

## Security and the Fourth International

# Sylvia Ageloff and the assassination of Leon Trotsky

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*This is part two. Part one was posted on February 6.*

*On August 20, 1940, Leon Trotsky was assassinated by Stalinist agent Ramón Mercader in the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán. Mercader's access to the great revolutionary was made possible through his relationship with Sylvia Ageloff, a member of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP). In the aftermath of the assassination, Ageloff presented herself as an innocent victim of Mercader's duplicity, a claim that was never challenged by the SWP.*

*This series of articles constitutes the first systematic investigation by the Trotskyist movement of Ageloff's role and continues the work of the International Committee of the Fourth International's Security and the Fourth International investigation. It will be published in four parts.*

## Summer 1938: Contradictions arise in Mornard's story as he funds Ageloff's stay

In his 2015 book, *Ramón Mercader: The Man of the Piolet*, Eduard Puigventós López wrote, "One day, Jac [Jacques Mornard] told Sylvia that he had to return suddenly to Belgium because his parents had an accident (although this contradicted the fact that he said his father had died in 1926)." [31]

In July 1938, precisely when Rudolf Klement disappeared in Paris, Mornard dropped contact with Ageloff on the pretense of having to travel to Brussels. Notably, Ageloff would later tell Mexican police: "She also went to Brussels on her own spontaneous decision, and even though she had sent a telegram to Jackson, with the proposal to meet him there, however she did not find him, all of this happening in August 1938." [32] The timing of Ageloff's disappearance from Paris corresponded to the period in which police continued their search for Klement's body and the Trotskyist movement investigated the GPU's role in his disappearance.

In Paris, Ageloff never met any of Mornard's friends, but she introduced him to her contacts in the Trotskyist movement. In Ageloff's deposition to Mexican police, she said he "had suspended relations" with his friends. The police report continued: "He only frequented the same group of friends as the declarant [Ageloff], her American and French comrades." [33]

Mornard began paying Ageloff for translation work. Marie Craipeau, the wife of then-influential French Trotskyist Yvan Craipeau, who was very close to Ageloff when she was in France, became suspicious. Craipeau later explained:

Surprisingly, he proposed that she translate articles about psychology from English to French for an agency, and I helped Sylvia typewrite her texts. We received a good salary for this. Later, one day when we were working, I stopped myself suddenly with my fingers on the keyboard, and I said to her, 'Listen, Sylvia, this does not make sense. There do not exist jobs like this that are so well paid.' So we sat there on the bed, lighting a cigarette like we used to, and we analyzed it. He was not interested in politics. ... He did not participate in our discussions... So? We thought that he was so crazy in love, that he did not want her to leave. That was our conclusion. [34]

Later in the summer, Mornard proposed that Ageloff take on another job, this time writing psychology articles for a company called "Argus Press." At this job, Ageloff received 3,000 francs per month directly from Mornard, not through the firm itself, and she was not allowed to know where the articles were published or read them in their final form. [35]

Author Gregorio Luri (*The Promised Sky: A Woman at the Service of Stalin*) explained: "There was not a psychologist in France who would be paid this amount, no matter how famous he was. But Sylvia suspected nothing." [36] Luri added: "If we analyze the facts coldly, that is to say, in a dispassionate manner, which, obviously, Sylvia was not, we quickly discover that the facts that Ramón was offering to her about himself were not coherent." [37]

## July-September 1938: Ageloff introduces Mornard to delegates in Europe attending upcoming founding conference of the Fourth International

Ageloff had traveled to Europe to aid the careful preparations of the international Trotskyist movement for its founding conference in Paris. The conference was initially scheduled for the time Ageloff arrived in France, but was later delayed until early September due to escalating security concerns.

In the run-up to the conference, the GPU campaign against the Trotskyist movement reached a fever pitch. In July, shortly after Ageloff arrived in Paris, the GPU assassinated Rudolf Klement, secretary of the Fourth International, whose body later washed up on the shores of the River Seine with its head and limbs chopped off. Shortly before

Klement's disappearance, the GPU had stolen a suitcase from Klement that contained documents relating to the plans for the founding conference.

It was known to French Trotskyists who were close to Klement that he was homosexual. They believed that a man with whom he had initiated an intimate relationship was, in fact, a GPU plant who helped set up the assassination. [38] Although this exposed the GPU's method of luring victims through personal relationships, Ageloff not only continued her relationship with the unknown Mornard, she was soon introducing him to Trotskyist leaders preparing to attend the founding conference of the Fourth International.

At his criminal trial in Mexico, Mercader testified that Ageloff introduced him to "Yvan," a reference to Yvan Craipeau, who was a delegate to the conference and with whom he was close enough to call by his first name. He continued:

By September 1938 I already knew Sylvia Ageloff was a Trotskyist and had relations with Trotskyists and was a member of the Trotskyist party, although on this last point I don't remember if Sylvia had said it specifically; and on occasion, sometimes just with Sylvia and sometimes with her friends or comrades we made numerous excursions, we went to Chateau Theirry, [sic] to Verdun, to Metz, to Touts, to Blois, to Chartres, to Dauville, etc. and among those comrades who were Trotskyist friends of Sylvia, I remember Manni, Waltha, Naty, Frank, Elizabeth and others. [39]

FBI reports from the weeks after Trotsky's murder show that confidential informants reported Mornard-Mercader "had been a guest for dinner at the home of Manuel Garrett," an American representative at the founding conference that September. [40] This was the "Manni" whom Mercader referenced at his trial in Mexico.

