

THE MAN WHO MURDERED TROTSKY

by Bernard Wolfe

An authority rips the veil of mystery from the assassin, who for 18 years has lived in a Mexican jail in luxury—dreading the vengeance of his co-plotters

UNLISTED TELEPHONE NUMBERS are easy to obtain. But the one belonging to the man who calls himself Jacques Mornard van den Dreschd, of Mexico City, has one unusual feature. The owner answers his phone at a Federal penitentiary, where he is serving out his 20-year-and-a-day sentence. Since his arrest he has been in jail for more than 18 years.

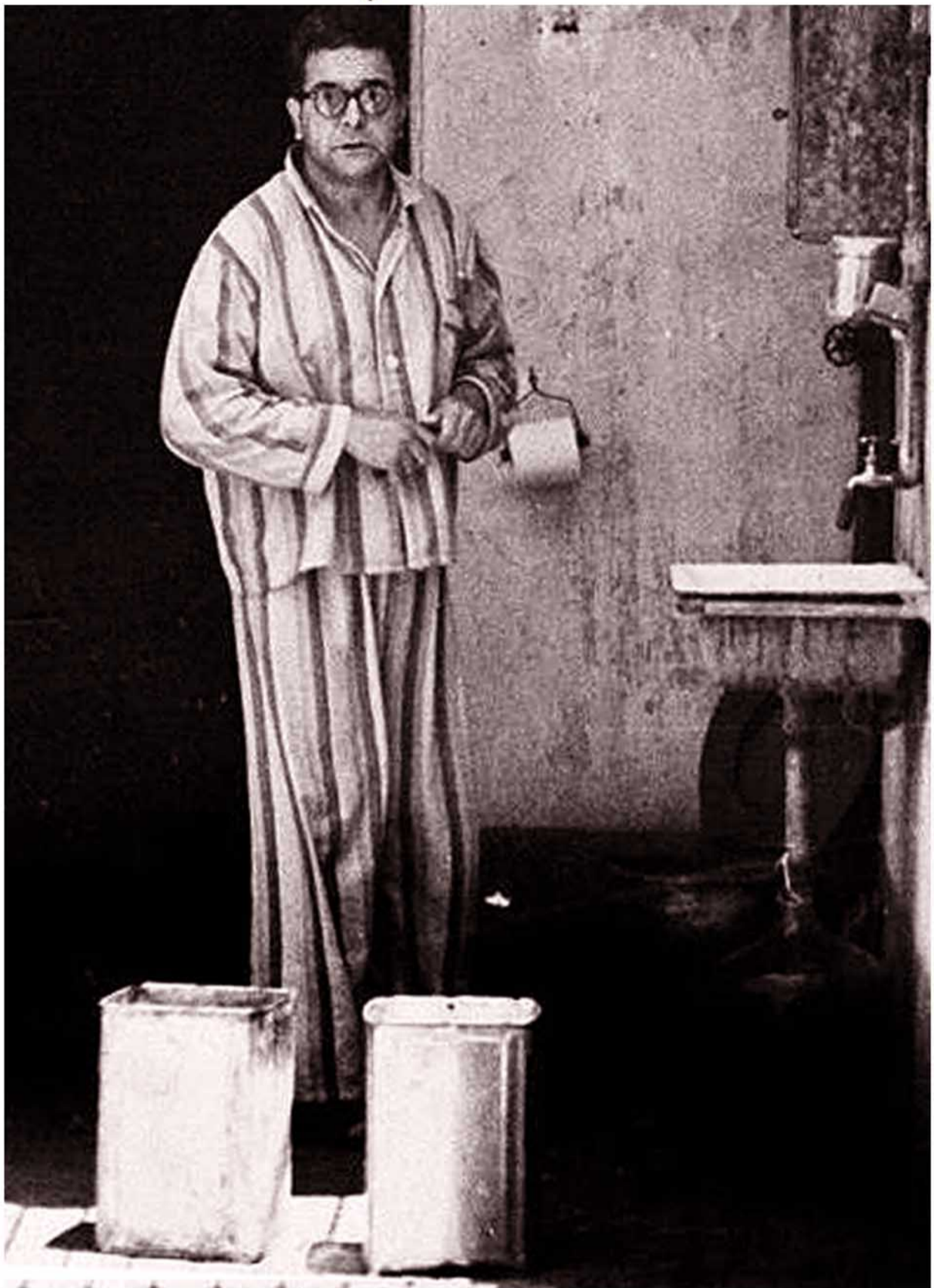
A private wire connecting him with the outside is not the only comfort this prisoner enjoys. Mornard, as he prefers to be called, lives, not in an ordinary cell, but in a two-room suite which boasts bookcases, a radio, a typewriter and a variety of electronic equipment with which he likes to experiment. Since his refined taste rebels at prison fare, he has his meals catered by an expensive restaurant. The guards protect him against intruders, but he is allowed unlimited visitors, including "romantic" visits with women—although under Mexican law, a prisoner is allowed visits with his legal wife only.

