find these agents and hire them. I lay out a plan for Norman. Then I go to see Jason Epstein, Mailer's editor at Random House. I tell Jason what Norman has said, that he'd like to go there and investigate. I then tell Jason that I want Random House to cover all start-up expenses. That doesn't seem to be a problem. I'm not saying he said, "Yes, \$25,000 is not a problem." But he is interested, especially since Norman wants to do the book. Of course, something else is happening at Random House, although at that time Jason doesn't reveal it to us—for good reasons—Gerald Posner is well into the writing of his Oswald book, *Case Closed* [1993]. At roughly the same time, I do learn from Ludmilla, who has gone to Belarus for me, meeting with the assistant to the head of the Belarus KGB, that it appears we will eventually get access to the Oswald material. And also at about the same time, ABC Television puts out the word, obtained through some leak, that the Oswald files are there. That little story on ABC says to me that the files are obtainable. Of course, one of the assets and the liabilities of Larry Schiller is that I believe something is possible before I have the foundation to prove it. Then Random House gives us \$25,000 for the trip.

Lennon: *Harlot's Ghost* was published in fall of 1991.

Schiller: Right.

Lennon: Norman's probably finished working on it by the time he hears from you. So he's more than ready.

Schiller: Yes, he's very interested, eager.

Lennon: And your KGB contact, you're having an affair with her. What's the name of your translator?

Schiller: Ludmilla Peresvetova. Her husband was no small fish in the KGB and who knows what she was.

Lennon: So your translator and the KGB contact is the same person.

Schiller: Yes. She says she's no longer involved with the KGB since her husband was assassinated. But she has all the contacts. I don't mean she walked around with a uniform. At one point, she must have also been very well

respected to move so quickly on this project and for whose benefit I will never know.

Lennon: Don't you marry her at some point?

Schiller: I'm divorced from my second wife and ready to make more mistakes, so down the road about half way through this project, I marry Ludmilla. And by the time she gets her Green Card the marriage will be over.

Lennon: I've got some letters here that Norman wrote during the period. Here's one he wrote to Mickey Knox in 1993. I'll just read you a little.

Schiller: Is this is after he finishes *Oswald's Tale*?

Lennon: No, he hasn't finished the book yet. Yeah, he says "Dear Mickey, I don't know if I told you, but I'm now jet-lagged out from the number of trips to Minsk. I've been there five times in the last five months doing research on this book, on "Oswald in Minsk," and it's tough. In fact, probably, for the good of my soul, I've been living, not like a poor man, but like a man without any real money or without any decent food. It doesn't matter how rich you are, you cannot buy yourself a decent meal in Minsk. So the biggest gastronomic sensations of the last five months while living there are the scrambled eggs I make myself, or the borscht, or once or twice, the tuna with cabbage. It's a sad place, and I'll tell you about it when I see you, for it made me realize how Russian I am, even though Minsk is in Belarus, White Russia, rather than Russia itself, in a separate country now. But it doesn't matter; one gets a sense of what life was like in the old Soviet Union. And it was a pretty grim place, but not as bad as painted. I'll talk to you about that when I see you." What does that make you think when you hear that?

Schiller: The hotel food in Minsk was no better than the worst restaurant, anywhere. Russia and Belarus were still climbing out of the horror of the past. The best restaurants in Minsk serve rubber food. So Norman gets a taste of the country in the first trip. Let's talk about this first trip. I communicate back to Ludmilla and tell her that I'm bringing the great American writer. She immediately tells Bakatin, of course. The first trip was to show off Norman. So, we go to Moscow. All we get out of our stop there is a few introductory meetings and they tell me to contact the KGB in Minsk, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Tell them you want access. They don't say we can give you the files, but, hopefully, they can help you. But they're saying it directly to

Mailer, the same thing they said to me in the previous trip. Moscow doesn't say anything, really. They give us a couple names of contacts. They give Norman a tour of the private KGB building and, you know, they do a lot of things kind of to make us feel like they're not sending us back empty-handed. I have the feeling on this first trip that we are in the process.

Lennon: They are not delivering anything you want, but they're keeping all the lines open.

Schiller: Exactly, this is an introductory trip. I ask, not Bakatin himself, but Bakatin's right hand to make a phone call to the head of Belarus KGB, to tell them we're coming. The call is to Alexander Sharkovsky, the head of the KGB, Belarus. So, we go to Belarus. We're supposed to meet Sharkovsky at the KGB office. In Belarus, we take a taxi over, get out of the taxi and start up the steps. There's a guy, with two others just off to the side, coming down the steps, coming toward us. At this moment, Ludmilla, who has gone a few steps ahead, a little bit, falls on the steps. I don't know if she fell on purpose, or what. Who do you think it is—it's Sharkovsky's assistant who leans over and picks her up. And, of course, she introduces Norman right on the steps of the KGB building to the guy who maybe winds up being maybe more important than Sharkovsky himself. I don't know if he really came out to meet Norman; I don't know. But it was a very funny incident. Falls right on the steps, her long legs and everything.

Lennon: Did you ask her if she did it on purpose?

Schiller: No, I never asked her. It's better sometimes if you don't know. So, we go in to Sharkovsky's office and are introduced to him; we sit and talk about how important this is. I don't want to go into all the details of the conversation, but we try to make him see how serious we are about the project, using what I had learned from making *Peter the Great*. At one point, Sharkovsky opens a door and we meet Oswald's "developer," that is, the man who ran the Oswald project while Oswald was living in Minsk. Sharkovsky knew whom we would want to meet. Then we met a couple people that they suggest we hire to assist us finding people and finding a place to live, etc. We are shown Oswald's apartment and the apartment above Oswald's where they listened to his conversations. We are treated very, very well. And all the time Sharkovsky is looking at Ludmilla. What can I say? Nobody could pass up those legs.

Lennon: Is there any discussion of money at this point?

Schiller: No, not yet. The trip was, like, four-five days, but at the end of the trip, they don't say they're giving us the files. But they don't say they're not. We haven't even set up a procedure, how we're going to work. But we do meet the developer and get the tour and so forth.

Lennon: That's part of what you wanted.

Schiller: Of course. What I'm saying is that even with all these meetings, we never got close to discussing if we needed to pay money or how much money we would pay, not on this trip. But they've introduced us to the people because obviously they want to discuss everything among themselves when we leave. I think we even met, on the first trip, that guy who taught Oswald Russian. He was a KGB employee. He was involved in trying to determine, back then, whether Oswald was faking learning Russian or if the USA government had planted him and he already knew the language well. I think we had accomplished what nobody else had ever been able to accomplish with the KGB. But that's my ego talking. Part of the satisfaction that I got was from being able to sit there with Norman Mailer and the head of the KGB, laying the groundwork. It was an exciting thing. So we felt pretty comfortable. The working title of the book, at least my working title, is "Oswald's Years in Russia." There's been no discussion about concept of a psychological portrait. We are hoping to find clues as to why he did what he did. What were the triggers that got him upset in the Soviet Union? What were the things that drove him off his rocker, you know? Could we find similar moments in the United States? Of course, we tried to make the KGB think that we did not believe that the Soviets were involved in the assassination. Also on the first trip, we're introduced to a guy, one of their great, expert riflemen, who recreated for them, Oswald's three shots to see how it was done. You know, they almost recreated Dealey Plaza, actually made a knoll out of dirt, to see whether these shots were possible.

So, we come back to the States and run into our problems. First thing is, Random House will not make the same kind of deal that I had earlier with Warner Books on *The Executioner's Song*. They won't make the deal and I already had a rough budget for two hundred thousand dollars in expenses. I have to hire translators, transcribers, Ludmilla wants a thousand, or fifteen hundred a week; she is also asking for a percentage of the profits, which

I won't do. We're going to need drivers; we will need places to live, etcetera, etcetera. I'm planning that it's going to be a long trip, nine months, perhaps longer.

Lennon: Right and some money has to go to the Russians. Is that part of your budget?

Schiller: Yes, much more money was needed. Negotiating with Random House, I came up with, like, a quarter of a million dollars for expenses, and in there, obviously I have included some for contingencies. And, yes, I have to give the Soviets what are called "facilitating fees." So things like that are in the budget. At first, Random House doesn't want to give me ownership of the book, not even fifty percent of the book; they'll give me maybe 20 percent of ownership of the book. Now, the contract becomes very, very complex. Advance \$870,000 dollars, 50% to Mailer, \$200,000 of my half goes to expenses, but only 20% ownership. Not the normal 50/50 that Norman and I had. But what really hits us is Posner's book.

Lennon: Jason finally tells you?

Schiller: He says, "Don't worry about it, Norman. You're going to write the great book. Don't worry." But I see the handwriting all over the place. For a while, it just takes the steam right out of me. I think, "Why am I wasting all this time with Random House? Why not go over to Simon and Schuster, Little Brown, or somebody else?" Yet I can't go there with Norman; he has a contract with Random House. And Random House has said yes to the book; it isn't like they rejected it. So, I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Lennon: Couldn't Norman get released? He got released for other books, for the Picasso book, for example.

Schiller: Well that's because Random House didn't want to do Norman's Picasso book [*Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man*, 1995] because John Richardson was writing the authorized biography for them. But with Oswald, they do want to do it. And Norman says he still wants to do it. I don't know if all this affected Norman; it certainly affected me. So it takes us quite a while to sort all this out and prepare. We have to find the right people, hire translators, drivers and so forth.

Lennon: What happens on the second trip?