The "Naty" referenced by Mercader was American Trotskyist Nathan Gould, who also attended the founding conference as a representative of the Socialist Workers Party.

Ageloff was also connected to Mark Zborowski.

According to the former Soviet general and Russian historian Dmitri Volkogonov, whose access to the restricted GPU archives gave him a unique view of the activities of the Stalinist secret police in Europe at this time, Ageloff "was known to Zborowski through their work together in the secretariat." [41]

The 2010 French historical graphic non-fiction book *Les Amants de Sylvia (Sylvia's Lovers)*, by Gani Jakupi, bases itself largely on interviews with Marie Craipeau and asserts that Zborowski was present when Weil and Ageloff were first introduced to "Mornard." [42] In his 1956 confidential testimony before the US Senate Subcommittee on the Scope of Soviet Activity in the US, Zborowski acknowledged knowing Ageloff, though he evasively claimed memory loss and gave no further details. [43]

### **September 1938: Ageloff invites Mornard to the founding conference of the Fourth International**

When the conference opened in early September at a suburban Paris property owned by Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer, Ageloff was inside as a Russian translator, working with Zborowski, the delegate representing the Russian section of the opposition.

Historian Robert Jackson Alexander described the life-threatening

conditions under which the event took place and explained the security precautions taken for the founding conference:

The meeting which formally established the Fourth International took place at the height of the Munich crisis, at a moment when the threat of a new world war seemed imminent. The Trotskyists had to take extreme security measures to assure the safe fulfillment of their mission. They had to protect themselves not only from the possible interference by the French police, but, more importantly, from attempts of the Soviet GPU to disrupt the meeting and perhaps to kill some or all of those attending it. ...

Those who attended the meeting sought to be as circumspect as possible about where they were going and what they were going to do. Thus, they took a number of different routes from Paris to the Rosmer house. ... Because of security considerations it was necessary that the meeting last not more than a day. [44]

The leadership of the movement was so worried about exposing the delegates' travel and the hosts' security that "after the meeting adjourned it was announced that the Founding Conference of the Fourth International had been held 'somewhere in Switzerland.'" [45]

Despite the dangers confronting the delegates, Ageloff brought Mornard to the conference location, and Trotsky's future assassin sat outside in the courtyard for the duration, observing the attendees and chatting with them during breaks.

Luri wrote:

Sylvia participated in this meeting as a translator. Ramón accompanied her up to the Rosmer house, but having told her he did not have the slightest interest in political discussions that were taking place inside, he limited himself to wait for her in the garden and to talk during the breaks about irrelevant themes with the participants. He found it easy to relate with strangers. [46]

Puigventós similarly explained that Mornard "stayed in the garden, smoking and passing time. He met a number of the delegates, because they were friends of his girlfriend ..." [47]

The GPU had the founding conference "covered." The international delegates all returned to their home countries and the GPU promptly informed their local spies and assassins.

Ageloff's decision to bring Mornard to the conference was an irresponsible breach of security that should have resulted in her expulsion from the party. Tragically, the Socialist Workers Party, reflecting the political immaturity of the American workers' movement, allowed such incidents to pass without scrutiny. This political weakness was to have devastating consequences for the personal security of Leon Trotsky.

Having murdered many of Trotsky's most able allies in Western Europe and with Trotsky increasingly isolated in Mexico, the GPU's attention shifted across the Atlantic, where a network of agents in Mexico City and New York drew ever closer to Trotsky. The Socialist Workers Party, the organization now principally responsible for Trotsky's physical survival, was politically unprepared for this threat.

Several months after the founding conference, in early 1939, Ageloff returned to the United States. She had become a critical component of the GPU conspiracy to murder Trotsky.

## September 1939: Mornard changes his identity and travels illegally to New York

By the time Mornard arrived in New York on the steamer *Ile de France* on September 3, 1939, the next stage of the GPU campaign was well underway. He would no longer go by the name “Jacques Mornard” and would instead be known as “Frank Jacson.” He was using a false Canadian passport, he said, and claimed that he was fleeing conscription into the Belgian armed forces. It would later become known that the GPU had provided him with the passport of Tony Babich, a Canadian volunteer who died in the Spanish Civil War.

It was not easy to emigrate from Europe to the United States at this time. With Hitler’s invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, many thousands were attempting to leave Europe but could not enter the United States due to the Roosevelt administration’s serious restrictions on immigration. Just three months earlier, the US government had refused to allow 900 German Jewish refugees on the HMS St. Louis to disembark in the US.

After Trotsky’s assassination, the FBI was interested to learn that “Frank Jacson” was able to enter the United States at this time via “Executive Order.” An FBI report read: “He was permitted to enter the United States through what is known as ‘an Executive order,’ this apparently meaning that he was cleared on order from the headquarters of the Immigration Service at Washington DC.” [48] J. Edgar Hoover promptly forwarded this report to Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Berle and Rear Admiral Walter Anderson, head of Naval Intelligence. [49] There are no further public records of the meaning of Mornard’s “Executive Order,” or how he obtained this order while traveling on the false passport of a dead Canadian Communist Party member.