The man enjoying these privileges is in Lecumberri Penitentiary, Mexico, for one of the most cold-blooded murders of modern times.

Mornard is the conspirator who, on the afternoon of August 20, 1940, drove to the Mexico City suburb of Coyoacán, entered a heavily-



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In silken pajamas, the ice-ax slayer of Leon Trotsky strolls on his cell patio. Below: Shortly before his murder, Trotsky charges Stalin with ordering his death.



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possible, to attack the leaders. . . . I came away from the discussion as though the house were falling on top of me." Disillusioned, desperate in the knowledge that he had given his life over to a vicious "enemy of the working class," Mornard said he had decided he must destroy Trotsky.

But large holes appeared in the murderer's story.

He was, he said, Jacques Mornard van den Dreschd, of a family long prominent in the Belgian diplomatic corps. The Belgian consul in Mexico City could find no trace of such a family in his country's Foreign Office archives. Mornard further insisted that he had lived at certain addresses in Brussels and gone to certain schools at Dixmude. These addresses and these schools did not exist. They never had.

Still another part of Mornard's story did not ring true: he accused Trotsky of inciting acts of terrorism, but Trotsky himself had, over the years, written voluminously against terrorism as a political weapon. Terrorism, however, was the one thing Stalin wished to prove against his archenemy. If Stalin could show that Trotsky had been plotting wholesale murders, nobody could be much concerned if and when *he* were murdered. Joseph Stalin would be the one to benefit if Mornard's story were made to stick. Thus Mornard could only be an agent of Stalin's secret police.

But knowing this was one thing. Proving it was another.

Mornard's trial was postponed for well over two years, until February, 1943. The legal maneuvering required the pulling of many strings. According to the report later published by former Secret Police Chief Leandro A. Sanchez Salazar (in collaboration with Spanish refugee Julian Gorkin), an agent had been dispatched from Moscow to Havana in December of 1941. Then, he pre-



sumably sent a woman agent to Mexico City with \$20,000 to be used in Mornard's defense.

It was Julian Gorkin's estimate that Trotsky's assassination, the subsequent legal maneuvers, the plans for an escape and the maintenance of Russian agents in Mexico cost somewhere in the neighborhood of \$600,000. The presumption was that only an adjunct of the Soviet state could or would hand out such sums for such purposes.

In 1943, a defense committee was charged with the preparation of Mornard's case for trial. Ignoring his original confession, it worked up a new version of the murder based on the argument of "legitimate defense." In this reconstruction of the crime, an argument had started, the "hot-tempered" Trotsky had brandished a revolver, and Mornard had simply struck out to defend himself.

But the evidences of premeditation were overwhelming. Mornard did not just "happen" to be carrying a raincoat on that bright, sunny day. He did not just "happen" to have a mountaineer's ice ax concealed in his coat, along with a revolver and a dagger as alternate weapons. The special loop that held the ax in place did not just "happen" to be there; somebody had deliberately sewed it to the coat's lining.

Mornard was found guilty of premeditated murder and of illegally bearing weapons, and was given a 20-year-and-a-day sentence. (There is no capital punishment in Mexico.)

But the real identity of the murderer remained a mystery. In their first meetings, General Salazar found his prisoner to be "an actor, a consummate actor . . . rather nervous, but with adroit self-control. . . . He had great agility of mind and . . . quite a wide culture. He was very fond of reading and had the appearance of an intellectual. He liked to eat well, and I noticed that he had a



sensual nature. Surely if corruption had been involved, here was a man open to it. He was rather violent, sometimes cynical and even impertinent. He was often sarcastic. . . . He smoked to excess, greedily, one cigarette after the other. On the whole he gave the impression of an adventurer, of a man who had absolutely nothing to lose.”

General Salazar was a shrewd judge of character. Months after Mornard’s trial and conviction, further investigation turned up conclusive evidence that the cosmopolitan Belgian businessman was in reality a native of Barcelona, by name Ramón Mercader del Río. Willingly or not, he had inherited from his mother, Caridad Mercader del Río, an ease in conspiratorial living and a talent for false face.

For more than a decade before the Spanish civil war, in Barcelona, Madrid, Paris, Brussels and other capitals of Western Europe, the murderer’s mother had carried out missions of the most confidential and delicate sort for the Russian secret police. She was so important a personage to them that in the ’40s, when she was living in Moscow, she was in direct contact with the Secret Police Chief, Lavrenti Beria.

How did her son become a puppet of Joseph Stalin?