Schiller: Well, Norman and I conclude that this is going to be a long stay and I'm prepared to stay straight through as I have said, I have split with my second wife, Stephanie, and don't have a real reason to be back in the States. One thing you should know is that my best work has always been done between marriages when I could go and do what I want. That's just me. So, it takes us a couple of months, I don't remember exactly how long, to put everything together. I buy some really advanced optical scanners which makes everyone laugh at me for spending a lot on these things. I make plans, knowing the technology situation in Belarus, to bring in from Austria Xerox machines, toner and paper. My experience from making *Peter the Great* helps me enormously in knowing how to set up an operation.

I also knew that food is going to be the most important and the most difficult thing, a real problem. So, one of the plans that I lay out is that as we meet people in Minsk, at the appropriate time, we will supply them with money so they can buy good quality food on the black market. They will invite us for lunches and dinners. With *Peter the Great*, the actors would invite us to share, you know, the best food in the world. So, it's the same plan, you see. Bank accounts have to be opened in Belarus; we had to get money in and out of the country.

Before we go, Norman and I have to make a decision about when we interview Marina Oswald. Do we do it before the trip or after? We come to an agreement that we'll interview her after, because we will have then all the information we need about her and Oswald in Minsk, and won't have to rely just on the published information. But I decide that we need a contract with Marina before we leave. Now, I have known Marina from the time of J.F.K.'s assassination, from when I had produced a film for ABC Television called *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald*. To make this docu-drama, we needed a release from Marina Oswald to depict certain scenes that would be based upon an interview I would do with her. They were intimate scenes, an invasion of privacy, without a proper release. I knew I had to negotiate a very different contract. I knew that Marina would never give up the rights, so I came up with a new concept. Let me put it this way. Why do you buy rights from anybody? Why?

Lennon: So there'll never be any legal issues.

Schiller: So they'll never sue. That's the only reason you buy rights. Well, I came up with the concept, and believe it or not, that had never been used at

ABC TV, but was used once before for a feature film. I read about it. Years and years before. So I go to Marina and I said, “We’re going make this movie, blah-blah-blah, and I know your right of privacy is important. I also know, Marina that someday you’re going have a big payday with your life story, and we don’t want to screw it up. If you have faith and trust in me, I’m prepared to offer you x dollars if you sign a simple letter that says you will never bring any legal action against Lawrence Schiller, or ABC, etc., for *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald*.” I paid her something like \$25,000 and she wrote the letter exactly the way I wanted it. Now, that film came out; it was a pretty shitty film, but it didn’t hurt our relationship. My second wife, Stephanie, had become pretty good friends with Marina when she vacationed in California with her kids. Stephanie would go to the beach with her, go to Disneyland.

Lennon: And trust was established.

Schiller: A working, trustful relationship with Marina was established. Before we went back to Russia and Belarus, I contacted Marina and went out to dinner with her. The short and long of it is that I negotiated an agreement with her, and paid her \$15,000. For five days, Norman and I would have the right to interview her for so many hours a day, so many hours in the morning, so many in the afternoon. We put her up in a hotel where we would all stay. She would not be alone; she could bring a friend. I have to tell you, she had a lot of trust in me to sign that contract. It proved something to Norman, too. I think he was very surprised. He may not have liked the concept of it at first, but eventually, he saw that we would have total access. In fact, put her in prison for five days.

Lennon: In what city?

Schiller: Dallas. But what I’m saying is, you see, those are the crazy things you have to do sometimes.

Lennon: Well, Norman Mailer called you the greatest dealmaker he’d ever known.

Schiller: Well, I don’t know if that’s true. I think that is good planning.

Lennon: In reference to your overall ability, let me read you the quote, where Norman praises what you did.

Schiller: Well, don't, you don't have to ...

Lennon: It's right here. He is writing to a friend of his. He says, "I must confess that you thought it was my blue eyes that charmed the KGB into giving all those secret files to me, but in fact, I had a collaborator who did the interviews with me. The same Larry Schiller who worked on interviews with me when I was writing *The Executioner's Song*. And he is one of the great wheeler-dealers of all time, and actually succeeded, since it was also the occasion of the breakup of Russian Communism, to get the new and uncertain KGB to enjoy the idea that they might consider giving me the Oswald file. I have to tell you that Larry can be utterly unscrupulous. So he went around telling everyone with whom we wanted to do interviews, I was the American Tolstoy, and they owed it to history to be interviewed by us. He also succeeded in getting Marina Oswald to sit down with us for a few days and talk, and when she read the book; her acerbic comment to Larry was 'Tolstoy, he's not.' At any rate, I owe him more than a little, because *The Executioner's Song* would never have been nearly as big, and perhaps not as good as it is, if it hadn't been for his skill in interviewing, a skill which I think I also picked up to a degree with working with him. And of course, the Oswald book began with his ability to get the KGB to promise their files to us. Later, I whisper this, they fulfilled that promise only in part, but the part was enough to do the book."

Schiller: Yeah. I'll get to that part. So, the short and long is we make all these plans to going to Moscow first, to interview various people. We want to follow the same road, the same steps that Oswald did. Day by day. Who he got in touch with, what he did, everything. In the interim, Ludmilla has communicated to us, while I'm putting the team together here, about the retired agents in Minsk. She says it's best not to talk to them about money, but to talk to them about goods.

So we start putting together the team, and off we go off to Moscow. I have all these cases of technology I'm bringing and everyone is laughing at me for lugging it there, and so forth. I did not think that the first week in Moscow was as fruitful as I had hoped. The girl that was Oswald's translator wasn't available to us, and I didn't think that we were hitting as many bases as we should have in Moscow. I don't know how Norman felt about it, but Ludmilla kept on saying to me, "Don't worry, we'll come back to Moscow; they're testing you, you know, so don't worry, don't push too hard. We'll come back."

Then we go to Minsk. Well, it's really a dreadful place. The first thing we have to do is go to see the memorials to the soldiers that died, and then we go to the place, which is really interesting, where all the Jews were slaughtered.

Then we have to look at apartments, renting, you know, everything had to be paid in advance and in local currency, so I had made arrangements to buy the money on the black market. I would say it took us a good ten days, two weeks. Norman, I don't think, was getting frustrated, because he spent his time reading the *Warren Commission Report*. We had all the pages blown up to double size because he was having difficulty reading. That's how he spent all of his time. It was a big job to Xerox all of those volumes.

Then we have a meeting, still haven't seen any Oswald files yet. I'm about to offer them ten thousand dollars, which Ludmilla says will not be accepted. You never make an offer more than \$10,000, and I'll tell why. That is the maximum amount of money that you're legally allowed to bring into the country, or out of the country. And you never want to be in a position of offering somebody more than that. But then they tell me about the shoes that Ludmilla has suggested. She was always ahead of Norman and me; she knew the Soviets and what she had forgotten nobody would ever learn. They wanted shoes, good leather shoes, you know, working shoes, dress shoes, boots, whatever. We purchased them in Austria, like maybe an entire truck load of shoes. A small truck. Then, of course, we had to pay the people that worked for us. They still got their salary after the KGB said it was all right for them to work with us, American Tolstoy or not. So, now we have to get to where American Tolstoy comes about. American Tolstoy actually comes about in the bedroom. One night, Ludmilla says to me that when we go knocking on people's doors, a lot of them are not going to be home. They're going to be at work, and this and that. So we have to put something on their door. I think I should write a biography of Norman and a little bit about you, she says. That's how the whole thing comes about. So I, one night, write this PR-type biography of Norman Mailer. You don't have a copy of that thing? There are a couple versions of it. First one, at the end, she adds a line trying to relate Norman to a Soviet writer. Can't relate him to Solzhenitsyn; you can't relate him to Pasternak. So we're stuck and I say, "Well, just say he's a great American writer like your great writers, like Tolstoy." I think that came about like, 1:00 in the morning. And so we, we typed this thing up, and we had it mimeographed and eventually we do it more professionally, eventually it has a headline. But that's how it really started. And of course, the KGB

would help us find the people, those who we should consider interviewing, and where they were, but they would never go with us, you know, it was just us knocking on the doors. Of course, lot of times, we'd find out they'd moved from where the KGB thought they were, you know.

Lennon: By the people, you mean those Oswald knew during his three years in Minsk.

Schiller: Yeah, yes. Ella Germann, all of them.

Lennon: Her boyfriends, and people who worked with Oswald at the radio factory, and everything.

Schiller: Right. Now as part of the agreement with Marina we're going to meet Valya Prusakova, the aunt she lived with in Minsk. Well, in the first couple weeks we go to meet Valya. Of course, Norman just really liked her and she's the very first one we give money to for food; she has us every day for lunch. Well, not every day because we had to be at other people's places as well. First thing I do is fix her TV set. I sent it out to be repaired. Black market repair guy.

Lennon: How old is she at this time?

Schiller: In her sixties. We have a picture. Also in the first couple of weeks, Ludmilla arranges for us to meet the president of Belarus, Stanislav Shushkevich. There's actually a formal picture, which I have, of Ludmilla, me, Norman, the president of Belarus. Everybody in the Belarus government knows, you understand, that we are there and why.

Lennon: When did you start interviewing?

Schiller: Not yet. I should also say that our plan is not to go near the American Embassy. Because the American Embassy wants what we want. The FBI wants what we want. Even though they know about us by now, I'm sure; they have their moles inside the Belarus government. But I'm not about ready to go there. This is what happens. We discover, like in the second week, that Oswald's first girlfriend, the one he meets while at the foreign language academy and dated before meeting Marina, that now she is the Belarus translator for the American Ambassador!