In New York, Ageloff introduced “Jacson” to her comrades in the SWP. One of these people was Lillian Pollak, who described Ageloff in a 2011 interview as “one of my closest friends.” Pollak, who was in the SWP and also visited Trotsky in Mexico, was immediately suspicious of Jacson-Mornard:

He came to visit her, and the day he arrived, a friend of mine and I walked up to where they [were staying], and he was sitting outside alone. I said to my friend, “Let’s walk by. ...” When we got past him, I said, “He had such a black look on his face, it frightened me.” This is the guy who just came from Europe to see his girlfriend? I started to sing this song from Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, it was very popular—“A strange romance, my friend, this is/A strange romance, with no kisses.” [50]

Pollak, who remained friends with Ageloff until the latter died in 1995, wrote an autobiographical memoir/novel in 2008 titled *The Sweetest Dream: Love, Lies, and Assassination*, which features a character named Sylvia Ageloff. She wrote that while the three of them were in New York in 1939, Ageloff told Pollak that Jacson-Mornard “did go with me to Rosmer’s home when we had the 4th International meeting, only he stayed outside and wouldn’t come in. I wanted him to meet Shachtman and Cannon and Etienne. ...” she said, implying a closer relationship with Zborowski and a desire to ingratiate Jacson-Mornard with the SWP leaders. [51]

Jacson-Mornard stayed in the US for a brief period and then went to Mexico City. In December 1939, Ageloff acquired a letter from a doctor saying she had a sinus problem that required a warmer climate. [52]

Historian Bertrand Patenaude believed this was a pretense: “As the Christmas break was drawing near, Sylvia simulated becoming sick to abandon her work as a social worker in New York City, confiding in a

doctor’s note that said she suffered a sinus pain and needed a warmer climate to recuperate.” [53] Puigventós similarly stated that “Sylvia explained this, years later, by insinuating that she had exaggerated her pain to have a good excuse to go visit Jac.” [54]

Her request for time off from work was granted and she traveled to Mexico in January. The GPU ring was closing in on Trotsky in Mexico. The year 1940 would be his last.

## January 1940: Ageloff and Jacson-Mornard reunite in Mexico City; he is introduced to the Trotsky household

Ageloff arrived in Mexico City, where a network of GPU agents had established itself.

Shortly after her arrival in Mexico, Ageloff began visiting the Trotsky compound, using the relationship her sisters had developed with Trotsky and his wife Natalia Sedova to integrate herself as a “friend” of the household.

In 1950, the chief of the secret service of the Mexico City police, General Leandro Sanchez Salazar, in collaboration with former POUM leader Julián Gorkin, wrote a book titled *Murder in Mexico*, detailing the assassination and aspects of the Mexican investigation. One chapter of the book, written by Gorkin, explained the GPU’s methods in introducing people like Ageloff and Jacson to the Trotsky household:

All the intuitions in the world do not suffice to discover the enemy’s agent when the latter is presented as a friend and comrade. If this were not so, there would be no spies or *agents-provocateurs*; or at any rate not so many of them. All police services use them in abundance, particularly in an epoch such as ours. But no one has ever equaled the GPU and the Gestapo in the diabolic art of preparing their agents and of introducing them into the most suitable places for the job which they are to carry out.

It is possible in this respect that the GPU is better qualified than the Gestapo. Its agents are not just mercenaries attracted by the bait of profit or pushed by the spirit of adventure, but fanatics always ready to sacrifice their lives and liberty for what they imagine to be their most rigid duty. Besides, they know that on the accomplishment of this “duty” depends their own existence. In this sense, they are spies constantly spied upon, terrorists on whom constantly weighs the threat of terror. For a long time schools have existed at Moscow and Leningrad for the preparation of GPU agents destined for service abroad. Trotsky well knew these schools, since he helped to create them. [55]

Ageloff’s “friendship” with the Trotsky family followed a GPU pattern. In France, in 1937, a 29-year-old Swiss woman named Renata Steiner befriended Lev Sedov and his wife, Jeanne Martin des Palliers. Steiner was a GPU agent, who followed and reported on not only Sedov, but also on Ignace Reiss. Steiner’s efforts to trace Reiss and his wife, Elisabeth Poretzky, helped the GPU locate and kill the GPU defector in September 1937 outside Lausanne, Switzerland. Poretzky recalled Steiner as follows:

[Steiner] was to get acquainted with the Sedovs, who were on holiday in the Antibes in Southern France. It was not much to do in exchange for a visa [to the Soviet Union] and it was not unpleasant. She took a room next to the Sedovs. She was given

money and clothes, and all she had to do was to report on Sedov's movements. [56]

And in New York City, another GPU agent—Sylvia Franklin (née Callen)—began working as James P. Cannon's secretary in 1938. She had become a personal friend of Cannon, and particularly his wife, Rose Karsner, whom Louis Budenz described as a "close friend" of the GPU agent. [57] For nine years, Sylvia Franklin passed all the correspondence of the Fourth International off of Cannon's desk to her GPU handlers in New York City.

In Ageloff's case, Luri wrote that in these first months of 1940, "Sylvia went various times to the Trotsky house in Coyoacán. In her first visit she said Jackson [sic] had entered the US with a false passport, but nobody expressed much interest about him and nobody asked for more details." [58]

Between January and mid-March, as Ageloff visited the compound, Jacson-Mornard made his first appearances when he dropped Ageloff off. Though he did not yet enter the Trotsky household, he chatted with Trotsky's guards and with the Mexican police stationed outside.

During these months, Ageloff and Jacson-Mornard developed a close relationship with Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer, the hosts of the founding conference of the Fourth International, who were now living with Trotsky in Coyoacán.

