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# MISCELLANY



Leon Trotsky, the man who lost the Russian Revolution, was murdered 50 years ago by a pickaxe-wielding Stalinist. **Jack Goldfarb** visits the permanent revolutionary's last refuge in Mexico

**T**HE square little peephole slid open and a dark scrutinizing eyeball peered out at me. Slowly the heavy iron door clanked aside, admitting me to the grounds of Casa Trotsky, one of Mexico City's lesser-known landmarks. Though long open to the general public, this house where Leon Trotsky spent his last years in exile, is still pervasively haunted by an aura of prudent wariness. It was here that he was assassinated by an agent of Stalin exactly 50 years ago.

The young bearded caretaker, in jeans and sneakers, regarded me closely as I paused on the entry path to jot down my first impressions of this historic, curiously hybrid building. A rambling suburban villa with flowering gardens, it had been converted into a bristling fortress with barricaded entrances and red-bricked gun

*At the moment of assault, Trotsky had a small revolver within reach, and an electric alarm button ... But Ramon Mercader had planned well*

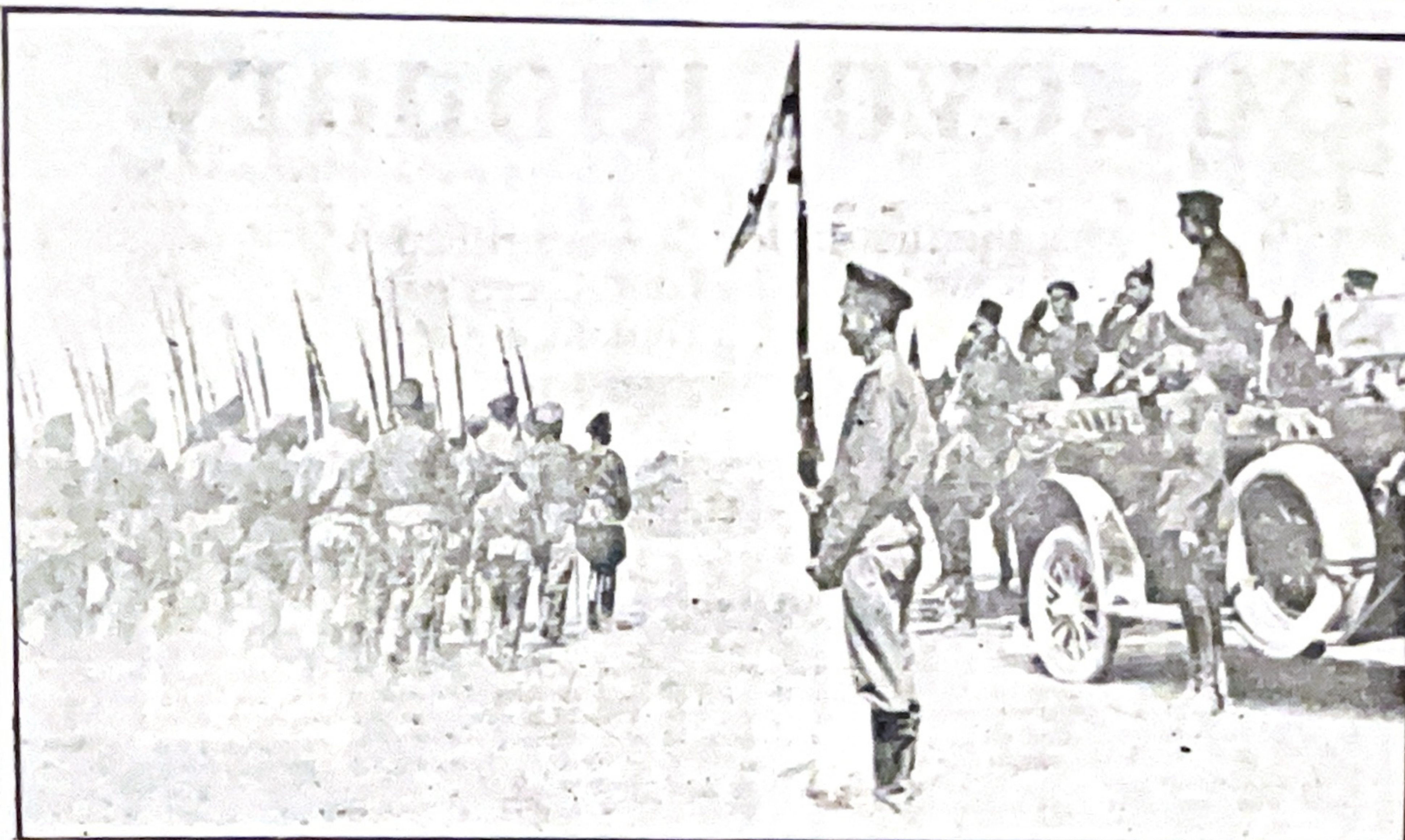
turrets atop the walls.