So we're forced to go to the American Embassy, to find her, you know, to introduce ourselves. And of course, we have to meet the Ambassador. But we

can't figure it out. At one point in an interview, I asked her if she's revealed to the government her relationship with Oswald, and she says yes. I mean, it's really an irony, right? So we meet Ambassador [David Heywood] Swartz and he tells us straight out, the FBI knows you're here and they are sending some agents over in the next couple months. He really lays it out for us. And he very politely, very nicely, says, "Norman, come have dinner at our home." It's not like, Larry Schiller come have dinner; I'm only included because of Norman Mailer, you know. But I do most of the talking. But he's letting us know that even though it's come to my home for dinner, business is business. We're in competition with you.

Of course, when we do meet people for the first time we never try to do an interview. But then I decide that I have to embed myself with Sharkovsky. I cannot just play a patient waiting game. I tell Ludmilla to set up an important lunch, private lunch with Sharkovsky. There's this big building which is built around this big sauna, and has lots of private rooms, private rooms is where you have lunch or dinner, or banquets. But that's where Sharkovsky wants to have lunch. I tell Norman that we have been there long enough, that they already know that we're delivering the shoes—they haven't gotten the shoes, I don't think, etcetera, etcetera. I actually say, driving over in the car, to Norman, "Norman, I haven't figured out every word I'm going to say, just wait for the end results. I have to be honest with you; I don't really have a plan. Everything to me is . . .

Lennon: Existential, is how Norman would put it.

Schiller: Is that what he called it? Yeah. I do realize that in every interview I never walk in with questions. I never have a piece of paper. Maybe the interviews would be better, I don't know. Maybe they wouldn't be as good, I have no idea. Anyway, at the lunch we order the best caviar, the best of this, the best pancakes, the best boiled potatoes, you know, it's just like, and you wouldn't believe it. So, we're going through all the pleasantries, and at some point, I decide to make my move. It's very important to understand that we'd already been in the KGB library, seen all the books in all languages; we'd already been in the KGB offices; we'd actually already seen some of the files, by now, you know, they'd shown us some things in a room. We know the files are just down the hall from where we were shown them. So, it isn't like I'm going into this meeting without a certain amount of knowledge. I've got enough foundation under me. I think you understand that in all these con-

versations, I'm the one that does all the talking, you know. Norman is, even in public, it's "Mr. Mailer." I don't call him Norman. Mr. Mailer. He's the great writer. And we may have even done a couple interviews with Russians by this point, but Norman and I haven't started fighting at the interviews yet. So in the meeting, at a strategic moment, I say, "You know, if you give these files to any Russian journalist to write this important history of Oswald's years, nobody will believe it. If you give these files to Italian TV or ABC Television, the story will be on the 6:00 news throughout the world. Then it will be replaced on the 11:00 news by some other event, maybe a shooting. The next day, it'll be forgotten. You give it to the *New York Times*, *London Times*, *Figaro*—give it to any of the major newspapers in the world, it will be headlines the first day, the next day, and everybody will have wrapped their garbage and their fish in it. But if you give it to a writer, such as Mr. Mailer, whose works are on the shelves of every library in the world, including your own KGB library, you are giving the information to history. You're preserving it with an independent voice that will establish the credibility of the fact that the Soviet Union was not involved in President Kennedy's assassination.

Lennon: This is in English, with Ludmilla translating?

Schiller: Right. I'm saying it with the same cadence, maybe a little slower. "You give it to a writer who's not only, his works are on shelves all over the world, a writer who ranks with Pasternak or Solzhenitsyn"—I named one of these two writers, but Ludmilla, of course, being as brilliant as she was, changes it, as I find out later when I read the transcript of the conversation. She says, "You give it to a writer who, under his photograph, in the Soviet encyclopedia says of Mr. Mailer, 'a writer who dares write what he thinks.'" That's what she adds. She knew that fact; I didn't. I was trying to say the same thing, with Pasternak or Solzhenitsyn, I forget which, but she does it much better without naming a Soviet writer. Sharkovsky looks at me, and he says, "I'm not going to give you the files. I am prepared to do the following." Very interesting. He actually leaned over the table. Let me go back. I just remembered that I had also said to him, "Mr. Mailer is prepared to stay here as long as it takes, a man who has a heart condition. He is a man who takes five years to write a book, and has maybe only has three or four books left in his life. He is willing to spend the time; he believes he owes it to history." So he says, "I'm not going to give you the files. But if you are prepared to stay here, I will allow you rent an office in the building and every time you ask a question,

we'll bring you that part of the files that answers your question. If you stay long enough, and if you're smart enough to ask the right questions, you will learn much." And I have to tell you that after that many, many of our discussions, ones that took place among Ludmilla and I and Norman, was how to ask the questions. So, we rent an office for a thousand U.S. dollars a week, an office with, a very, very plush room with a big, long table. That's where we had all our meetings with the KGB people.

Lennon: So the way they do it protects them. They can say we didn't just turn over the files.

Schiller: Exactly right. Now there were many occasions when we asked questions and Norman felt that we weren't getting the papers that responded to those questions. They would explain to us that there were no papers to answer that question, but, these are the papers that come as close as possible to answering the questions. That's why Norman felt that we got enough to do the book, but we didn't get everything. Okay?

Lennon: They actually brought the files in, the actual files?

Schiller: Yes. By the way, they were all kept in potato sacks. In the sacks were bound volumes of books. The documents weren't necessarily bound in; they were laid in between, you know. And they would bring us the page. Or sometimes they would bring us the book opened to a certain page, and then you have to read it, and you could take notes. I brought all this optical equipment, because I thought they would let us scan things. Eventually, you know, at the end, after we had a big argument, and paid some money, they did let us scan some material.

Lennon: But from day to day they would not let you scan.

Schiller: Correct. But they would let us sit there for five hours, copy every single thing in Russian, and then have it translated, see? So as time went on, we interviewed more people, and when we weren't interviewing people, we were asking questions to see the files. Now, Norman says in that letter you read to me that he made five trips. He may have made five trips; I don't remember making that many, but he may have. I know we were there from fall through winter and he and I would walk on the snow, and he would fall and I would fall. We'd run into guys drinking vodka in the middle of the night, and the short and long of it is we were there for an extraordinarily

long time. For a Westerner, the food was very difficult; the cold was very difficult, you know, there was no proper heating. But what really allowed us to survive was giving the families we visited money for the black market, and having four or five really good meals a week, the best meat, or the best fish. And then, Norman started making pasta, in his kitchen. He had a big apartment. I began fighting with Ludmilla; we'd gotten married by then, as you know.

Lennon: Married in Russia?

Schiller: We actually got married twice, once in Russia and once in the Bel Air Hotel. No matter what country or what bed we were in she was great. No question about it. And she was a very shrewd person, and I understood she was shrewd and smart. She was worried about what was happening with Norman and me and how things would work out with the book and she was really working her ass off. I can't even tell you whether or not she spent personal time with somebody else, or even Sharkovsky. I have no idea. But she worked her ass off for us. I think I paid her \$25,000 for the project. She bought a brand new car when we got back for cash so maybe she got paid \$50,000. But, she really kept on worrying. She said, "I'm going to wind up on the wrong list, Larry." She was always saying that to me, and she was very shrewd, always asking, "So how do I get to stay in the United States, blah, blah, blah." So, you know, being with her most nights and not married, so I said, "All right. We'll get married, you know, and you'll come and we'll live together, and after you get your green card, we'll see what happens." She could be lot of fun, don't get me wrong. So I went to the ambassador, and just laid it right out on the line. So that's how the marriage came about.

But several things happened as we started to do the interviews. First, the FBI shows up. One day we're in a meeting with Sharkovsky's assistant, the one who did all the work, you know, and all of a sudden, he hands us a letter and says, "I thought you'd like to read this." Signed by, I believe, the President of the United States. Hand-delivered, by the FBI to the head of the Belarus government, asking for the Oswald files saying the government is aware that you're speaking to certain writers, but doesn't name Norman Mailer. And we believe—I'm just paraphrasing the letter—that the climate is right, that this is the moment that you should share this information with the United States government first; our representatives are there, you know. You understand that eventually Yeltsin (years later elected to be the president of

Russia) gives President Clinton the Oswald files. And the assistant looks at us and says, "How should we answer this?" He actually says that to us! It just blows my mind, how should we answer this? And I came up with something that made everybody laugh. I just said, "First come, first served." (laughter). And everybody just laughed, you know. So I'm told they replied that they did not feel that this was the right time to, etcetera. And, of course, when we had dinner with Ambassador Swartz, he said, "Oh, you really shaped a reply to the letter, didn't you?" I said, "I don't know what was said." And then I told him about my line, first come, first served. It was kind of funny.

The interview process in Minsk and Moscow was very difficult because while Norman and I had worked together very well, I felt, on *The Executioner's Song*; the reason was that he read all of my interviews that I had done before he came to Utah, read them before we began interviewing as a team. Here it was different. He was not reading things, and then coming in; we were creating it together. And we did have some real big disagreements about these interviews about which road to take when somebody gives you a certain answer. The plan was that I lead the interviews, and then he would come in with a question, you know, because if you read the transcripts, most of them, I think, bears out that I'm the major voice in the interviews. So, there were times when I would ask the question, and Norman would say, "No, that's not the question to ask, let's ask this." Of course, the subject being interviewed didn't know what we were saying, because they did not speak English, and Norman and I would sometimes get in a fight, and sometimes he would get up and walk out of the room, saying, "You go finish the god-dam interview yourself then." Or sometimes we'd both go outside, sometimes Ludmilla would turn around and scream at us, saying, and "What are you guys doing? Why are you fighting in front of somebody?" I'm not saying we had a lot of fights. The interviews speak for themselves; if you read them word for word, you can see where there's a disagreement. But there were three or four really big ones.

