“If they’ve found another assassin, let them name names and produce their evidence.”

—Allen Dulles, July, 1966

Name: Igor “Turk” Vaganov
Evidence: see below

by John Berendt

F orty minutes after the assassination of President Kennedy, Mrs. Helen Louise Markham left her second-story flat at 338 Ninth Street in the Oak Cliff section of Dallas and walked over to catch a bus. At the corner of Tenth Street and Patton Avenue she noticed a police car cruise slowly along Tenth Street and then draw up to a young man walking in the same direction. The car stopped, and the young man walked over, rested his elbows on the window ledge of the passenger side, and started talking. A moment afterward the policeman opened his door and began to walk around the front of the car. As he did, the young man stepped back, raised a pistol and fired him with three shots. Then he turned, shook the spent shells out of the gun and tossed off. After a moment Mrs. Markham went over to the fallen officer and waited with him twenty minutes before anyone came. He tried in vain to talk to her.

The Warren Commission concluded that the young man Mrs. Markham had described had been Lee Harvey Oswald, whom police apprehended a half hour later in a movie theatre eight blocks away.

Not the coolest of observers, Mrs. Markham had covered her eyes with her hands after the shooting and commenced “hollering and screaming.” But the Warren Commission decided to accept her version of the killing against all others. This despite the fact that there had been four shots, not three as she had said, that the car window, through which Oswald had supposedly spoken, was found rolled up, that the policeman who had tried to talk to her had been killed instantly, that he hadn’t spotted another witness, that Mrs. Markham, according to other witnesses, was not the first to go to his aid, and that one Commission staff member described Mrs. Markham as “utterly unreliable.”

Critics of the Warren Commission were not satisfied with the official explanation of the Tippit killing. Mrs. Markham had described the killer as “bushy-haired,” which Oswald wasn’t, and she was completely confused about picking him out of the lineup

“Did you recognize anyone in the lineup?” the Commission counsel had asked her.
“No, sir,” she had replied.
“... did you recognize anybody from their face?”
“From their face, no.”
“Did you identify anybody in these four people?”
“I didn’t know nobody,” she steadfastly maintained. But a moment later, without warning, she changed her story. “Number two is the one I picked.” Number two, she said, had given her the chills, had made her go weak. That, apparently, was good enough for the Commission.

But not for the critics. There were a couple of witnesses, not questioned by the Commission, who had seen at least two people run away. There were also mysterious aspects about the two kinds of bullets found in Tippit’s body, about the arrest of Oswald in the Texas Theatre and about the coming and going of some unidentified people in the area.

The critics were being pressed to stop the quibbling and come up with names. By February of this year they had one: Igor Vaganov, a twenty-seven-year-old Latvian emigre who lived in Philadelphia but who had arrived in Dallas under strange circumstances less than two weeks before the assassination. The independent sleuths had traced him for three years, suspecting him of involvement in the Tippit killing and, by extension, the assassination. Their efforts had finally led to a confrontation with him in Philadelphia. The confrontation had produced accusations, denials and challenges. One night recently I drove out to Mrs. Markham’s house in Oak Cliff to present her with the new “suspect,” Igor Vaganov, face-to-face.

Having arrived in Dallas the night before, Vaganov and I had gone first to see another of the Tippit witnesses: Domingo Benavides. Benavides was an underground hero among assassination enthusiasts, having been connected with the post-assassination operation in which he had witnessed the sniper mopping up pickup truck tirades. So when he met the police that evening, in pursuit of the killer, Benavides and his friends took the opportunity to question the Commission. Benavides, who worked in the garage business, was also shot. Tippit had become a daily occurrence, Benavides father-in-law had been shot at, and according to Mark Lane, Benavides had fled Dallas. By chance I discovered his whereabouts and drove Vaganov out to see him. When we got there I left Vaganov in the car and went in alone. At first he did not want to talk. He said there wasn’t anything in it for him but trouble; people were always coming up to him now and picking fights. He showed me a scar on his chin and another across his chest from a fight he had got into in a bar. He said he didn’t think he ought to get himself in any more trouble. But I had five pictures of Vaganov with me, and I gave them to him. He looked at them carefully, frowned, and then studied them again, one by one.

“I know him,” he said. “I’m sure I’ve seen him before, but I don’t know where.”

I told Benavides that the man in the picture was out in the car and he could see him if he wanted to.

“Uh, no. Uh-uh.” Benavides got up and started to go back to work. But he turned and said slowly, “I’ll tell you what, bring him in. I’ll look at him.”

I went out and got Vaganov. The two of them stared at each other.

Patrolman J. D. Tippit was killed on this street in Dallas forty-five minutes after the assassination of President Kennedy. Igor Vaganov (right), of Philadelphia, suspected by several independ