Puigventós explained, "Sylvia had a very close relationship with the Rosmers, principally with Marguerite, to whom she confided her worries and her doubts," while "Ramón fell into the Rosmers' good graces" as well. "They found themselves talking to each other at the door of Trotsky's house. ... He obtained their confidence quickly, they exchanged some words and they invited Jacson to eat or to go on walks. ... The good relations came, above all, on the part of Marguerite, who saw Ramón as a smart, considerate and generous boy, a likable type and very handsome. [59]

Ageloff's companion "began to ingratiate himself with members of the Trotsky household," running errands for the Rosmers and offering his Buick to help members of the household. [60]

But Jacson-Mornard had yet to enter the compound and had not yet made himself known to Trotsky. Ageloff extended her stay in Mexico City by informing her employer that she was still sick and needed additional time off work. Luri explained:

On February 26, Sylvia sent a telegraph to the New York Department of Social Welfare, explaining that although her permission for sickness expired March 1, she was obligated to delay her return due to an aggravation of her health state. She said that in the next few days she would send a medical certificate. Effective March 1, she officially asked for a prolongation of her sick period until April 1 and attached a certificate signed by the doctor A. Zollinger of Mexico City on the 24th of February. This doctor confirmed that her sinusitis was worsening and recommended that Sylvia stay in a warmer climate like that of Mexico for at least another month. It is at the very least curious that she appealed to doctor Zollinger, because her specialty was gynecology. She was the doctor who helped Frida Kahlo with her abortion during her third pregnancy. [61]

### **March 1940: The Ermita Building incident**

In March, there occurred an incident which—as Ageloff later claimed to Mexican police following her arrest—raised concerns in her own mind about the nature of Jacson-Mornard's activities.

Ageloff was aware that Jacson-Mornard maintained a business office, where he claimed to be conducting his import/export work. According to Sylvia, when she asked him where his office was located, he responded that his address was office number 820 in the Ermita Building in the neighborhood of Tacubaya.

Ageloff claimed that when her own subsequent effort to reach Jacson-Mornard by telephone failed, she asked her sister, Hilda, who was also in Mexico City at the time, to visit the Ermita Building. Hilda was the sister who had spent three and a half months in the Soviet Union in 1931.

Luri, reproducing Ageloff's account, explained:

Hilda made the surprising discovery that there was no room 820 at the Ermita building. When she told this to Sylvia, the two were trying to find an explanation for this unexpected fact. They put forward the hypothesis that Ramón was in reality collaborating secretly with the British government. ... Sylvia told all of this to Margaret Rosmer, including her fears that Ramón was a British agent. Margaret calmed her. [62]

Ageloff said that she asked Jacson-Mornard to explain why she had been given a false address. He replied that the room number was actually 620, not 820, and that he misspoke. According to information available to Trotsky's attorney and SWP National Committee member Albert Goldman, "Marguerite Rosmer went to the building and actually found an office boy who told her that it was Jacson's office." [63]

In the aftermath of the May 24 attempt on Trotsky's life, but well before the August attack, it became publicly known that Room 620 in the Ermita Building had been rented by the leader of the assassination squad, David Alfaro Siqueiros. [64]

This bizarre story, related by Ageloff herself to the police, is extremely incriminating. It establishes that Ageloff had developed concerns about Jacson-Mornard's credibility by March 1940, five months before the assassination. Moreover, she expressed concern that he might be a British agent! If she harbored these suspicions, why did Ageloff continue her relationship with the man? The concern that he might be an agent would certainly have compelled Ageloff to suspect that she was being used by Jacson-Mornard for some unknown and, in all likelihood, criminal purpose.

Moreover, why—if she suspected that he might be an agent—did she consider only the possibility that he was working for British intelligence? Why did the far more likely possibility that Jacson-Mornard could be an agent of the GPU not occur to her?

The assertion that Jacson-Mornard might be a British agent would have been consistent with the position of the Stalinist bureaucracy at the time. In March 1940, the "Hitler-Stalin" pact was in force and the Stalinists' global propaganda machine moved from portraying Trotsky as an agent of Nazi Germany to denouncing him as an agent of British imperialism. The Mexican Communist Party, in particular, was violently denouncing Trotsky and demanding his removal from the country as "an agent of the English intelligence services." [65]

Sylvia Ageloff's recollection—if there was any truth to it—also raises questions about Marguerite Rosmer's role. Why did she "calm" Ageloff, rather than strongly caution her against maintaining a relationship with a dubious individual? Why did Rosmer fail to inform Trotsky and Natalia Sedova of the concerns supposedly raised by Ageloff about her personal companion?

Moreover, the confirmation, widely reported in the Mexican press after

the May 24 assassination attempt, that the address in the Ermita Building given by Jacson-Mornard was the same as that used by Siqueiros could have left no doubt that Ageloff's lover was a Stalinist agent. After the assassination, Mexican Trotskyist Octavio Fernández confirmed that Ageloff never told Trotsky or his guards that Jacson-Mornard had an address at the Ermita building, even after Siqueiros' address there became known and his ties to the GPU became patently obvious. [66]

There is yet another question: Why did Ageloff tell this story to the Mexican police? Was she attempting to demonstrate, in support of her claim to innocence, that she had harbored concerns about Jacson, but that she had been reassured by the politically experienced Marguerite Rosmer? The answers to these questions are hidden in the complicated web of lies, half-truths and alibis that were constructed after the assassination.