Lennon: Well, it is because Norman is a writer, and he's already beginning to shape the narrative in his head, and he's moving along a certain line. He knows what he wants to explore next, because he's writing the next paragraph in his head.

Schiller: And I'm the type of person that doesn't have any narrative ever figured out. I'm just searching for the unknown.

Lennon: In a sense, you're like an academic. You want to gather all the information, and then figure it out later.

Schiller: I always want to be educated by the person being interviewed.

Lennon: But Norman is impatient.

Schiller: Exactly right. And obviously staying there eight, nine months, on and off, the impatience starts to grow on him. And sometimes the impatience starts growing with me. But the big fight happens over whether Marina was a virgin or not when Oswald marries her. There's this episode where he comes into the factory with a piece of the sheet with blood on it, the Russian tradition, you know. And the question that we argued about was Oswald's act a facade? Or did she fake it? Was she a virgin or not? And of course, the background information about where she lived in Leningrad, and why she was exiled to live with her aunt Valya, is all part of it. And the FBI back in '64 never addressed those questions to her. They never interviewed anybody from the Soviet Union before interviewing her. We were exploring what the Secret Service and the FBI would've *loved* to have done for the *Warren Report*. Okay? Do you realize how it would've made that thing, you know, so extraordinary?

Lennon: Well, there are at least two or three people, males, who say they did have intimate relations with her.

Schiller: Of course. I mean, we were searching out all those people, and we find them. But the *Warren Report* doesn't have any of that. So now, you know, Norman, the journalist, the amateur novelist, as I used to kid him. I'd say, "You're just learning to be a novelist." And one time I was so mad at him, I said, "You only wrote one good book in your life as a novelist, you were just lucky." But I could get away with that, you know, because he knew I didn't read. I did read "The Book of the Charioteers" in *Ancient Evenings*. Anyway, we needed to get confirmation from Marina's closest friend confirmation that she was not a virgin. And that's where our biggest argument takes place, is how to ask her that question. I can't remember how I wanted to phrase it, or how he wanted to phrase it, but I remember that's where the biggest argument took place, and Ludmilla screamed at us, "Get out of this room, you guys better figure it out." It wasn't like we were fighting because we were far apart; we just had subtly different approaches. I was saying to myself, as I still

say, here's Larry Schiller with the great Norman Mailer, doing what nobody's ever done before. And it's exciting to me. I mean it really is, Mike. So I stand up and fight with him about what he's the best at: writing.

At one point, the KGB tells us, that back then they were thinking that Oswald was in Minsk to maybe blow up, the new hotel that Khrushchev is going to visit, and they're measuring and looking at everything he buys in every shop to see whether he's making a bomb. They had this grid pattern, block by block in the city, and one agent follows him so far and Oswald goes into another part of the grid, and another agent picks him up, and when he buys something, they wonder if he is making a wireless radio. Actually, he's making a toy for somebody.

Lennon: Ultimately, they conclude that he is doing nothing very extraordinary at all.

Schiller: Exactly. He's not a mole.

Lennon: He's not trying to meet a tremendous number of people; he's leading a very circumscribed life.

Schiller: Right, right. When Khrushchev had the first World Youth Conference in Moscow, he allowed all the foreign youngsters in, even though they were mostly from Communist countries, and before that the Western powers had been sending their spies in by parachuting them in, or bringing them across the border clandestinely, from Europe. So when Oswald says, "I'm a Marine, I'm a defector," and this and that, then cuts his wrist in a failed, bull-shit attempt at suicide, the Soviets wonder if this a new channel for bringing in a mole, one that's going to lay dormant for maybe 5, 10 or 40 years, and then at some point in history will be called upon to do something.

Lennon: A Manchurian candidate-kind of approach.

Schiller: Right, before the film. So, that's what was really interesting to the Soviets. They were just waiting for another kind of spy.

Lennon: And when Oswald came back, the FBI and the CIA had the same question, is he being sent over here . . .

Schiller: It's really exciting. We're getting into things that any journalist could do a front-page story on the next day in the *New York Times*. Maybe not above the fold, but you know what I'm saying?

Lennon: Yes, of course. It's much different from the information you got about Gary Gilmore.

Schiller: Oh, it's a very different world. Whole new experience.

Lennon: For *The Executioner's Song* you went into a world that anybody could have access to, if they wanted to go out and spend time in Salt Lake City and Provo, and learn how those people live out there, but the Oswald papers and the people of Minsk had been hermetically sealed for 30 years.

Schiller: Right. Thirty years before the people of Minsk that knew Oswald were told by the KGB to destroy the photographs they had of Oswald, forget they knew him. And the KGB and the people themselves are now telling us all of this, 30 some odd years later. It was the perfect moment; I figured that out when I sent the first inquiry to Ludmilla, you know, the one about Alger Hiss, the Rosenbergs, and Oswald. The Berlin Wall is down. People may begin to talk. They don't fear being sent to the gulag. All right? And again, I guess, I'm patting myself on the back, but I was right. *I was right.*

Lennon: Let me ask you this. Did you have any idea at this time about the shape of the book that Norman was going to write? Did he communicate it to you?

Schiller: Well, it was always "Oswald's Years in Russia." Not until we get to New York and the whole thing is halfway done did he tell me his plan. He may have had it in his mind, but I'd actually read half a draft of *Oswald's Tale* before told me he's going to write the second part of the book.

Lennon: What was your response?

Schiller: He's crazy.

Lennon: So you told him that you thought he was crazy.

Schiller: Out of his mind. I said "We haven't done any research in the U.S. I'm not going to do any research on it," you know, what research is there to do on it? What are the files in the U.S. that we're going to get? There's no new information. I told him it was total insanity.

Lennon: But he'd been reading the *Warren Commission Report*.

Schiller: Right.

Lennon: Essentially, the second half of the book is a shorter version of the *Warren Commission Report*, but in much finer prose.

Schiller: It's a cut and paste job. Yes, he does it in a skillful way, but, you know, I remember when I actually said, "All you're doing is a cut-and-paste job. There isn't anything new in what you're doing." And he got real mad at me, you know, really mad. You know, because I was treading on his creativity.

Lennon: Look at the way he wrote *Marilyn*, and the way he wrote *The Executioner's Song*. *Oswald's Tale* is a combination of both methods. In *Marilyn*, of course, there was no new, very little new material.

Schiller: There was no new material in *Marilyn*. It was his experience; I always felt that 80 percent of *Marilyn* was his emotional experience watching all of Marilyn's films. You know, he ordered all of those films.

Lennon: He watched most of them. Right.

Schiller: And, of course, the big, one of the big, the last fights we had on *Marilyn*, was when I turned to him and said, "You know, thank God you never fucked her." He almost hit me, almost hit me. This was after the interview he did with Mike Wallace. You know, I had more power in a way, in *The Executioner's Song*, or I had more strength—power's the wrong word—I had more strength in *The Executioner's Song*, to win a battle with him than I did for some reason with the *Oswald* book. The way the contract was written with Random House really weakened my position as the owner of the book.

Lennon: How is that different from with *The Executioner's Song*?

Schiller: With *The Executioner's Song*, the contract was with me, and there's a clause to pay Mailer a certain amount of money. The book is mine. Here, the way the contract was written, is he's the author for Random House, and I'm getting a share.

Lennon: Don't you own the copyright to *Oswald's Tale*?

Schiller: Yes, I own the copyright to the material in the book but, technically, he was getting paid directly from Random House.

Lennon: Instead of from you?

Schiller: From me. Right. See [pointing to *Oswald's Tale*]: "Copyright Norman Mailer, Lawrence Schiller and Polaris Communications." Which is basically the same as with *Executioner's Song*. But, the way the contract is written, he's getting paid directly from the publisher.

Lennon: Right, that undermines somewhat your strength. Let me ask you this, Larry. What if Posner's book didn't exist? Would that have changed your mind at all about the way Norman wrote it?

Schiller: If Posner's book hadn't existed, I would have insisted that I go out and do research for the second half of this book.

Lennon: Would you have done that? The material had been picked over pretty carefully.

Schiller: I can't tell you what I would've done, but my ego says I would have done something that would have been enough to lift the second half of the book because I had never really gotten enough from Sylvia Odio; I'd never really done Ruth Paine, who was still alive. I'd never done one-on-one interviews with Lee's brother. There were a lot of interviews you could do for the second half of the book.

Lennon: Do you know what Lee's brother said about this book?

Schiller: No.

Lennon: He said it tells us more about Norman Mailer than it does about Lee Oswald.

Schiller: Marina didn't like the book either. But I think people didn't like it because of the second half of the book. I may be wrong. I'm not saying that to support my position that the second half ruins the book.

Lennon: Right. But from Norman's point of view, and you're helping me greatly understand it, from Norman's point of view, he relies a great deal on ... I think he defers to you when it comes to information collection. But he defers to no one when it comes to information interpretation.

Schiller: I agree on that.

