

THE HOUSE AT No. 19 VIENA STREET

Vladimir Lenin, despite much public debate remains entombed in a massive mausoleum in the middle of Moscow's Red Square. Stalin and other who played leading roles in the formation of the USSR lie nearby in places of, if not honor at least prominence. Yet the mortal remains of Leon Trotsky, founder of the Red Army, hero of the Revolution, once considered heir apparent to Lenin lie half a world away, mostly forgotten in a quiet district in the south of Mexico City. Trotsky's journey to No. 19 Viena (Vienna) Street began with his political defeat and internal exile by Josef Stalin in 1927. He later left his homeland for Norway where he remained until harassment by what he termed "pro-nazi" Norwegian groups forced him to look elsewhere. The leftist government of Lázaro Cárdenas offered Trotsky political asylum. His arrival was something of a festive event and he was met by prominent Mexican leftist including painters Diego Rivera and Frida De Kahlo.

Initially Trotsky's relationship with Mexico's leftist elite was good and for a time Trotsky stayed at Rivera's house. For one reason or another (some say political, others an illicit relationship with Frida De Kahlo, Rivera's lover) the relationship between Trotsky and Rivera soon began to deteriorate. At the same time, Trotsky's relentless campaign from abroad against Stalin and his take-over of the Russian revolution did little to endear Trotsky to the Stalinists among Mexico's leftists. Soon the former friendship between Trotsky and Rivera had dissolved to the point where Trotsky had to look for other lodgings for himself and Natalia Sedova, his long-time companion.

The house at No. 19 Viena St. in Coyohuacán, what was then a small town several miles to the south of Mexico City, was originally built as a vacation house in the 1920's. It had sat largely abandoned from the mid-30's until Leon Trotsky selected it as his new abode. At first Trotsky rented the house, but soon donations from the Socialist Workers Party of the United States enabled Trotsky to purchase the house outright. From a simple country house Trotsky and his party set about converting No 19 Viena into a fortress. The garden wall was raised and a guard tower was built in one corner. The house's occupants now included Trotsky, Natalia and Estéban Volkov, Trotsky's grandson from his first (and only legal) marriage, and an entourage of bodyguards commanded by American Robert Sheldon.

Even with all this preparation, Trotsky was not safe from the worldwide tentacles of Stalin's dreaded NKVD. The house on Viena Street would be the site of not one but two assassination attempts. The first came on the night of May 24th, 1940 and it came through the betrayal of head bodyguard, Robert Sheldon. He opened the gates to allow in the would-be assassins, among them famous Mexican painter David Siquieros. A hail of bullets tore through the rooms where Trotsky, Natalia and Volkov were sleeping. So heavy was the fire that the guards were unable to leave their barracks to assist Trotsky. The Russian revolutionary and his companion escaped death by huddling in the only corner of their room not raked by fire. Their shouted warnings to Estéban gave him enough time to hide under his bed. One bullet slightly grazed his foot making him the only person injured in the assassination attempt. Robert Sheldon, the traitorous chief bodyguard, fled with the attackers. His partially mummified corpse was found miles away about a month later. Apparently he was considered an unnecessary witness whose services were no longer needed.

The second assassination attempt was both more low-key and more successful. Ramón Mercadero del Río, a Spanish communist had married a female member of Trotsky's tightly controlled inner circle. This gave him the access he needed. On August 20, less than three months after the first assassination attempt, del Río entered Trotsky's house, supposedly to get Trotsky's input on an article del Río had written for publication. Trotsky took the article and turned to read it at the desk in his study. As he turned his back to del Río, the Soviet agent drew a small mountain climbing axe he had concealed under the coat he was carrying and struck Trotsky on the head. Trotsky, despite the severity of the blow, did not die immediately or quietly. The bodyguards heard the commotion and came barreling into the room. Realizing what had happened, some of them began attending to Trotsky while others began beating del Río. They probably would have killed him there had not Trotsky called out to spare his life, saying that he too had a story to tell.