### **March 1940: Did Ageloff attend a Stalinist rally with Mercader?**

Ageloff related a second incident to police after her arrest, explaining she attended a Stalinist meeting in downtown Mexico City that same month of March. Luri summarized the following from Ageloff's declaration to officials:

In the month of March, the Mexican communists organized a conference in the Theater of Bellas Artes with a marked anti-Trotskyist character. Sylvia wanted to go to listen. Although Ramón resisted, finally he agreed to accompany her. James Ford spoke, a black American who the CPUSA had presented as their vice-presidential candidate in 1932 and who had visited Spain during the civil war. He attacked Trotsky so firmly that Sylvia wanted to publicly respond to his arguments, but Ramón stopped her, grabbing her arm to impede her from speaking. [67]

If Ageloff did in fact attend the rally, this would have been extremely dangerous for a lone Trotskyist, especially one who had been visiting Trotsky's compound. The Stalinists repeatedly used violence against Trotskyists at public meetings.

Furthermore, if Ageloff attended a Stalinist event with Jacson-Mornard, it is likely the latter would have been recognized as Ramón Mercader by the numerous Catalan Stalinist exiles who were living in Mexico. The son of Caridad del Río, leading Catalan Stalinist, was easily identifiable by members of the wave of Communist immigrants who left Spain for Mexico after Franco's victory. President Cardenas granted blanket asylum to all refugees from Republican Spain.

After the attack, when photos of the assassin began appearing in the Mexican press, there was no doubt among the Spanish Stalinist exile community as to the assassin's true identity. Luri noted that "Rossend Cabré, who had been a comrade of Ramón's since their time in the Communist Party of Catalonia, identified him when he opened the newspapers. 'That is Ramón Mercader,' he said. The news circulated by word of mouth between the exiled Spaniards." [68]

Luri quoted another exiled Catalan Stalinist, Arturo García Igual, who said: "When the Mexican press speculated about the identity of whoever destroyed the head of Trotsky with a piolet, 'Jacson-Mornard,' we all knew it was Ramón Mercader of the PSUC [the Stalinist United Socialist Party of Catalonia]." [69]

If Ageloff did attend the meeting, perhaps in an act of indiscretion, did she feel she needed to create a backstory in case she had been seen by someone who would make this known to the investigators? Was the story

invented in order to attempt to furbish her credentials as a genuine Trotskyist, while at the same time casting Jacson-Mornard in a favorable light?

### **Late March, 1940: Ageloff brings Jacson-Mornard into the Trotsky house before leaving for New York**

Ageloff left Mexico City to return to New York at the end of March. Up until this point, Jacson had not entered the Trotsky house and had only dropped off Ageloff outside. But before Ageloff left, she brought Jacson-Mornard into the home—the first time he had come inside.

Luri wrote: "On March 26, Sylvia returned to New York, but first she went to say goodbye to Trotsky accompanied by Ramón, who in this way entered the interior of the house for the first time." [70]

Ageloff would later tell Mexican police that before she left for New York, she instructed Jacson-Mornard not to travel to the Trotsky household without her. [71]

If this were true, it would mean that her suspicions of this man were so serious that she considered him a threat to Trotsky's life. Why, then, would she have brought him into the Trotsky compound just as her suspicions were growing? If she was beginning to have doubts about his trustworthiness, why did she not communicate this to Trotsky or his guards? The incident over Jacson-Mornard's address at the Ermita building had taken place earlier that same month. Why did she then decide to bring a man whom she claimed to believe could be a British agent into Trotsky's home? Why give him a view of the layout from the inside? Was this information used to provide the May attackers with an understanding of the home's interior? Was Ageloff testing whether the guards would allow him entry?

With Ageloff departing for New York, Jacson-Mornard moved to the Shirley Court apartments, where he would remain until June. The Shirley Court apartments were located at 139 Calzada Manuel Villalongín, just north of Paseo de la Reforma in downtown Mexico City, a nine-block walk from 55 Calle Dinamarca, where the GPU had set up an operational headquarters in the city.

During this time, Jacson-Mornard met repeatedly with his mother and leading GPU official Leonid Eitingon, who had been tasked with managing the Mexican aspects of the assassination. Marguerite Rosmer also made repeated visits to the Shirley Court apartments during this time. [72]

### **The May 24, 1940 attack**

In the early morning hours of May 24, a group of gunmen led by the Stalinist painter David Alfaro Siqueiros entered Trotsky's compound. Once in the courtyard, the Stalinists opened fire but failed to hit Trotsky or his guards. They succeeded only in shooting Trotsky's young grandson, Sieva, in the foot.

The attackers also attempted to set fire to Trotsky's archive and papers. Many important documents had just been brought to Mexico City from Trotsky's European archives by Marguerite and Alfred Rosmer, who had arrived at the compound shortly before the attack.

According to Dmitri Volkogonov, the Rosmers "had been staying for several weeks, having brought with them a large number of books and letters, and part of Trotsky's archives. [73] Volkogonov references Soviet intelligence archive material, noting that the Rosmers arrived in Mexico

also to defend Mark Zborowski. Alfred Rosmer “‘vouched for his [Zborowski’s] reliability with his life’ and gave ‘the best account of his character,’” Volkogonov wrote, quoting intelligence documents. [74]

Although the May 24 attack failed, the assault revealed that the Stalinist attackers had an intimate knowledge of the layout of the compound and were able to pin down the defenders with suppressing fire from various critical points.