Lennon: He feels that he can read the *Warren Commission Report*...

Schiller: And interpret it better than anybody else.

Lennon: And interpret it better than anybody else, and make a story out of it, and he does a pretty good job of it.

Schiller: Yes, but I never told him how to write, what to write. That's not my strong suit; otherwise, I wouldn't have asked him to write it. But I feel that if the writer is misusing the information, then I have a right to speak up and to be heard. And, I feel that if we bargain to do one thing, and then the writer decides to do something else, I should have a say in that. Now, in *Marilyn, The Executioner's Song*, all the books leading up to *Oswald's Tale*, I did have a say, even though I didn't have to exercise it. Here, where I would have liked to have exercised it, I couldn't stop it, because the contract was directly between Random House and him, and I was the profit participant.

Lennon: Do you think that *Harlot's Ghost* was a factor in all this?

Schiller: I have no idea.

Lennon: Well, *Harlot's Ghost* goes up to and includes the assassination, but it happens offstage.

Schiller: Right.

Lennon: It's indirect. Norman doesn't really depict it, and you know, for all of his life, going back to Kennedy's assassination, I think he'd been itching to write about all of that, and he hadn't for various reasons. This is my hunch. I think when he got to the end of *Harlot's Ghost*, which looked like it was going to go on forever, he realized that if he tried to write about the assassination he would have a book that would be 2,000 pages long.

Schiller: Right. But you know, we can talk about a book that's well written and we can talk about a book that's written well that's going to sell well. Norman had long passed the point whether he cared whether his books sold or not. I believe that. I think when he signed the '95 contract, or the early agreements with Random House, which this book is under, the first one, by that time, he didn't care whether the book sold or not. He would go out and promote it. He would go out and say this is the best book I've ever written. All of the things that you have to do, but I don't think he cared anymore. He wanted to write and write better and better. He never wanted the commercial aspect to intrude on his writing and that is how it should be. He was preserving our history and making history at the same time.

Lennon: His mind was on history, posterity.

Schiller: Yes. I remember him saying about *Ancient Evenings*, “Larry, I wrote this book for people to read 100 years from now, not now. I don’t care about the people who read it now.” Look, my whole concept was that you end *Oswald’s Tale* and the reader says one thing: “Just tell me enough about the man who pulled the trigger.” Okay? Now, the other thing, which was very, very important is this, Norman warned me going into this, he said, “I believe that Oswald is part of a conspiracy. I’m not saying a Russian conspiracy, Larry, but don’t expect me to write a book”—this is before we even knew about Posner—“that argues that Oswald did it alone.” Because he knew that’s how I felt. Because I had done *The Scavengers and Critics of the Warren Report* [with Richard W. Lewis, 1967]. You’ve seen that book. Right. And I’d made *The Trial of Lee Harvey Oswald* and I’d done other things. So I felt that Oswald may have been politically motivated, because of the General Walker shooting, and when he didn’t succeed in the Walker shooting ... I always felt the motivation for Kennedy was he that failed once, and wasn’t going to fail again. It had nothing to do with Kennedy’s political point of view. It was Oswald wanting to be recognized in some way.

Lennon: You didn’t agree with the conspiracy theory?

Schiller: Never did. And Norman knew that.

Lennon: He finally came around to your way of thinking on it.

Schiller: Well, he came to thinking that Oswald was the lone assassin, the way I and many other people thought. Okay? But, that wasn’t even the issue. If he had written the book that Oswald still was part of a conspiracy, it wouldn’t have bothered me. I didn’t ask him to write a book to support my position. I asked him to write a book about Oswald’s years in the Soviet Union, which nobody knew anything about, and my ego said that Norman and I were the best people in the world to do it. And I had the connections to get my foot in the door. Now, he was too deep in writing the second half of the book when he told me his plan because otherwise, Mike, I might have said to him, “All right, stop writing for six or nine months and let’s do some interviews in the United States.” But he didn’t want to do that. He never once said, “Larry, let’s do a couple interviews.” Now I can’t remember whether George De Mohrenschildt had committed suicide or not by the time this

book was written. I can't remember. But De Mohrenschildt certainly would be somebody that we could have interviewed. And doing it the Schiller way, you know, day in, day out and finally getting all the material, but he didn't even want that.

Lennon: He told me later, in his last couple of years, that he wasn't completely satisfied with *Oswald's Tale*. While he never went into a great deal of detail, he felt that it was imperfect. It's very difficult to understand any one of Norman's books in the latter half of his career without looking at the links to the books that came before and after. I think that in his mind *Oswald's Tale* was close to being a sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*, and its existence is one of the reasons he never wrote a formal sequel to *Harlot's Ghost*.

Schiller: I think he was always looking at the overall picture, how all of his books fit together, the overall picture, at least, from when I met him in '72. So, where does this book fit into the puzzle that's going to be left when I get done? I'm not saying he thought about his death, but I'm saying he was very conscious of posterity. You know, I gave him projects that he might never have thought about. Now, I'm not saying that because of my ego, what I'm saying is that new projects gave him a certain amount of energy. Yeah, and I think that was exciting for him.

Lennon: It was very exciting. All of his life he was searching for ideas for the next novel. All through his papers, there are files, ideas for novels. They were filled with newspaper clippings, magazine clippings, books. He had a thousand ideas. What he had in you was someone, as he put in, who had a fantastic ability to spot a great story.

Schiller: After the first project, *Marilyn*, I think he saw I had the ability to aid him in the foundation that he could build upon to write a great book. I admire him so much for that because how many writers can you think of that would put their ego aside for that? Not many.

Lennon: It's a paradox, because everyone thinks of Mailer as being totally in charge of his writing program. I don't think the role that you played is understood. Norman finally found in you someone who could do the kind of searching and sniffing out of information, and could also put the deal together. Those are the two things he mentioned to me.

Schiller: My instinct was that the great story is Oswald in Russia. I had no instinct for a great story of Oswald in America.

Lennon: Mailer could have written the second half of the book at several points after Kennedy was assassinated. He flirted with it in several books but never took the plunge. He bought the 26 volumes of the *Warren Report*, and he hired Jean Malaquais to provide summaries and insights gleaned from them, but it never went anywhere. He was paying him a monthly salary to do that kind of work for him, but to no avail. But Norman never got it out of his mind that within those 26 volumes, the story was already there, if he could just distill it out. I'm very glad that Mailer wrote *Oswald's Tale*. "The Three Widows" conclusion is incredible.

Schiller: "The Three Widows" stands alone. No question. But we're not talking about some parts of the book, and there's brilliance in a lot of it. But the book falls short after Oswald returns to the US.

Lennon: He wrote it when he was in his seventies. He's the age you are now, so it was tough on him. His eyes were starting to weaken; his knees were killing him. And I think also, he had weighing on him all the time, the last three words of *Harlot's Ghost*: "To be continued." He had a title and he had a huge number of notes. It was going to be called "Harlot's Grave."

Schiller: Let me touch upon something else, the whole thing about the \$10,000 bribe I gave and the Xerox copy of the files. Little by little, it became obvious that they were never going to let us scan the files, and I always had in the back of my mind this problem of credibility. How could we prove we were actually quoting from reports and summaries of the KGB's bugging of Oswald's apartment? So, about two or three months before we knew we would leave, I concluded that we had to bring back copies of all the bugging reports, parts of the files, because Norman was quoting so heavily from it. I did not want him to be accused of making up the dialogue. I was worried tremendously that at some point somebody would challenge Norman, you know, "How are you going to prove, Mr. Mailer, that this is actually what was said by Oswald?" I got it in my head that I was not going to leave the Belarus without copies. My motivation was to shore up the credibility of the book.

Lennon: Who was the \$10,000 going to?

Schiller: We'll get to the \$10,000 in a second. So I discussed with Norman the importance of bringing back the transcripts, and he didn't care. He didn't worry about his credibility. See? On one hand, I respected him for that, but on the other hand, we're playing with a subject that is bigger than Norman Mailer. We're playing with history. Nobody else had gone, even after us (except ABC, who interviewed three people on tape), and did what we did. And right up to the day we published it, the U.S. Government still didn't have the Oswald files. So I got it my head that I was going to bring back the files. I knew that I had to bribe Sharkovsky's assistant. And again, I knew I could never give more than \$10,000. But there was always full disclosure between Norman and me. I told him that I was going to give \$10,000 to make three sets of Xerox copies. I even had to give him the paper and I had to give them the toner; I had to give them everything. And, of course, Norman went ballistic, not because it was undermining his credibility; he looked at it the opposite way. He feared that we were going to be called on the carpet for paying the bribe. He felt his credibility was being attacked because now I wasn't giving someone shoes, I was actually giving cash. And of course, we had this tremendous fight in the stairwell outside of his apartment door one day. Just really screaming, screaming, screaming. And he bumped me really hard and pushed me down half the flight of stairs, you know, and, and came down to pick me up, you know. I really pushed him against the wall and he fell about four or five steps. It was really an altercation. He finally understood that I was not going to retreat, although I didn't have \$10,000. I had to leave the country, believe it or not, to get it and bring it back in.

When we finally made up his last argument to try to convince me not to do it, was that the KGB was setting us up. They were going to catch us at the border, because in those days when you left the Soviet Union, everything was inspected. You weren't inspected when you entered, it was when you left. They were setting us up and all the work we've done was being put in jeopardy. You know, he felt we were going to be arrested at the border.

Lennon: There were three sets because ... ?