In the centre of the garden a white rectangular stone, surrounded by cactus plants bears the name "Leon Trotsky" inscribed above a huge sculpted hammer and sickle. Behind the monument on a flagpole a red banner droops at half-mast. The caretaker told me that beneath the stone lie the ashes of Trotsky mingled with those of his wife, Natalia Sedova, who died 21 years after him.

The caretaker politely offered to show me around the premises, now officially designated by the Mexican Government as Museo Leon Trotsky. Almost 50 years have passed since the co-author of the Russian Revolution, founder of the Red Army and one of the 20th Century's most controversial

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# MURDER IN MEXICO CITY



Alexander Kerensky reviewing troops during his brief period of tenure as head of the provisional government

## MURDER IN MEXICO CITY

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and colourful political figures was struck down in this house. But this saffron-coloured dwelling on the corner of Avenida Viena and Calle Morelos in the quiet residential neighbourhood of Coyoacan, still unmistakably retains the presence and charisma of Lev Davidovich Bronstein, better known to the world as Leon Trotsky.



The thickly-grown garden, crowded with arum lilies, rose bushes, iris, hydrangea, and Trotsky's collection of favourite cacti, is enclosed by heightened brick and

granite walls, testifying to the grim threat to Trotsky's life continually posed by the stalking GPU agents of his implacable enemy, Josef Stalin. Inside the parapets of what Trotsky so often referred to as "the jail", the widely-travelled exile with the "internationalist" view spent much of his time in this Mexican refuge within the restricted confines of this garden, putting about and feeding his similarly "caged" pet rabbits. Natalia Sedova has described how she and her husband so often strolled in this tropical garden accompanied by the ghosts of their many Russian colleagues and friends who were executed in Stalin's mass purges of the 1930s.

To the left of the house, a two-storey green dwelling, looking like barracks, stands apart. Here Trotsky's guards and secretaries, most of whom were American volunteers, were quartered. Closed to the public, it is occupied by the caretakers now.

A narrow flagstone path through the garden leads past palm, banana and pine trees into Natalia's studio in the interior of the main house. The walls are lined with hundreds of books, mainly on art and literature. This cultured, self-effacing woman had spent 38 years with Trotsky through all the vicissitudes of his revolutionary struggles: imprisonments, rise to power in the top Soviet leadership, political downfall engineered by Stalin — and wanderings in exile. She had briefly held one post in the Soviet Government, director of museums

and ancient monuments in the Commissariat of Education. After Trotsky's death, Natalia lived on in the house for two decades, together with his only other survivor, his grandson, Seva.

Next to Natalia's studio is the simply-furnished, almost austere, dining room with its original furniture. A white tablecloth covers the long pipewood dining board and the Indian-Spanish style painted chairs lean against the bare walls. Above the doorframe leading to the kitchen, a bizarre sight suddenly arrests your attention. An ugly spray of bullet holes are dug deep into the plaster. Sinister scars of a dawn attack on the Trotskys while they slept in their bedroom, an attack they miraculously survived. But more about that later.

Adjacent to the dining room is Trotsky's study where the personality of the man is most vividly felt. The study is almost exactly as it was in his lifetime. Dominating the high-ceilinged, white-washed room is his massive work table with its desk calendar frozen at the fateful date, August 20, 1940. Late that afternoon, seated at this table, Trotsky was felled by an alpine pickaxe wielded by his assassin, a Spanish Communist named Ramon Mercader.