Trotsky fought for his life for the next day in a hospital, but it was no use. Approximately 24 hours after the attack he died from the head wounds he had suffered. After the funeral, Trotsky's body was cremated, the ashes were later placed in the base of a small monument in the garden of the house. They remain there to this day, far from the frozen Russian steppe, far from the halls of the Kremlin and far from the snow covered battle fields of the Russian Revolution.

Natalia Sedova and Estéban Volkov continued living in the house for several years afterward. Natalia eventually moved to Paris where she died in 1961. Her ashes were then interred with those of Trotsky in the base of the monument in the garden. Volkov continued to live there for several years after the departure of Sedova. He eventually married a Spanish woman and raised several daughters in the house where his grandfather had been murdered. Today he is a retired engineer still living in Mexico City and sometimes visits the house in which he spent so much of his life.

Of all the historical and cultural monuments in Mexico City, none touches the emotions quite as much as this one. Unlike most historical sites in Mexico City, this is not a major tourist mecca. The lady at the ticket counter assured us that the crowds are usually quite large, but the number of people present on the day I visited and the basic set-up of the house belie that claim. After Estéban Volkov left, the house was restored to its former state so that now the visitor enters the house that is, as best as can be reconstructed, just as it was on the day that Trotsky died. Since Volkov himself was still in Mexico City at the time, the restorers surely used his personal knowledge to ensure that they got the details right.

The result is that when you walk into the house at 19 Viena Street you do not feel that you are in a tourist attraction or in a museum display, rather you feel that you have just entered someone's house when they stepped out for a moment. The simple reality of the house gives you an almost voyeuristic sense that you are violating the privacy of a man who has been dead for over sixty years. With the exception of a few pieces that were destroyed in the first assassination attempt, the furniture is original. Trotsky's extensive library of volumes in Russian, French, German, English and even Chinese still line the walls. His Dictaphone and typewriter are still there. As you walk through the house and surrounding garden, you cannot help but feel the realness and humanity of the place. Even if you're not a student of the Russian Revolution or a political scientist, you cannot avoid the sense of extreme irony; the man who played such an important role in the overthrow and destruction of Europe's oldest ruling house and the establishment of one of the twentieth century's super-powers now rests here, half a world away from the Russian cities and steppe where his name was known by millions and feared by many of them.

The entrance is through a small building at the rear wall of the garden. After paying an admission of 35 pesos (about \$3.50 USD), the visitor enters a small hall whose walls are covered with photos of Trotsky at various times in his career. Display cases in the middle of the room hold several items of

historical interest including a pair of Trotsky's famous spectacles. One of the several photos on the wall shows Trotsky caring for the chickens and rabbits he kept in the walled garden of the house.

Once you leave the photo hall, you pass through a small passageway that leads through the back wall of the house's garden. Upon exiting the tunnel-like passage, the first thing you see are the chicken coops and rabbit hutches shown in the photos. This touch of reality, this up-close concrete humanness falls like a blow, the realization that Leon Trotsky was a real flesh and blood human being. He walked the garden where the tourist now walks. His ashes are in the monument just a few yards from where you stand. He was not just a name in history books or a figure in old black and white news reels. This is just the first step in making clear the reality of what one now sees. At the historic castle of Chapultepec the visitor will see displays of 19th century finery set out in museum-like displays. At the former Convent of San Mateo at Churubusco, he will see more displays chronicling the foreign invasions of and interventions in Mexico. Here you have just walked into someone's private home and in some way touched a private life.

