

Robert F Kennedy

VS

Otto Otepka

In 1953 Otto Otepka began working for the Office of Security in the State Department. His job was to keep an eye on State Department appointees, detecting any criminal acts or communist sympathies. He was a deeply principled man, methodical, scrupulous, and fair. He never let ideology interfere with integrity.

In 1957, Otepka was promoted to Deputy Director of the Office of Security. In his new position, he was responsible for issuing security clearances for all State Department appointees. In 1960, the Office of Security was also tasked with handling the official list of American defectors to the communist bloc.

One of those American defectors was Lee Harvey Oswald (LHO), a name which meant nothing to Otepka at the time. Following normal procedure, he contacted both the FBI and CIA to find out if they had any information about LHO. The file bounced around from agency to agency for a while. It gradually began to dawn on Otepka that something was fishy about the LHO file. For one thing, it was designated as #39-61981, with the 39 prefix meaning it was an intelligence file. Also, LHO's 1962 return from the Soviet Union was expedited by a loan to him from the State Department. And his wife, Marina, was cleared for entrance into the US much faster than normal. All very unusual. And why had LHO been issued a passport that allowed him to travel to Cuba (or back to Russia, for that matter)?

Before Otepka had a chance to sort it all out, his LHO file was stolen in 1963. It

disappeared from the safe in which he stored high-security files. But that was just one of the bizarre experiences Otto Otepka encountered in his job as Deputy Director of the Office of Security.

In December, 1960, before JFK had taken up residence at the White House, Dean Rusk, designated Secretary of State, requested a meeting with Otepka, who had very recently cleared Rusk. Otepka assumed the purpose was to discuss security clearances for JFK's appointees. However, the meeting turned out to be with Robert Kennedy, not Dean Rusk, who was acting merely as an intermediary.

Bobby was about an hour late, and when he arrived he offered no apology for keeping these men waiting. Nor were there any pleasantries exchanged. Bobby got right down to business, which was assuring a security clearance for W W Rostow's cabinet appointment. Otepka had already declined to clear Rostow as a foreign policy expert in 1955, and then again in 1957. Otepka explained that Air Force Intelligence had expressed concerns about Rostow.

RFK responded angrily: Those people are nuts! Bobby left in a rage. He wasn't pleased to find that Otepka was not a man who could be swayed by bullying or political influence.

Almost a year later, Otepka was told that the Office of Security was being reorganized, and the position of Deputy Director was being eliminated. Beginning January, 1961, Otepka would become chief of the brand new Division of Evaluations. In April, John Francis Reilly was installed as Director of Office of Security. Also in April, Otepka's new Division of Evaluations was relieved of any and all responsibilities to the Intelligence Reporting Branch, which role

was now being assumed by the Executive Office.

In other words, Otepka was being isolated from intelligence activity. In fact, now Otepka really had no responsibilities at all of any significance. So he made use of his time by continuing to build his file on LHO.

In August, 1962, Reilly was appointed Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Security – another brand new position. And four new Kennedy loyalists arrived at Office of Security. Their primary job was, as it turned out, to keep an eye on Otto Otepka. (They were Joseph E Rosetti, Robert J McCarthy, Charles W Lyons, and David I Belisle.)

At the time, wiretaps were illegal without established probable cause that national security was being compromised. As Attorney General, RFK would have known that better than anyone else in America. But that didn't slow him down. In 1962, Otepka's office phone was tapped by Elmer Dewey Hill under orders from John Francis Reilly. Hill and his helpers set up in a room across from Otepka's little hole-in-the-wall office, and they recorded every one of Otepka's telephone conversations.

But it wasn't just his office phone. Hill was recording every word spoken in Otepka's office. And it wasn't just at the office. They were also spying on Otepka in his home. And it wasn't just illegally recording conversations. Every night Hill's gang went through Otepka's office trash.

One night at 10:00, David Belisle and a helper broke into Otepka's office. They found Otepka sitting at his desk, working. Masking their surprise, they just pretended to be there on legitimate official business. They said they were searching for evidence that Otepka had given classified information to the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee.