Among the books, papers, pamphlets and cuttings lying neatly ordered on the table, lies a clipping of an interview he gave to an American newspaper, dated 16 months before Pearl Harbour. Trotsky predicts the USA will enter World War II, will defeat her enemies, and will rule over them "with customary American benevolence, and will be considered a nation of 'great guys'".

**Trotsky and Natalia, dazed and awaiting the worst, crouched on the floor behind the bed while the murderous hail of bullets ripped through the room**

A line-up of nine wax Ediphone cylinders on the table preserve the last recordings of the firebrand voice that once roused millions with its oratorical power. Here, too, are the writing tools — pens, ink bottles, old-fashioned "rocking blotter" — of this advocate of world revolution, "Prince of Pamphleteers" as George Bernard Shaw called him, and historian of no small literary talent, who composed an avalanche of words in his lifetime. On the uncluttered desk of a man known for his simple tastes, are a scant few personal items: a magnifying glass, ivory letter opener, Japanese lacquered box, a seashell.

In a little tray, directly in front of his straightback wicker chair, are Trotsky's shattered tortoiseshell eyeglasses, found on the floor after a fierce struggle with his killer. At the moment of the assault, Trotsky had a small revolver within reach, and an electric alarm button at the edge of the table to alert his guards. But Ramon Mercader had planned well. Trotsky put up a desperate fight, but the assassin had positioned himself so that Trotsky was unable to reach the gun or the little black button.



The overloaded bookshelves along the walls sag under countless titles in Russian, German, French and English. Trotsky was fluent in all these languages. Reflecting his many

faceted personality as political activist, military strategist and intellectual scholar, his collection of books spanned a broad spectrum of subjects. But, above all, Trotsky was the dedicated Marxist and the shelves hoard the complete works of Marx, Engels and Lenin. Surely his multi-volume set of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia gave him no satisfaction when he read the official Government-approved version of his role in Soviet history. He was judged an anti-party conspirator, who committed grave ideological errors, a counter-revolutionary against whom Lenin bitterly fought.

Trotsky obviously preferred his own version of his relationship with Lenin. Propped against the study wall is an enlarged photograph of himself, Lenin and Lev Kamenev, the three prime movers of the October Revolution. Faces fired with revolutionary zeal, the comrades stand close together, beaming smiles at each other.

**An ugly spray of bullet holes are dug deep into the plaster. Sinister scars of a dawn attack on the Trotskys ...**

A life-like marble bust of Trotsky perches above the antiquated Ediphone dictating machine in a corner of the room. His sharp, angular features, with the familiar goatee accentuating his projecting jaw, express the sculptor's image of Trotsky the militant, the obstinate rebel. (He had adopted the name Trotsky in his youth while escaping Siberian exile on a forged passport. Trotsky was the name of one of his prison warders, but he may have chosen the name from the German *trots*, meaning stubbornness, defiance, resistance.)

In the far corner of the room is a little blanket-covered cot in which the indefatigable worker, often yielding to the Mexican heat and his doctor's orders, would take a siesta.

The heat of Mexico took some getting used to for the Trotskys who grew up with the harshness of Mother Russia's winters. When Stalin ordered Trotsky deported from the Soviet Union in 1929, he and Natalia began a series of transient stays in countries that never offered a permanent home. From Turkey to France to Norway, they drifted until, finally, an offer of permanent residence came from Mexico. The celebrated Mexican artist, Diego Rivera, an admirer of Trotsky, interceded with President Lazaro Cardenas and asylum was granted. Rivera and his wife, Frida Kahlo, opened their home in Coyoacan to the Trotskys. After a time, Trotsky and Natalia moved into this house, about a kilometer away.

The master bedroom adjacent to the study is currently used as a storage room filled with tidily-arranged piles of aging newspapers and magazines. Hand-lettered signs on each stack indicate Trotsky's eclectic choices for his voracious reading of the events of the times. *Pravda*, *The New York Times*, *Socialist Call*, *Figaro*, *Militant*. On a table lies a black, cumbersome bulletproof vest.