Actually, Ramón had never had much interest in politics; at Caridad’s urging he had joined the Loyalist militias during the Spanish civil war, but when he received a minor wound at the Catalan front, he immediately returned home to his mother. What interested the secret police most particularly was that, even as an adult, Ramón remained unnaturally attached to his mother, stayed close by her side, could hardly take his eyes from her.

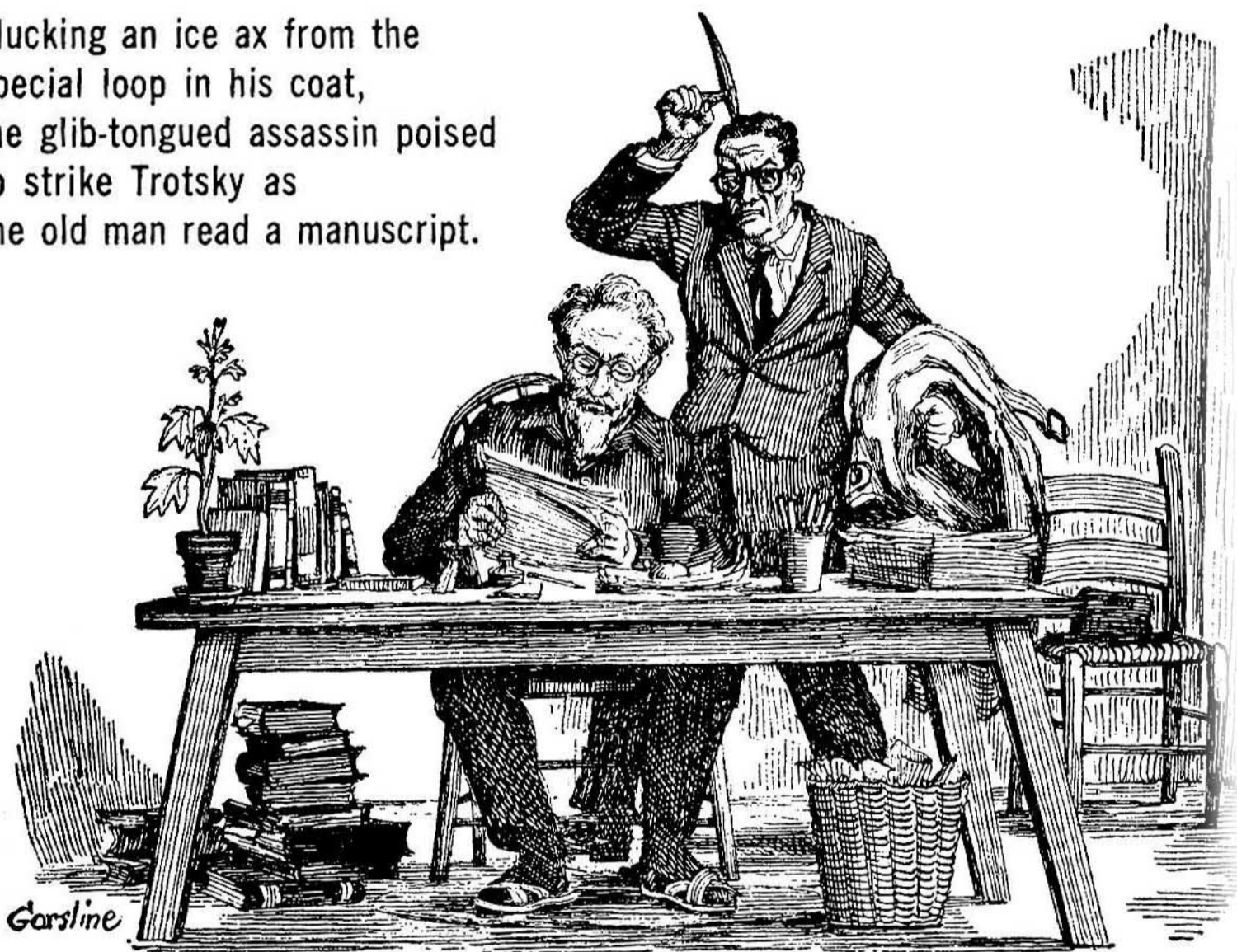
The man picked for the Coyoacán assassination would have to be more

than personable, cosmopolitan, able to play a role, good at languages. He would also have to be ready to carry out the job even if it added up to a suicide mission.

Ramón was good-looking and presentable. He knew languages. Most important, he was pathologically dependent on his mother. The secret police had control over Caridad's life. They could manipulate the son—by manipulating the mother.

Nobody knows precisely what means were used to terrorize Ramón through the person of Caridad. But it is a historical fact that the '30s

Plucking an ice ax from the special loop in his coat, the glib-tongued assassin poised to strike Trotsky as the old man read a manuscript.



were a time of widespread purges in the Communist ranks. Caridad might have been called to Moscow and confronted with charges of some trumped-up sort. At this point, her son might have been informed of her troubles—and told that if he took on a tricky assignment for the secret police, the charges against his mother would be suspended or even dropped.