You are drawn first to the modest but attention grabbing monument that holds Trotsky's ashes. It is a simple vertical block of stone with the name LEON TROTSKY carved on it. Interestingly, the name is carved in Latin letters, not the Cyrillic alphabet of Trotsky's native Russian. Also of note is the name itself. Trotsky was born Lev Davidovitch Bronstein. Leon Trotsky was the alias he adopted during his time as an illegal revolutionary. He has maintained it even in death. Above the name is carved the Hammer and Sickle symbol of the Soviet Union. Over the monument flies the Red Flag of the Soviet Union. Now rare even in the former Soviet Union, it still waves in the breeze everyday here at No. 19 Viena Street. In the back of the monument is a small locked door behind which lie the ashes of Trotsky and Sedova.

After a close up look at the monument, one moves to the beginning of the "tour". A tablet on the side of the house tells the story of the building itself and how Trotsky came to occupy it. The door beside it leads into the kitchen which appears just as it did during Trotsky's occupancy. The utensils are not gold-encrusted or ornate museum pieces. These are the simple utilitarian kitchen tools of a middle class Mexican home during that time.

From the kitchen, the walkway leads into the dining room where Trotsky and the members of his inner circle, to include his bodyguards took their meals together at a long, common table. The decorations

and furnishings are colorful but simple in the style of the day. These are not the fine porcelain or the golden dinner-ware of the Kremlin that the former People's Commissar for War had once used. They are the common furnishings of a common man, not a marble statue.

A door in the opposite side of the room opens directly into Trotsky's office. It is the workplace of a writer, not a showplace for news reels. There are few decorations and the simple, practical furnishings of the room contrast starkly with the museum-like display of Vladimir Lenin's office in the Kremlin. Books in a multitude of languages fill the bookshelves and cabinets. Typewriter and Dictaphone are beside the chair just where they were the last day that Leon Trotsky used them.

A door in the office leads directly into the study where Ramon Mercadero del Rio struck the fatal blow as Trotsky sat at his desk. As you walk through the door you are following the same path that the assassin took. As you go through the door, you can almost picture Trotsky sitting hunched over his desk scribbling intensely. Trotsky first came to the notice of Lenin and the other revolutionary leaders because of his writings in support of the revolution; he died because of his continued writing in opposition to what the revolution had become; he died while reading a document given him by his assassin.

Next to the study is the simple bedroom of Leon and Natalia. The original bed was destroyed by the intense gunfire of the first assassination attempt. The wall opposite the window is still scarred by bullet holes.

The last room, as you follow the walkway, is the bedroom of Esteban Volkov, Trotsky's grandson who had come to live with the couple after the death of his parents. Shouted warnings gave the child of 13 time to get under his bed before gunfire tore through his room.

At the back corner of the garden what was once the garage has been converted into a small movie theater that shows films about Trotsky's life and impact. Ironically, on the outside of the garage is a plaque to the memory of Robert Sheldon, the traitorous American bodyguard who assisted the would-be killers in the first assassination attempt, escaped with them and then was murdered by them. The plaque simply states "In memory of Robert Sheldon, murdered by Stalin." The true irony is that it was Leon Trotsky himself who directed that the plaque be placed there. The man who had specifically rejected the forgiving philosophies of Judaism and Christianity, still saw the man who had tried to kill him to see him as a victim, not as a villain.

On the other side of the enclosure, separated from the kitchen by the guard tower are the bodyguards' quarters. This area, like the garage, has not remained in its original state. The beds and personal comforts of the bodyguards have been replaced by a photo gallery tracing the life of Trotsky from childhood onward.

The back corner of the garden compound is now occupied by a small café. It is the one truly incongruent element in the entire experience. What was once a fortified and private fortress now serves coffee and snacks for a few pesos. After having passed through the scenes of a man's life and death, to sit there and eat and drink seemed almost sacrilegious. I did not stop there.

You leave the house at No. 19 Viena Street profoundly touched, more so than at any other of Mexico City's numerous historical sites and monuments. In the other places, you touch history. At No. 19 Viena Street you touch a human being who made history. And as you leave, you feel the sense of abandonment inherent in the lonely tomb. It seems that today's history has largely forgotten a man who did much to shape it.