

had spent 38 years with Trotsky through all his revolutionary struggles, imprisonments, rise to power, political downfall and wanderings in exile. After Trotsky's death, Natalya lived on in the house for two decades with his only other survivor, his grandson, Seva.

Next to Natalya's study is the simple, almost austere, dining room. A white tablecloth covers the long pine-wood dining board and the Indian-Spanish-style painted chairs lean against the bare walls. Above the doorframe leading to the kitchen is an ugly spray of bullet holes. It remains a sinister scar of a dawn attack on the Trotskys, an attack they miraculously survived.

Adjacent to the dining room is Trotsky's study, which is almost exactly as it was in his lifetime. Dominating the high-ceilinged, white-washed room is his massive worktable with his desk calendar turned to August 20, 1940. Late that afternoon, at this table, Trotsky was struck by an alpine pick-ax wielded by a Spanish communist named Ramón Mercader. This attack, however, Trotsky did not survive.

On the table a cluster of nine wax Ediphone cylinders preserve the last recordings of the impassioned voice that once roused millions with its oratorical power. Here too are the writing tools—pens, ink bottles, old-fashioned blotter—of this advocate of world revolution and historian of no small talent.

Trotsky kept a small revolver within reach and had an alarm button at the edge of the table to alert his guards. But Ramón Mercader had planned well. He had positioned himself so that Trotsky was unable to reach either the gun or the black button.

The master bedroom, next to the study, is currently used as a storage room for piles of old newspapers and magazines. Hand-lettered signs on each stack indicate Trotsky's penchant for eclectic reading matter: *Pravda*, the *New York Times*, *Socialist Call*, *Le Figaro*, *Militant*. On a table lies a cumbersome black bulletproof vest.

This was the bedroom where Trotsky and Natalya awoke in the early hours of May 24, 1940, to an intricately conspired attack to kill them. A band of armed men arrived at the house and tied up the Mexican policemen on sentry duty. They set up machine guns in cross-fire positions, and

opened up with fusillades targeted on the bedroom.

Trotsky and Natalya, awaiting the worst, crouched on the floor behind the bed while bullets ripped through the room. In the adjoining bedroom, Seva, Trotsky's 14-year-old grandson, hid beneath his bed as bullets spattered all around him. Twenty minutes later the attackers withdrew after having planted a powerful dynamite charge in the garden. Although Trotsky, Natalya and Seva were grazed, no one in the household was seriously injured, and the bomb, incredibly, failed to go off.

The only casualty was one of Trotsky's guards, a young New Yorker, Robert S. Harte. He was taken away by the assailants as they drove off in Trotsky's two cars and was found dead a month later in the basement of a farmhouse. When the Mexican police finally unraveled the plot, the principal organizer turned out to be the famous

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Mexican painter David Alfaro Siqueiros. Siqueiros, a founder of the Mexican Communist Party and an ardent pro-Stalinist, was arrested along with two dozen others. He claimed he only wanted to remove documents from Trotsky's house. Siqueiros jumped bail, fled to Chile and did not return for four years, when he claimed immunity under the statute of limitations. He was never brought to trial.

After the attack, Trotsky's "little fortress" of Coyoacán reinforced its defenses. Walls were made higher, more watchtowers were built, steel shutters were affixed to the windows, and armor plating was added to the doors. Inside the entrance gate Trotsky placed a marble plaque: "In memory of Robert Sheldon Harte 1915-1940. Murdered by Stalin."

While the Casa Trotsky stronghold was being fortified, a visitor stood by in the garden one day watching the construction work. He commented to

a secretary that the reinforcements were useless. "They"—the secret agents of Stalin—wouldn't try that tactic again, he said. The visitor was Frank Jacson, alias Jacques Mornard, whose real name was Ramón Mercader. Jacson frequently brought gifts and did many favors for the household, slowly becoming an accepted visitor. His role at first was probably that of advance scout for Stalin's agents.

On August 20, 1940, Trotsky's copy of *Ultimas Noticias*, a Mexico City newspaper lying on his desk, headlined critical events in World War II. For Stalin it was an opportune time to murder Trotsky, the exiled "traitor" and still potential rival.

Stalin's instructions reached Mercader. Mercader asked Trotsky to do him a favor; he had written a political article and wanted Trotsky to look it over. Trotsky invited Mercader into his study, but that day—August 17—was either a dress rehearsal or Mercader just lost his nerve.

Three days later Mercader returned with the rewritten article. Again he and Trotsky went into the study but this time he delivered the fatal blow. The guards caught Mercader, and Trotsky was rushed to nearby Green Cross Hospital where he was operated on by five surgeons. He doggedly clung to life for 26 hours after the attack.

For five days his body lay in state at the Alcazar Mortuary while hundreds of thousands of people came to pay their last respects. After Trotsky was cremated his ashes were laid to rest in his beloved garden.

In May 1960 Ramón Mercader was released from prison, having completed a 20-year sentence for Trotsky's murder. Mercader was reported to have arrived in Moscow shortly thereafter. He had been awarded the Order of the Hero of the Soviet Union, *in absentia* from Josef Stalin, for the service he had performed in the isolated, star-crossed house in Coyoacán.

Museo Leon Trotsky is located at Viena 45, Colonia del Carmen, Coyoacán 04100, Mexico, tel. 905-554-4482. The museum is open Tuesday through Friday, 10 A.M. to 5:30 P.M. and Saturday and Sunday 10:30 A.M. to 4 P.M. (For further information on Mexico City see page 133.) □

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