At first, Ramón must have been told that he would only have to maneuver himself into a position close to Trotsky so that he might report on the goings on in the exile's fortress-house. To do this, Mornard culti-



vated a close relationship with a New York girl who shared Trotsky's politics and often traveled abroad to visit him. Mornard's mission was to meet this girl, posing as a Trotsky sympathizer, and make her his mistress. Not only did he carry out the politically motivated seduction, he lived with the girl for over two years before the time came to open the vital door.

Says a Mexican police officer who came to know Mornard well: "A man who did not take some secret pleasure in abasing and humiliating women, covering them with mud, could hardly have carried out this kind of mission. It meant that every day of his life, every hour of the day or night, for over two years, he had to live the most fantastic lie—and make it convincing."

Finally, no doubt after Caridad had been threatened in a still more ominous way, Ramón was told he would have to kill. He struck with the ice ax—for his mother.

Now, nearly 19 years after the murder, Mornard has run a little to fat; his shoulders have a slight sag; but there is still nervous intelligence in his too-quick eyes. He is now in his 50s. But confinement has not been hard on the man. He has "connubial" visits from women more often than most prisoners, always from the same girl. "They say this girl is the sister of one of Mornard's prison mates," a Mexican penologist says. "The girl lives in one of the worst slums and there is no sign that she gets a penny from him, though by her standards he is enormously rich. He simply has no interest in her apart from her 'use value' once or twice a week."

As often happens in such men, Mornard's cruel streak is overlaid with considerable surface charm. Twenty years ago he was rather dashing, very much the continental, a good dancer, a devotee of moun-



tain climbing and other vigorous sports. This racier side has not been entirely frustrated by prison. A California woman who lived for some time in Mexico City, on close terms with people in the “international set,” reports:

“Life for the café crowd down there was a parade of parties. The most exclusive parties were weekend affairs arranged by a certain man who’d been a figure in New York night club life and then had to get out of the States to beat a tax rap. This man threw these 48-hour parties for one particular guest—Jacques Mornard. I don’t know how he got out of jail but he always showed up, dressed in expensive clothes and surrounded by bodyguards. We all knew who he was but nobody particularly minded; it made him all the more fascinating, gave him a certain shivery glamor. . . .”

If Mornard has at times been free to come and go, why hasn’t he escaped? It appears that he has been that rare and remarkable thing, a voluntary prisoner, perhaps from the very beginning. Some observers believe that an elaborate plan for his escape in 1942 went wrong only because of a tip that reached the police from—Mornard.

He knew that, having accomplished his mission, he could only be a nuisance to his friends; he could name the real inspirers and organizers of Trotsky’s assassination. So long as he stayed in jail, he could blackmail his associates on the outside into taking good care of him. If he escaped and put himself in their hands—they might kill him.

When Mornard became eligible for parole in August, 1953, his reaction was puzzling. He did take the necessary steps to keep open what in Mexican law is called the *emparo*, the right to petition for parole; but for a long time the petition was not forthcoming. Well over a year later,



however, the Mexican parole officials did receive Mornard's formal application. He had had time to mull over the crucial events that had taken place in Russia.

Joseph Stalin had died and the Soviet bureaucracy had been severely shaken up; Lavrenti Beria, dismissed from his post in 1953, had been executed. The day of unchecked terror was allegedly over.

Without strong off-the-record guarantees of his safety, Mornard would hardly have made his belated move for parole. Word must have come to him from the secret police that he need have no more qualms about leaving prison.

But the parole board turned his petition down. According to Mexican penal law, a prisoner can be granted parole only if he has shown penitence for his crime, and there was only one way Mornard could convincingly do that—by confessing that he is Ramón Mercader del Río. Ironically, admitting his identity was the one thing Mornard could not do. That would infuriate the people who would be waiting for him when he was released.

No one can say what Mornard-Mercader plans for himself when he leaves prison. Wherever he goes, he will spend sleepless nights. The secret police know very well that if and when he should decide to reveal his true connections he could not stop with his mother's name. He would be obliged to go on and name all the others he knew, all his mother's old associates.

Many of these old-timers, at least those who survived the Stalin and post-Stalin purges, must still be doing undercover work for the Soviets in various parts of the world.

Wherever the murderer decides to settle when the Lecumberri prison gates swing open for him next year, he will never be sure that these old friends will not one day come to si-



lence him. He knows better than anyone what a long and lethal reach the Soviet secret police has, how it can stretch across continents and oceans, into sealed fortresses, with an ice ax in its hand.

Bernard Wolfe is the author of **The Great Prince Died**, a novel based on Trotsky's life. The book has been likened to **Dr. Zhivago** in its political significance.

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