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## Music Made For Two

By Somdeb Das Gupta

**M**R Lee was sitting near the passage which led to the well-appointed rooms of the guest house of the Bokaro Steel Project. He saw me arrive with my daughter and later told me that when a bearer had remarked that we were European, he had expressed his doubts. He was partly right.

Mr Lee was somewhat diminutive and the bearer's comment might well have applied to him because there was in him something vaguely European. It was perhaps the way he had of motioning his head and hand together. This reminded me of the man in a certain advertisement for Italian ice cream. It later turned out that he was of Portuguese origin.

But he was also partly British, so thought my daughter and I was inclined to agree. Complimented on his fluent English, he looked at my daughter with a warm smile. "Thank you Ma'am," Mr Lee was a Christian from Madhya Pradesh. "Cliff, they call me in the profession". He was in charge of the catering in the guest house and laid on marvellous meals for us. "No problem", was his inevitable response to any request. He must have faced a few at least in his life of sixty-eight years but chose to keep them to himself.

"There is something of the cowboy about Mr Lee, isn't there?" remarked my daughter. The vision of Mr Lee galloping across the Wild West firing his six-shooter from the hip appeared a little far-fetched in Bokaro Steel City but an eighteen-year-old girl has her reasons.

I had borrowed my daughter's Walkman and over the weekend revelled in the kind of music I have loved all my life. The tapes, too, were my daughter's — almost entirely medieval and Baroque, would you believe it! But then she told me in the strictest confidence that she did look back and not always in anger. Not being a particularly energetic person, I tuned into the Walkman while sitting in a chair or travelling by car along the broad avenues of the industrial township. And not on the road alone. Sitting near a small lake, the Walkman pouring into my ears the works of the great masters, specially for my listening pleasure, I realized that if the music is only meant for you, you must take off the headphones to communicate with someone sitting very close to you. Otherwise your voice is too loud, my daughter reprimanded me good-humouredly.

So we can't share even music anymore, I mused to myself. "Isn't that lovely", I wanted to remark every other minute but she hadn't heard the lovely bit, only muffled notes that escaped from the headphones and were wafted towards her by the gentle breeze. I was being selfish, there was no sharing here.

I looked at her almost with a sense of guilt as she sat looking at the placid surface of the lake and a butterfly flitting around the shrubbery. But but the Walkman was on her lap.

So I was wrong, terribly wrong after all.

It was rather late in the evening when Cliff (by then Mr Lee and I were on first name terms) dropped in. He had always wanted to write, he told me, but had never quite got round to it. Listening to him I remembered the butterfly flitting around the lakeside, keeping time to the music.

"I'm going to send you a piece within the next few days and this is what I would like to write..." I wasn't listening to Mr Lee nor even thinking. I was happily lost in the magnificent world of Henry Purcell.

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And on the wall above, the obvious reason for the protective garment. The grisly pattern of machinegun fire as it cut a wide swath across the room remains imprinted on the pockmarked walls.



This was the bedroom where Trotsky and Natalia awoke in the early hours of May 24, 1940 to a cunningly-conspired attack to kill them. A band of armed men had overcome the

Mexican policemen on sentry duty outside the house and tied them up. One of Trotsky's private guards had then opened, or been forced to open, the heavy iron entrance door, and the raiders charged in. Setting up machine-guns in crossfire positions, they targeted their fusillades on the bedroom.

Trotsky and Natalia, dazed and awaiting the worst, crouched on the floor behind the bed while the murderous hail of bullets ripped through the room. In the adjoining bedroom, Seva, Trotsky's 14-year-old grandson, instinctively dove under his bed as bullets splattered all around him. Twenty minutes later the attackers withdrew, but not before planting a powerful dy-

namite charge in the garden. Then a miracle! Although Trotsky, Natalia and Seva were grazed, no one in the household was seriously injured, and the bomb, incredibly, failed to go off.

The only very real casualty was the guard who had opened the entrance gate, a young New Yorker, Robert S. Harte. He was kidnapped by the assailants as they drove away in the two cars in Trotsky's garage. A month later Harte's body was found in the basement of a farmhouse.