(It doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to figure out who stole the LHO file from Otepka's safe.)

Much of this came to light because of a whistleblower named Stanley Holden, a colleague of Otepka's. Dean Rusk ordered Reilly to find out who the whistleblower was. The following day, Holden's face and tongue were slashed, requiring stitches. Then, Joe Rosetti and Robert McCarthy went to Holden's home and yelled at him so loudly that neighbors were coming outside to find out what all the shouting was about. McCarthy concluded with this threat: **I'll get you fired for this!** He did.

Otepka was soon permanently removed from any work related to security. He was told to summarize each day's Congressional record, and to update the Office of Security handbook. Makeshift work. Otepka was determined to find out who had destroyed his career, and why.

It couldn't have been about denying security clearance for a few low-level appointees, because that just wasn't a big enough deal to provoke such a hostile campaign of revenge. And it couldn't have been because of the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee. Yes, he had provided them with three documents, but they were not classified; they were innocuous, and the Senate was legally entitled to see them. Nor did Otepka have any choice about appearing before the committee. He was legally required to do so. Furthermore, Dean Rusk himself had given him permission.

Eventually, Otepka would learn that it had all been about LHO. Robert Kennedy, Attorney General of the United States, personally set out to destroy Otto Otepka because he was doing his job. Doing his job led him to investigate LHO, and that's what Bobby could not allow. Otepka had been in RFK's crosshairs from the moment Otepka encountered the name Oswald.

But Otepka didn't yet understand all that in September, 1963, when he was charged with ten crimes. Somebody was out to crush him, and he had to find out who and why. He first reached out to friends in the FBI, who told him he was being investigated by higher authority in the Department of Justice. Otepka knew that couldn't refer to Hoover, because he was always associated with the FBI, not the Justice Department. It could only be Robert Kennedy who was out to get him.

Some answers came from a hearing in 1967. John Francis Reilly admitted under oath that it had been RFK himself who installed him at the head of Office of Security. RFK also had ordered him to intercept all conversations that took place inside Otepka's office. Hill testified that Reilly had ordered him to turn over the tapes of those conversations at a prearranged site to a man Hill didn't know.

Who was this mystery man? It wasn't the mighty US government that found out. It wasn't the mighty New York Times, either. It was Sidney Goldberg, who ran a weekly newsletter in Washington DC. Goldberg stated in the September 4, 1968 edition of the *Government Employees Exchange* that an unidentified source had revealed to him the truth behind the destruction of Otto Otepka's career. A member of Reilly's staff, Clarence Jerome Schneider, an electronics expert, got the tapes ready for delivery, with the help of CIA, who removed background noise. The mystery man who took possession of them from Hill was RFK's personal assistant, Walter Sheridan.

This unnamed source also told Goldberg that Sheridan was RFK's primary contact at an organization called International Investigators Incorporated (III), based in Indianapolis. III was an ultra-secretive entity providing industrial security services to federal government and private sector

employers. One of their specialties was wire-tap operations. III was commonly known as The Three Eyes, but its employees referred to it as The Five Eyes. They were paid with untraceable funds by the Justice Department, who also provided The However Many Eyes with immunity from prosecution.

There is no trace of RFK's and Sheridan's roles in destroying Otepka's career anywhere in Justice Department records. Although Sheridan was paid by Justice, his office was in the White House. He also received recordings made by the Secret Service and the State Department. (Those tapes were housed at a separate facility.) It is not surprising that the papers of Robert Kennedy and Walter Sheridan are off limits to historians.

Needless to say, Sheridan was furious when he read Goldberg's piece in the *Government Employees Exchange*. Sheridan just happened to stop by Goldberg's little office to demand a full retraction and the name of his source. Goldberg stood up to the federal bully. He never revealed the name of his source to anybody.

Otto Otepka retired in 1972, and he died on March 20, 2010 at the age of 94. He died an honest and honorable man. The same cannot be said of Bobby Kennedy.