Schiller: Because I already had a plan. But he didn't want to listen to my plan. He was just arguing and arguing, and there were days and weeks he wasn't talking to me. Finally, I told him that I'd paid the \$10,000 by then, but I hadn't gotten the three sets yet. The plan was that he would leave with one set from one airport; I would leave from another airport and Ludmilla would

leave from another airport. Each with a set. If one of us was arrested, that made the drama, made the book more important because we would be taking out something that the West was unable to get their hands on. And that was my final argument to him: that if we were stopped at customs, we would actually be promoting the book.

Lennon: It would be good to get caught.

Schiller: Exactly right. His answer to me was okay, just as long as it's not me. And I said to him that the most important person to get caught is you, because you're the author of the book. So with that final exchange, he finally relented, and agreed to be part of the plan. When we had that conversation, I still hadn't received the copies, but I did receive them, and I think he left from Belarus, I left from Moscow, and Ludmilla left from from Leningrad.

Lennon: Did they inspect any of you?

Schiller: We didn't realize at the time that the word was out. We were working with the KGB. Nobody was going blink at us. We were paying the KGB a thousand a week for an office; we were paying all these guys. Nobody was going to look twice at us. But at the time, we were worried. I remember the night before I left I had bad cramps in my legs and I had to lie in the bathtub in the hotel. But we finally realized that they weren't going to stop us. They'd gone this far with us; what did they have to gain by stopping us? That was my final argument with Norman and it worked and he agreed to leave, because for a long time he didn't even want to take the third set. At first he said, "It's your idea, you take them." But then he came around to it and saw it might really help the book, get it noticed. But they never even opened our suitcases.

Lennon: Larry, when you got back to the States, approximately how long was it before you interview Marina Oswald?

Schiller: Well, let's first talk about actually traveling back to the United States, because as we previously discussed we left from three different airports.

Lennon: Yes, you told the whole story.

Schiller: I had a lot of thinking to do on the plane because there was a big problem. The government was changing in Belarus and Ludmilla was get-

ting on the wrong list, and the question was how far I would go to help get her daughter out of Russia.

Lennon: You said you wanted to get her some education in the United States and that you would marry her.

Schiller: Right. The question was how far I would actually go in the relationship and helping her daughter. My previous wife, Stephanie, had this attitude that every dollar I spent on another woman was a dollar taken away from our children, Anthony and Cameron. And she would tell Anthony and Cameron in those exact words. I had a feeling that I didn't want to cause harm to somebody else. So I felt I had to make sure Ludmilla was out of that country and her daughter was out. To this day, I feel we are deeply in her debt for whatever went on between us and KGB or Internal Security as it was called after the Wall came down, because I don't know the pauses or the hesitations of her translations of our words. You know, how she convinced them to do what she did. Another decision that had to be made was whether to bring Marina's aunt, Valya, out of Belarus. Marina had lived with her and Norman and I spent lots of time with Valya. So, I made the decision that I also had to help Valya. She had a flat that was worth a lot of money, but she didn't even know how to manage it or sell it.

So, on the agenda shortly after coming back to the United States was the question of Valya, getting a visa for her and would she live with Marina and this and that. And, that was something, quite honestly, something I used to ingratiate us with Marina, you see. Marina would have to sign papers, but we knew that through the Embassy we could help that situation greatly.

Lennon: The Valya situation?

Schiller: Yes. And we did. We also had to make sure that all the transcripts we had brought back were ready and that everything in them that related to Marina was indexed in a manner that we would be able to brief ourselves for the forthcoming interviews with Marina. Now, while we were in Minsk, Norman and I had strategized about interviewing Marina. I had known Marina for some time, and as I explained, I had negotiated an agreement with her once before. She was going to be paid \$15,000, if my memory is right, for a week's worth of interviews.

Lennon: Five days in a hotel in Dallas.

Schiller: Right. At the Embassy Suites. She could have a girlfriend there, but she could not leave the premises—she couldn't run home. Norman and I would interview her in the morning for three hours, after breakfast, in the afternoon for three hours, and then two hours in the evening if we wanted to, five days a week. So, there were kind of two things that made her go through with the deal: one, she was being paid \$15,000 and maybe, just a little, to help the "American Tolstoy"—and then there was Valya. Valya, by the way, did eventually come to the United States and stayed with Marina, but didn't like the U.S. and decided to go back.

When all the transcripts were finished, Norman and I then independently read them carefully while we set the date for the interviews. There were certain key things that we knew we really had to find out. Even though we now had strong indications that she was not a virgin when she married Lee, we needed to hear that from her. Because you cannot write a book like this based on hearsay. And that was very crucial because, you know, when Lee married her he went around the radio factory with a piece of a sheet with blood on it—the Russian tradition, as you know. If she was not a virgin, had she masqueraded on her marriage night with him? Had she had pre-marital sex with him? We didn't know, even though her girlfriends had told us no. What was that wedding night like and how did it irrevocably affect him? Did it change his attitude if he learned that she was or was not a virgin? Now all of this was important to a writer like Norman Mailer. It allowed him to develop his character. It allowed him to write with authenticity and creditability. My responsibility—I don't know if I ever said this before—was to give Norman more than he ever dreamed he needed.

So, we generally knew whom she had dated in Leningrad. We knew, from hearsay, that she had been thrown out of her family's apartment and slept outside the door at night, and so forth. We needed to find out more about her early years. We needed to find out about a lot of things, about whether the way they lived as a married couple in the States was almost the same as the way they lived in the Soviet Union. He was guaranteed a job there; in the U.S., he was not. And how, as a woman coming to this country, did she understand the capitalistic way of earning a living? Had he educated her on that, as much as one can without personal experience? Was she unsettled by a husband who did not have steady employment? What was their relationship with Ruth Paine, the Quaker, that she was friendly with? On the list was the General Walker shooting, his mood swings from her point of view, etc.

etc. Of course, we had the *Warren Report*; we had many other sources of information. So, as the old saying goes, we started with Vaseline, but we knew we were going to wind up with vinegar. For the interviews, her girlfriend stayed with her, shared a room with her.

Lennon: Who was the girlfriend?

Schiller: I don't remember her name.

Lennon: Was this the friend from Texas?

Schiller: Yes, I remember she was a little heavy set; she was jolly. We did have some meals with them together. Or we'd see them at the Embassy Suites restaurant. It had an atrium in the center and the restaurant is there and the rooms go up the side. Sometimes they would be sitting at a table over there and Norman and I would be sitting at a table over here and if we had just finished a rough session, we would give looks to each other, you know, "What's coming next!" Marina had no idea, at the outset, of how extensive our interviews had been in Belarus and how much we knew about her life there. It was also surprising to us that, besides Valya, nobody else who we had interviewed had communicated to her about our interviews with them.

Lennon: Only Valya?

Schiller: Only Valya. Maybe they didn't know where she was. So, we started, and I may be totally wrong because I haven't read the interviews recently, but I think we started very simply with events that were already public knowledge. We wanted to see if there was more info to the events, more skin on the bones than in her original Secret Service interviews, her FBI interviews, or what other authors may have obtained through other sources. You know, how did she meet Lee, what was the dance like? But we would go a step further, at least I would. Norman would sit back and listen and then come in with really good questions. I would say to her, "Was his hand around your waist firmer than or not as firm as you would have expected on a first date?" That's a Larry Schiller question. I'm not saying it's a brilliant question, but when you already know certain facts, you try to go for these little intimate things that give the writer more flesh. I remember, for example, asking her the color of her shoes, and how high the heels were, because little things like that, Norman could use. I remember asking if she bought the dress or if she had made it, or was it adapted and cut down from another dress. To me

that's the joy of doing interviews. So the short and long of it is that I really enjoyed Marina's interviews at the beginning because she had been interviewed by the Secret Service and the FBI and all these professional people and now a non-professional interviewer was interviewing her based upon knowledge that the government didn't have.

Lennon: I would never describe you as a non-professional interviewer Larry.

Schiller: Well, non-trained interviewer. Non-educated interviewer. At one point, I asked her a question and she turned to me and she said, "Why are you even asking me that question? What does it have to do with Lee?" And I said to her at another point, "Who in your family taught you how to curl your hair and perm your hair?" Now, I don't ever come with a list of questions—I know that surprised Norman—and I often go home after an interview and want to kick myself in the ass about all the questions that I didn't ask, that I should have asked, that I wanted to ask, but didn't because I didn't have a list of questions. A list of questions inhibits me.

Lennon: But, you'd read all the transcripts and saturated yourself in the material.

Schiller: Of course.

Lennon: So you trust your intuition.