### **The role of Robert Sheldon Harte**

The assailants were allowed into the compound by Trotsky’s guard Robert Sheldon Harte. After the attack, Harte was taken away with the assailants, who subsequently murdered him.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, decrypted GPU cables—the “Venona papers”—would establish that Harte was, in fact, a GPU agent. Immediately after the May 24 attack, there was already ample evidence of Harte’s complicity, including the testimony of a policeman who saw Harte fleeing with the GPU on his own volition and a statement by Harte’s father revealing that his son had a poster of Stalin in his bedroom in New York.

Trotsky publicly stated that Harte’s death at the hands of the GPU “is a convincing argument” against his role as an agent. However, Trotsky did not exclude the possibility of Harte’s complicity in the attack. He wrote on June 25, 1940:

In reality, the penetration of an agent of Stalin into my household *could have indicated solely that the GPU had succeeded in deceiving my friends in New York, who recommended Bob Sheldon to me.* Every informed person knows that the GPU floods its agents into all the workers’ organizations and state institutions throughout the world. For this it spends annually tens of millions of dollars (emphasis added). [75]

Mexican police investigator Leandro Sanchez Salazar, who from the start believed that Harte was a GPU operative, identified the implications of recognizing Harte as a participant in the May 24 attack. He wrote: “If it were admitted that Sheldon was a spy, that would place the question of responsibility on the chief Trotskyists in New York, who had sent him to Mexico.” [76]

But the SWP uncritically placed its trust in Harte’s innocence and made no further effort to carefully review how individuals were authorized to enter the compound in Coyoacán and obtain access to Trotsky. A serious investigation into Harte’s background would have certainly revealed his ties to the Stalinist movement. The exposure of this calamitous breach of security might well have led the SWP to undertake a review of all individuals who were allowed to enter the villa on the Avenida Viena. It is hard to believe that such a review would not have raised questions about Frank Jacson-Jacques Mornard and Sylvia Ageloff.

### **After the May 24 attack: Jacson-Mornard’s new assignment**

In Moscow, the failure of the May 24 attack was viewed as a political disaster. When word reached Stalin, according to Volkogonov:

News of the failure of the assassination attempt sent Stalin into a rage. GPU head Lavrentiy Beria had to endure his angry words, while those associated with the operation could expect a fate similar to that of Shpigelglas, [77] who was under arrest. Everything would now be staked on the action of an individual operator who had long been installed in Mexico, and who was preparing to carry out his mission. [78]

Jacson-Mornard did not know of his assignment until after the failure of the May 24 attack. Volkogonov asserted:

At first the young Spaniard did not expect that he would have to bloody his own hands with the murder of Trotsky, but on 26 or 27 May 1940, a few days after the unsuccessful attempt on Trotsky’s life, Eitingon closeted himself with Mercader and made clear how things stood. It was impressed on him that he would be merely “carrying out a just sentence” issued in Moscow, and that this enormous honour would make him a hero forever. Mercader could not disobey. He had already seen in Spain how disobedience could end. When one of his Republican acquaintances was suspected in Catalonia of connections with the POUM, he disappeared without trace. Mercader had learned that this was the law of the revolution: the weak and unreliable are liquidated. [79]

The extent to which Eitingon explained the new assignment to Jacson-Mornard on these dates is not known. Two weeks later, however, Jacson-Mornard was to travel to New York to meet with his GPU handlers, and it is likely here that the true meaning of his new assignment was explained in more detail.

Another leading GPU official, Pavel Sudoplatov, who, alongside Eitingon, was placed in charge of the plot to kill Trotsky, confirmed that Mercader received his new assignment after May 24. Sudoplatov related a conversation he had with Mercader in Moscow in 1969, nine years after the latter’s release from a Mexican prison.

Mercader told Sudoplatov that he did not believe he would be involved in a plot to kill Trotsky until the days after the failed May 24 attack. Until then, Mercader was being groomed as a long-term GPU asset functioning within the Trotskyist movement. “Ramón had known, naturally, that he was a member of the team to combat Trotskyism in Mexico,” Sudoplatov wrote, “but he did not expect that he would be the assassin” until after May 24. [80]

### **May 28, 1940: Jacson-Mornard meets Trotsky for the first time**

According to Trotsky’s wife, Natalia Sedova, “Our first meeting with Sylvia Ageloff’s husband, ‘Jacson,’ took place on May 28, 9 o’clock in the morning.” [81]

In *The Prophet Outcast*, the third part of his triptych biography of Trotsky, the Polish historian Isaac Deutscher wrote that this initial meeting was arranged based on another highly useful pretext:

It was on 28 May, a few days after the raid, that the assassin came for the first time face to face with Trotsky. The encounter could not have been more casual. The Rosmers were about to leave Mexico and board a ship at Vera Cruz; and “Jacson” had

offered to take them there in his car, pretending that he had to go to Vera Cruz anyhow, on one of his regular business journeys. He came to fetch them early in the morning and was asked to wait in the courtyard until they were ready. As he entered, he ran into Trotsky, who was still at the hutches feeding the rabbits. [82]

On this date, Sedova also traveled with Jacson-Mornard to Vera Cruz to drop off the Rosmers. [83] Puigventós wrote that Sedova would later recall “that Jacson had to ask for directions for Veracruz on several occasions, which was strange given that he said he had to travel to this city frequently.” [84]