When the plot was finally unraveled by the Mexican police, the principal organizers turned out to be celebrated 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 the Trotsky home. Siqueiros jumped bail, fled to Chile, and did not return until four years later, to claim immunity under the statute of limitations. He was never brought to trial. Today his classic works are exhibited in an art centre in Mexico City bearing his name. His "world's largest mural", on permanent display, is called, "The March of Humanity". David Siqueiros remains one of modern Mexico's most talented artists.

After the onslaught, Trotsky's "little fortress" of Coyoacan rein-

forced its defences. Walls were made higher, more watchtowers were built, steel shutters affixed to windows, armour plating to the doors. One poignant touch was added. Inside the entrance gate Trotsky placed a marble plaque: "In Memory of Robert Sheldon Harte, 1915-1940. Murdered by Stalin".

Even while the Casa Trotsky stronghold was being fortified, a new visitor stood by in the garden one day watching the construction work. He commented to Trotsky and a secretary that the reinforcements were a useless effort. They — the OGPU agents of Stalin — wouldn't try that tactic again, he said.

The visitor was "Frank Jacson" alias "Jacques Mornard", but whose real name was Ramon Mercader. He had become the companion of Sylvia Agelof, a young woman from Brooklyn, New York, who occasionally did secretarial work for Trotsky. Despite Sylvia's insistence that he never enter the house, "Jacson", bearing gifts and doing frequent favours, slowly, surely ingratiated himself with the household and became an accepted visitor. His role at first was probably that of OGPU informer and advance scout.

On August 20, 1940, Trotsky's copy of *Ultimas Noticias*, a Mexico City newspaper, lying on his desk, headlined critical developments of World War II, then raging in Europe. Beleaguered Britain was making urgent pleas for increased aid from the USA. Churchill wanted 50 over-age American destroyers for his hard-

pressed Navy. The Nazis were stepping up daylight bombing of London. In the USA, Congress was about to adopt a compulsory military service bill.



For Stalin it was an opportune time to kill Trotsky. The attention of the world was focussed on momentous events. If the Nazis were victorious against Britain, Stalin knew the might of the German Army would be turned on him. Trotsky, the exiled "traitor" and still potential rival, even as a remote threat, had to be eliminated.

Mercader got the message. The frequent favour-doer asked Trotsky to do him a favour. He had written a political article and wanted Trotsky to look it over. Trotsky invited him into his study, where Mercader rudely seated himself on the table while Trotsky, his head downward, pored over the manuscript. Mercader was carrying a raincoat concealing a pickaxe, a dagger and a pistol. But that day — August 17 — he was either performing a dress rehearsal or he somehow lost his nerve.

Three days later Mercader returned with the rewritten article. Again Trotsky and he went into the study. Again he seated himself at the table. This time Mercader delivered the fatal blow to Trotsky's skull with the pickaxe. Trotsky screamed, furiously grappled with his assassin, toppling over chairs and bookshelves.

Guards came running to batter and subdue Mercader. Trotsky was rushed to nearby Green Cross Hospital and operated on by five surgeons. He doggedly clung to life for 26 hours after the attack, then passed into history.

For five days his body lay in state at the Alcazar Mortuary, while hundreds of thousands of persons came to pay their last respects. In the streets a ballad about him was already being chanted. One verse narrated.

*Finally destiny conquered him  
In his own house.*

*When a cowardly assassin  
Snatched away his life.*

For a week his American lawyer sought permission from the U.S. State Department to have his funeral conducted in New York. The State Department refused, and after he was cremated, his ashes were also not allowed into the USA for burial.

Trotsky's ashes were laid to rest in the leafy garden on the site of the hutches where he had spent many relaxed hours watching over his beloved pet rabbits.

In May, 1960, Ramon Mercader was released from his Mexican prison, after completing a full 20-year sentence for Trotsky's murder. He flew to Cuba, where he changed planes, and flew on to Czechoslovakia. Mercader was reported to have arrived in Moscow shortly afterwards. Perhaps it was then that he picked up his Order of the Hero of the Soviet Union which he had received in absentia from Stalin for the competent service he had performed in the isolated, star-crossed house in Coyoacan.