Schiller: Or, I trust the fact that I'm letting the subject educate me. But in Marina's case, I'm probing for two things: facts we don't know and, as I've said before, more skin on the bones, more revealing detail. And for the first day and half that really worked very well. Then I made a decision, without discussing it with Norman that I was going to enter the area of sexuality. I don't know to this day if I made the right decision. Norman was upset with me when I went into Marina's years in Leningrad much faster than we had originally discussed. All of a sudden, we were talking about her previous boyfriends in Minsk. I said to her, "But before that you had a very close relationship with so-and-so." And she looked at me—"You've spoken to him?" It was like I opened the door to Leningrad. I immediately said, "No, I haven't spoken to him, I couldn't even find him, Marina, but I knew that you had to have had boyfriends and I was told that he was fond of you by somebody in Minsk." So, I got out of it. The question opened about half a day too soon the fact that we knew some things about Leningrad inside out. She was smart

enough to understand that. But then, I think on the third day, we opened the door as Norman and I had planned. I said, "Well how did you feel when your uncle locked the door and wouldn't let you into the apartment and you had to sleep on the landing?" Well, I saw really hatred in her eyes and that's when she shouted and screamed. I don't remember if Norman was in the room or not, because sometimes I would ask questions when Norman was out and sometimes he was there and I wasn't, but usually we were together. She said, I don't remember her exact words, "You're worse than the Secret Service; you're worse than the FBI." I said, "What do you mean, I'm worse than them?" I could just tell where this was going. So at that point I went in pretty strong and I said, "Look, whatever your relationships were in Leningrad, as a young girl growing up, you were experiencing life or exploring sexuality, like a lot of young people," something like that. It wasn't like I said that she was a hooker, which of course she wasn't. I tried to put it, to couch it, in language that suggested she was in an educational situation, a growth situation.

Before I come back to the conversations with Marina, I want to remember one thing. After we got back to the United States we had a very big fight with Ludmilla about Marina's interviews, a tremendous fight, because Ludmilla thought she was going to translate for Marina and that the interviews would be done with Marina in Russian. I can honestly say that I had never said that to her but it's easy to understand why she made the assumption. Norman and I said from the very beginning that we wanted the interviews with Marina in English, and her English was good enough. We actually had a Russian-English and a English-Russian dictionary there in case she had to look up one of our words. They were never used. Ludmilla was just furious, but we didn't want Ludmilla's KGB contacts to know. We also knew that Marina would go ballistic if she thought everything would go back to the Soviet Union as it was called in those days.

Lennon: Right.

Schiller: Ludmilla was very mad and I believe held it against me for a long time.

Lennon: Let me interrupt here. You said earlier that one of the reasons you wanted to talk to Marina was about whether she had pre-material sex.

Schiller: Yes.

Lennon: What was your information about it that was hearsay?

Schiller: It came through her girlfriends.

Lennon: Are you saying that none of the guys you talked to would say that they had sex with her?

Schiller: Correct.

Lennon: So that's why it was hearsay. No direct testimony from any of them.

Schiller: I mean the guys in Leningrad that she dated would not give us that information. I think it was Norman who said that girls talk to girls and they say intimate things. Remember, at that point Norman was just doing research. We'd do the interviews during the day, and he'd read the *Warren Report*, blown up twice the size, at night. I don't know if I explained to you that every single day we sent the transcripts by Sprint or some other carrier by satellite. There was no email in those days, but you could send a packet of information by satellite.

Lennon: So you were getting it back to the States daily?

Schiller: Yea, daily. We were among the first tourists to use data transfer in this way. It was legal. There may have been email in the United States but it wasn't worldwide.

Lennon: It was just starting.

Schiller: Yes, right. Every night we had such joy—we got it out, we got it out! And Norman would say, “All right Larry, all right.” And I would say, “No, Norman, you never know.” I get excited about it; I still get childish, then and now, about little things succeeding.

So, back to Marina. I started to ask about her sexuality; how does a young girl learn about sex, you know. I would try questions that she just ran away from: “What's your earliest memory of masturbation?” It's a daring question, isn't it? But I would ask this kind of question at a very soft moment. When she ran away from that question, I used the same tactic that I used on Nicole Baker in the interviews for *The Executioner's Song*. I said, “What do you have to hide?” Then on the fourth day, in the afternoon, it became obvious that we knew everything and she was starting to respond. So, I said to Marina, “Your girls are married. They've got their own children; they've been

divorced; what's to protect, what's to hide?" That's the way I talked to her. So she loosened up. She'd get angry and frustrated and finally she admitted that she was not a virgin when she met Lee. I don't remember how Norman used what she said, but she would never explain how she faked her wedding night. But, obviously, she had to in some way.

Lennon: Was she still a cigarette smoker?

Schiller: Oh, yes, when we interviewed her.

Lennon: A heavy smoker.

Schiller: Her fingers were stained. Thanks for reminding me. It was just unbelievable. You know, two, three packs—unbelievable. She was divorced from Porter, but living with him for the sake of their children.

Lennon: How many children did they have?

Schiller: I don't remember. One or two, I think. I don't know. Anyway, I would probe, and Norman would probe. "How did you feel about Lee walking into the radio factory with a piece of sheet with your blood on it?" She'd say, "I don't know anything about that. You're just making that up." Many times, she'd respond that way, "You're just making that up. There is no way anybody ever said that to you." And when I mentioned one of her girlfriends or someone from Minsk, she just said I was a damn liar.

Lennon: Called you a liar?

Schiller: Yes, straight out called me liar you know. She really screamed at us the last day. She said that we were really worse than the FBI, worse than anybody who had interrogated her.

Lennon: That was the last day?

Schiller: No, she started it earlier but then really repeated it, loud, nasty. "I don't ever, ever want to see you guys again or talk to you again. You don't have the right to pry into my life." She may have used the word weasel, something like that; weasel comes back to my mind. "You can't use all your capitalistic tricks." She was tough on me, she really was. She felt I had betrayed her because I had befriended her after the assassination. I had protected her on the film that ABC made. She had vacationed with Stephanie and me in California, my second wife.

Lennon: Why did she feel you betrayed her? By asking her these tough questions?

Schiller: Well, she felt we had more of a personal relationship.

Lennon: She felt that your relationship with her was such that you would be gentler, that you would not pry into her secret past.

Schiller: She didn't think it was going to be this type of interview. She might have forgotten that when she gave us Valya's phone number that we were going to go do a detailed book based on detailed interviews. It was the same thing with the lawyers in the O.J. Simpson case. None of them understood when I interviewed them for my book, *American Tragedy* [1996, No. 1 *New York Times* bestseller] that the sum total of all their interviews would collectively make something incredible. They didn't realize how much they were giving up; that every spoke of a wheel when in place makes the wheel, it is so important. Some of the lawyers gave me their yellow pads from meetings, notes, this and that and everything.

Lennon: The cumulative effect.

Schiller: Exactly right and it was same thing with Marina. By the last day there was no politeness. Every single word out of her mouth was said with venom.

Lennon: You said that she held Norman in awe. Did that awe wear off?

Schiller: Definitely. At the beginning, he was God. She thought, "Larry Schiller has brought this great American writer to the table." It's the same thing we did in the Soviet Union. Remember, the American Tolstoy.

Lennon: Part of it is because the Russians have such out-size admiration for cultural figures.

Schiller: Yes, of course. Writers, even in the Soviet Union days, were held in the highest esteem. There's nothing more powerful than to say to a Russian, "Pushkin wrote that Peter the Great hacked a window into the West," because that's the word that Pushkin used. The Russians know it. I tried to use little things, little bits of information, and slide them into an interview. With Marina we were doing that. Norman felt at the end, quite honestly, that he didn't get as much out of the interviews as he would have liked. I have no

idea what he wanted out of the interviews, but at least he wasn't upset with what we did get.

Lennon: He was hoping for a larger breakthrough.

Schiller: Well, if you look at the Nixon/Frost interview (also an interview for which the subject was paid money), you know, it was in the eleventh hour that Nixon all of sudden says "I let the American people down. And I'll have to carry that burden for the rest of my life." Frost had no idea what he was going to get.

Lennon: You and Norman seemed to have worked pretty well as a team with Marina.

Schiller: Yes.

Lennon: Did you have any major blowups?

Schiller: We had a couple. But since we all speaking English, if we disagreed in the middle of an interview one of us would say, "Larry, why don't you carry on and I'll just come back a little bit later." Or, I'd say, "Norman, I've got to call my office." But I'm glad you brought it up. Obviously, we did have disagreements; Norman and I (laughter) We loved it. That is what was so exciting.

Lennon: Did you stay pretty much to that schedule of three hours in the morning, three in the afternoon? Did you do any evenings?

Schiller: Many days we didn't do the evenings. We were exhausted.

Lennon: So, if you averaged six hours a day that's still thirty hours.

Schiller: Oh, there's more than thirty hours.

Lennon: Because you did some nights?

Schiller: Well, because sometimes we went more than three hours in the morning and sometimes we went more than three hours in the afternoon.

Lennon: But the evenings were just too much.

Schiller: I think we did meet on two evenings, but as she got more and more upset, it was obvious she wasn't going to give us the evenings.

Lennon: And did her friend sit in?

Schiller: Her friend did not sit in at any of the interviews. She wasn't allowed to.

Lennon: Just the three of you and a big ashtray.

Schiller: Yes and the friend was there so later she could comfort her.

Lennon: Over dinner.

Schiller: What were we going to do, send her back to her room like a prison?

Lennon: You told me earlier that in a sense you did have her in prison.

Schiller: Of course.

Lennon: For five days.

Schiller: Yes, but we didn't have her in solitary confinement (chuckles). You know, she could still make phone calls. I guess this is going to be bragging but I think it's extraordinary that we were able to keep her in a building for five days.

Lennon: Did you pay her before or after?

Schiller: It was a cashier's check and I paid her on the first day.

Lennon: You paid her on the first day, so she'd already received the money. So in a sense she was obliged to produce.

Schiller: That is my *modus operandi*. I always want to take a little bit of the high road. I don't know if it produces something good or not, but you know she showed up every day

Lennon: When it was all over what were the goodbyes like?

Schiller: There were really no goodbyes. We just finished the session and the next morning she drove away.

Lennon: No hugs, no Merry Christmas?

Schiller: No way!