According to Luri, the Rosmers said they were traveling to Paris via New York City, though at this time Hitler’s armies were approaching Paris, which fell on June 14. [85] The Rosmers remained in New York and met with Ageloff and Jacson-Mornard when the latter traveled there in June to meet his GPU handlers. [86] Around this time, other Stalinist agents in Mexico were converging on New York, where they would soon meet with Jacson-Mornard. Caridad del Rio had arrived there on May 21, after traveling from Mexico City by way of Cuba. [87]

### **June 11, 1940: Jacson-Mornard meets Cannon and Dobbs**

In Mexico on June 11, Jacson-Mornard met leading members of the SWP, including James Cannon and Farrell Dobbs, who had traveled for the purpose of preparing Trotsky’s security in the wake of the May attack. As David North wrote in “Trotsky’s Last Year”:

In the course of their trip to Coyoacán, the SWP leaders inspected the villa and approved construction work that would fortify the compound against attack. Despite their sincere commitment to Trotsky’s defense, their efforts were undermined by a disturbing level of personal carelessness. Even though there remained unanswered questions about the role of Sheldon Harte in the May 24 assault, there is no indication that SWP leaders were taking a more cautious attitude toward their personal associations. Given the continuing campaign against Trotsky in the Stalinist press, it should have been clear to the SWP leaders that the political environment in Mexico City was dangerous, and that the capital was crawling with GPU agents intent on eliminating Trotsky.

Nevertheless, on the evening of June 11, James P. Cannon and Farrell Dobbs accepted an invitation to dinner at the Hotel Geneva, followed by drinks at another locale. The host of the two SWP leaders was Jacson-Mornard. This encounter was reported by Cannon in the course of a brief internal investigation conducted by the SWP leadership following the assassination. This information was, however, concealed from the rank and file party membership. [88]

Though Sylvia Ageloff was not in Mexico at the time of this meeting, it is likely that she had arranged to introduce Jacson-Mornard to Cannon and Dobbs. Lillian Pollak recalled that Ageloff told her in 1939 that she wanted to introduce him to Cannon and other SWP leaders. She may have already introduced them in the autumn of 1939 when Jacson-Mornard visited New York. On this trip, Ageloff did introduce him to a number of her SWP comrades there, and both Cannon and Dobbs were in the city at

this time.

If they hadn’t been introduced before 1940, it would have fit Ageloff’s pattern of behavior to have suggested that Cannon and Dobbs call on Jacson-Mornard when they arrived in Mexico. She was always the one introducing Jacson-Mornard to the leaders of the Fourth International. In Paris, Ageloff introduced Jacson-Mornard to the delegates of its founding conference. In Coyoacán, she brought him to the compound and introduced him to its residents. Cannon and Dobbs would not have gone out with a total stranger. He would have been presented as Sylvia’s companion. Once again, she was the link that integrated Trotsky’s assassin deeper and deeper into the Trotskyist movement.

Jacson-Mornard was about to leave for New York. But before flying there, he left his car at the Trotsky compound, which would later provide him with a pretense to come back to pick it up upon his return to Mexico City. [89]

### **June 12, 1940: Ageloff enables Jacson-Mornard to enter the US**

On June 12, the American Consulate in Mexico City granted Jacson-Mornard’s request for entry to the US. The next day, he was to fly to New York.

In June 1940, it remained extremely difficult for a foreigner to enter the United States. Hitler’s invasion of France was underway and there was an exodus of refugees from the European continent. The Roosevelt administration’s highly restrictive immigration standards were in force.

In order for Jacson-Mornard to travel to the United States, he had to present several references from US citizens who would agree to vouch for the veracity of his application. Even with these references, Jacson-Mornard did not obtain the right to stay in the US for an extended period of time. His entry was only for the purpose of passing through to another country, and he was obligated to present evidence that he had purchased tickets to leave the US. He was granted permission to stay only for the brief period required to catch his transfer flight out of the US. He was required to provide a US address where he would stay during his brief layover.

An August 24, 1940 FBI memorandum from J. Edgar Hoover titled “Re: Frank Jacson, Sylvia Ageloff, Espionage” shows that Jacson-Mornard’s references were Sylvia Ageloff and SWP members Henry Schultz and Evelyn Reed. [90] Reed later became the wife of longtime SWP leader George Novack, who helped GPU agent Mark Zborowski secure entry to the US during the Second World War.

When applying for the visa, Jacson-Mornard said he planned to stop in New York for only two days before traveling to Montreal, Canada. On the application, he stated that his permanent address was 1269 St. Denis St. in Montreal. [91] Jacson-Mornard had no intention of traveling to Montreal, and “1269 St. Denis St.” was a non-existent address.

A separate FBI report written by J. Edgar Hoover commented on Jacson-Mornard’s application for a travel permit:

He intended to remain in the United States for approximately two days where his address would be 50 Livingston Street, Brooklyn, New York. He furnished as reference the following:

Sylvia Ageloff, 50 Livingston Street  
Brooklyn, New York

... Upon applying for the above mentioned transit certificate, Jacson exhibited a letter from the Via Mexicana de Aviacion dated June 12, 1940, which indicated that Jacson had previously deposited money for a plane ticket to Montreal, Canada and a

reservation had been made for this trip. [92]

Also on August 24, Hoover sent a separate memorandum to B.E. Sackett, special agent in charge of the FBI's office in New York City. Hoover repeated the names and addresses of Ageloff, Evelyn Reed and Henry Schultz. Apparently believing an investigation of the individuals who had enabled Jacson-Mornard's travels would uncover GPU agents in the US, Hoover stated the following:

The Bureau desires that a very careful and thorough investigation be conducted concerning this matter in the area covered by your Field Office [i.e., in New York]. Every possible effort should be expended to ascertain all available information regarding Jackson's background, associates and activities. As you were previously advised, the Bureau desires that every precaution be exercised to avoid any publicity of any kind whatsoever concerning this investigation. [93]

Trotsky's assassination robbed the world working class of the greatest living representative of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

Hoover did not want to tip off the GPU agents he felt were within his reach. He demanded that the agency proceed quietly with its investigation.

*To be continued*

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Notes:

[Original sources not shown are available in Part one.]

[31] Ibid. at location 2,575.

[32] Barrón Cruz, p. 136.

[33] Puigventós at location 2,433.

[34] Alain Dugrand, *Trotsky: Mexico 1937–1940* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI de España Editores, 1992), p. 63.

[35] Barrón Cruz, p. 72.

[36] Luri, p. 223.

[37] Ibid., p. 220.

[38] David North interview with Jean van Heijenoort, September 10, 1975.

[39] Puigventós at location 2,467, referencing Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico. Tribunal Superior de la Justicia del D.F. Año 1940.Caja 3265. Folio 602993, p. 73.

[40] Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929–1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Duke University Press, 1991), p. 270.

[41] Dmitri Volkogonov, *Trotsky: The Eternal Revolutionary* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), p. 402.

[42] Gani Jakupi, *Les Amants de Sylvia* (Paris: Futuropolis, 2010) pp. 11–14.

[43] February 29, 1956 Executive Confidential Testimony, p. 268.

[44] Alexander, p. 268.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Luri, p. 223.

[47] Puigventós at location 2,462.

[48] FBI Report of Agent George Starr, dated September 4, 1940.

[49] Memoranda from J. Edgar Hoover dated September 17, 1940.

[50] See: "Class Struggle: Education Workers Newsletter," Issue No. 3, April-May 2012, p. 15–16. Available here.

[51] Lillian Pollak, *The Sweetest Dream: Love, Lies and Assassination*, (New York: iUniverse, 2008) p. 267. Though Pollak claimed the book was "fiction," in the above-referenced 2011 interview, she says, "incidents that I describe in the book actually happened."

[52] Luri, p. 237.

[53] Bertrand Patenaude, *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary* (New York: Harper, 2009), kindle edition, pp. 244–45.

[54] Puigventós at location 3,517.

[55] Leandro Sanchez Salazar and Julian Gorkin, *Murder in Mexico* (New York: Secker & Warbig, 1950) pp. 88–89.

[56] Elisabeth K. Poretsky, *Our Own People* (University of Michigan Press, 1969) p. 238.

[57] Louis Budenz, *Men Without Faces* (New York: Harper and Brothers), 1950, p. 126.

[58] Luri, p. 238.

[59] Puigventós at location 146.

[60] *How the GPU Murdered Trotsky* (London: New Park Publications, 1981) p. 103.

[61] Luri, p. 238.

[62] Ibid., p. 239.

[63] Albert Goldman, *The Assassination of Leon Trotsky: The Proofs of Stalin's Guilt* (New York: Pioneer Publishers, 1940), p. 16.

[64] Ibid.

[65] For example, see "How Stalin pressured Mexico for Trotsky's deportation," *El Pais*, September 15, 2016.

[66] Olivia Gall, *Trotsky en Mexico y la vida política en tiempos de Lázaro Cárdenas (1937–1940)* (Mexico DF: UNAM, 2012), pp. 354–55.

[67] Luri, p. 237.

[68] Ibid., p. 255.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Ibid., p. 240.

[71] Ibid.

[72] FBI report of August 27, 1940.

[73] Volkogonov, p. 451.

[74] Ibid., p. 452.

[75] Leon Trotsky, "GPU Tried to Cover Murder with Slander," *Socialist Appeal*, June 25, 1940.

[76] Sanchez Salazar, p. 96.

[77] Sergey Spigelglas led the GPU's efforts to assassinate leading European Trotskyists throughout the 1930s and was Zborowski's handler. He was arrested by the Stalinists in 1938 in large part due to the fact that Trotsky had not been killed. He was tortured and executed in 1941.

[78] Volkogonov, p. 454.

[79] Ibid., p. 459.

[80] Pavel Sudoplatov and Anatoli Sudoplatov, *Special Tasks: The Memoirs of an Unwanted Witness—A Soviet Spymaster* (Little, Brown & Co., 1994), pp. 77–78.

[81] "Natalia Trotsky Answers A Foul Slander," *Socialist Appeal*, October 26, 1940.

[82] Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929–1940* (Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 495.

[83] Puigventós at location 4,383.

[84] Ibid. at location 4,403.

[85] Luri, p. 244.

[86] According to Reinier Tosstorff, the Rosmers did not return to France in 1940 due to the war and stayed in the United States. See: Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) 1930–1937* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), p. 858.

[87] Luri, p. 241.

[88] David North, "Trotsky's Last year," World Socialist Web Site, August 29, 2020.

[89] Puigventós at location 4,527.

[90] August 24, 1940 FBI report "Re: Frank Jacson, Sylvia Ageloff, Espionage," from J. Edgar Hoover to B.E. Sackett.

[91] FBI Report of August 23, 1940 from Agent C.H. Carson to Clegg.

[92] FBI report of J. Edgar Hoover dated August 24, 1940.



[93] Ibid.



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