Lennon: You burned your bridges. What happened next?

Schiller: What happened is that Norman informed me that he was going to write the second half of the book about Oswald's United States years. That was not part of the plan. I felt it would diminish the power of Oswald's time in Moscow and Minsk. For me, the whole idea was "The Soviet Years: Lee Harvey Oswald."

Lennon: Right.

Schiller: After he told me, I understood why he was always reading all the *Warren Report*. So, I said to him, "Norman we've done no research on the American years. We've not interviewed anyone. We don't have the time; we don't have the money to do it." He said, "I don't want to interview anybody; I just want to use the *Warren Report* and the other books. There's plenty of information in there." I said, "No, Norman this is not how we're supposed to work together." He said, "Just let me write it, and you read it." When he got Jason Epstein on his side that the book should include the American years in it, it was done. I think it was a crucial mistake.

Lennon: Well, you were running into Norman's idea of his legacy and also his deep and frustrated desire to write about the Kennedy assassination. You know, he'd never written about it.

Schiller: I know that.

Lennon: He was not going to go to his grave without doing it. This was his last chance to write about the assassination.

Schiller: I know.

Lennon: You might have been completely right, but it would have made no difference at all.

Schiller: Right, right, right.

Lennon: In hindsight.

Schiller: When you say, "Write about the assassination," that's too broad a statement for me. Was he writing about the assassination or about everything that leads up to the assassination and then assassination itself? What Norman did is continue the narrative story of Oswald's life. It was based mostly on material that had been previously published. When the reader hits the shift in the book, I feel the reader is unsettled by it. I was afraid it would

have an impact on how reviewers judged the overall work. Now, Norman had said to me for years, “Larry, don’t worry about reviews. You don’t write a book for reviews.” And I agree, but you have an obligation to make sure you are not setting yourself up for bad reviews by doing something. If you want to go back to the interview I gave to Jeffrey Severs on *The Executioner’s Song* [*Mailer Review* 1, 81–118] you know, about what my motives were in having Norman tear me to pieces, I felt he should have even torn me to pieces more. I felt I was protecting the book from people looking at the copyright page and saying, “Norman Mailer was hired by Larry Schiller again. Not only for *Marilyn*, but now for Gilmore. Look how nice Larry Schiller is in *the Executioner’s Song*; he’s a hero.” No, no. I didn’t want that.

Lennon: Well, you had enough trouble with that perception as it was.

Schiller: What they didn’t realize is that only Norman could have written *The Executioner’s Song*. Having him detail my flaws was my way of protecting us from unfair reviews.

Lennon: You see books as discrete things.

Schiller: I don’t know what you mean by discrete.

Lennon: You felt that the material you found in Russia was good material that held together, cohered, material that nobody had ever seen before. That’s one discrete book. But all of Norman’s books are part of a chain.

Schiller: Right.

Lennon: *Oswald’s Tale* was another link in his life’s work. He was always thinking about the next work.

Schiller: That’s fine, but I still think that Oswald’s years in the United States should have been a separate work.

Lennon: I have read all the reviews of the book and I can say right now that there is great admiration for the first part of the book, and there is less admiration for the second part. But a lot of reviewers are taken with the conclusion of that book—“The Three Widows.” Nobody else who looked at that material could have come up with that kind of an ending, only Norman Mailer.

Schiller: Of course, the ending is brilliant.

Lennon: And Oswald's mother. He uses her testimony so deftly.

Schiller: He uses part of my interview with her.

Lennon: That's right.

Schiller: As the final quote in the book.

Lennon: Yes, exactly. It's a fantastic interview.

Schiller: I am very proud that he used it; I have to admit to you. Norman, at one point, said, "What else do you have on Oswald?" I said, "A bunch of stuff with Marguerite Oswald," and I just sent it to him. I didn't even read it or look at it. I was very pleased when I saw the draft and, as in *The Executioner's Song*, he's using my interview as a conclusion. Look, I think "The Three Widows" is extraordinary, but let me take it a step further. When the book is done but before publication, an excerpt was published in the *New Yorker*. We decided to send it to Marina, because we had not spoken to her and the book was going to come out. What was the part in the *New Yorker*? It was something that directly related to Marina.

Lennon: Yes, it was "Oswald in Minsk with Marina."

Schiller: We decided to send it. We felt an obligation to show her what Norman was saying about her. We had a moral obligation, not a legal obligation, to let her know before the book was published what Norman Mailer thought and was writing of her.

Lennon: So you sent it to her.

Schiller: Yes, and we got a letter that came back from Marina that was scathing. She tore Norman to pieces. It should be in the Ransom Center at the University of Texas, in Norman's Archive.

Lennon: I've never seen it.

Schiller: Then it may be in my archives. She may have sent it to me. But it was a scathing letter. She used language that really summed up really her . . .

Lennon: Bitterness.

Schiller: Bitterness. Outrage and bitterness.

Lennon: What did Norman feel about the reviews or what did you think about the reviews?

Schiller: We never discussed them.

Lennon: The book did fairly well, but I think there was also a little bit of burnout of interest in Oswald.

Schiller: Oh, yes.

Lennon: So many books had been published.

Schiller: Yes, and one of them was published by Random House: Gerald Posner's *Case Closed*.

Lennon: It came out in 1993.

Schiller: Posner, being a lawyer, had written this book to prove that Oswald did it, beyond a doubt. Now, Norman's educational curve on the question is that he went into the project believing that Oswald was part of a conspiracy and he came out of it believing, as I did, that he was the lone assassin. Maybe Oswald was motivated by missing his shot at General Walker, but he was still a lone assassin. This brings back to mind a big piece of information, which was very crucial to the book. It is the description of Lee when he came home after missing the shot at Walker and sits on the porch. Not knowing he missed, waiting by the radio, waiting to hear the news that never comes. With the gun resting against the wall. That all came from our interviews with Marina.

Lennon: In Dallas.

Schiller: In Dallas, yes. That is material that the Secret Service or FBI never knew anything about.

Lennon: Norman had been a profound believer in the Kennedy assassination conspiracy. He was the keynote speaker at the Assassination Symposium in Dallas in the fall of 1993. He was 70 at the time and he'd believed in the conspiracy for 30 years. Posner's book had its influence.

Schiller: Posner's book was a big, big book; it reached, I think, number one on the bestseller list. So it did take the bloom off our book because Norman

always said the assassination was part of a conspiracy. Posner proved his point and the gas leaked out of the conspiracy theory.

Lennon: Posner crosses the finish line two years before *Oswald's Tale* is published. Norman agrees it was not a conspiracy; he says he is 75% sure it wasn't.

Schiller: Yes. Let me tell you about something else. When the lawyers and editors from the *New Yorker* arrived at my house in California to do fact checking for the excerpt—this would be in the winter of 1994—or early 1995—I was in the middle of the Simpson case. So we're sitting in my dining room. They actually brought the galleys. And as I looked at the galleys, I read the subhead in which my name was used and I was called Norman Mailer's collaborator, something like that. I turned to the representative from the *New Yorker* and said, "How dare you do this, you don't have Norman Mailer's permission. You don't have the right to say I'm his collaborator; only Norman Mailer can say what he wants to say in regard to his relationship with me." She looked at me and said, "Norman's the one who wrote the line." So that was the time I felt a sense of accomplishment.

Lennon: Well, you should. Was Tina Brown the editor of the *New Yorker* then?

Schiller: Yes, but she was not at this meeting.

Lennon: I think he was happy to be in the *New Yorker* because he really hadn't been in it that much before.

Schiller: This was big.

Lennon: After fifty years of trying to get a big piece in it.

Schiller: I was very proud. The excerpt they used was based on the interviews that we had done together. So, the *New Yorker* thing kind of came together nicely. But there's another part to the story. When the book came out in May 1995, it became obvious to the government that we had some new information on Oswald. Not long after, there was a select committee on assassinations in the Congress. They wanted the files and they subpoenaed them. But for one reason or another, various delays, I never did give the files to the House Select Committee. Oliver Stone even called me and asked that I give the government the documents we had.

Lennon: But they came to California didn't they?

Schiller: Later. Shortly after Clinton was elected, I think he went to Russia and Yeltsin says that he's going to give the U. S. the files on Oswald. It was in the newspapers. About four or six months after that, I don't remember exactly, around 6:30 in the morning there was a knock on the door. Two FBI agents showed us badges and so forth. They explained that they knew that we had transcripts and documents from the Oswald files, and that Mr. Yeltsin may have given President Clinton the same files. They asked if they could compare their set with our set to see if there were any changes made. So I gave them a complete set of duplicates and they sat there and compared files. I think there were four or five of them, with Russian translators, and they sat for at least a day and a half at our dining room table. And, of course, I had no idea if there were differences or not. There were no lunches with them, no dinners, just work. And after two days, they left.

Lennon: Were you under the impression there were no differences, that the files were the same?

Schiller: That's my impression, but nobody ever said that to me. I sat most of the time in the dining room and I didn't see anyone saying, "Oh look at this, look at this." I don't believe that the Russians or the KGB in Belarus, at that time would falsify any documents. There was no motive to falsify, too much to lose, too much credibility to be shot.

That's the end of this little war story. But don't forget, Norman and I went back to Russia in 2001 to do the Robert Hansen project, the book and the movie. He was the American FBI agent who spied for the Soviets for some 20 years. We met some people from our first trip and they opened more doors, deep inside the old KGB. What we discovered is a good tale. But not today.