

Freed Cold War Spy

Morton Sobell

STANDING before the bar of justice in Federal Court here on Thursday, April 5, 1961, a mild-looking man heard Judge Irving R. Kaufman tell him: "I do not for a moment doubt that you were engaged in espionage activities; however, the evidence in the case did not point to any activity on your part in connection with the atom bomb project." The subject and object of these words was Morton Sobell, and seconds later he was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Then the judge said, "While it might be gratuitous on my part, I also not, at this point my recommendation against parole for this defendant."

Then and there the stage was set for one of the most massive, most protracted efforts ever made to free a prisoner.

Yesterday, nearly 18 years later, Morton Sobell was given his release, not because of the appeals but because he had served his sentence, with time off for good behavior.

At the time of his trial on charges of conspiracy to commit espionage, Sobell was a relatively minor figure, overshadowed by two of his co-defendants, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were found guilty, denounced by the judge for "putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb," and sentenced to die.

Sympathizers Work Hard

After the Rosenbergs were put to death in the electric chair at Sing Sing prison in June, 1954, the efforts that had been directed in their behalf by sympathizers were focused on the innocuous looking man who had stood with them before the bar of justice.

There were many who rallied to Sobell's cause—writers, academicians and clergymen—convinced that he should not have been tried with the Rosenbergs, that the evidence against him was flimsy and that the verdict and sentence were excesses generated by Cold War hysteria.

A dark-haired, bespectacled man who struck most observers as being almost pudgy, Morton Sobell broke into the headlines in August, 1950, when he was arrested under a sealed warrant on espionage charges in Laredo, Tex. Picked up by Federal Bureau of Investigation agents as he was deported from Mexico, where he had flown two months earlier, Sobell was held under a \$100,000 bond.

With him was his wife, Helen, who was to act as spearhead of the unflinching drive to regain him his freedom. Joining her in the effort were Sobell's mother, Rose, and the two Sobell children, a daughter, Sydney, now married and a teacher, and a son, Mark, a computer programmer.

When their father was sentenced to prison, Sydney was 11 years old. Mark was 18 months.

Sobell, whose father, Louis, was a Bronx pharmacist, was born in New



United Press International

More than 18 years in continuous custody.

York on April 11, 1917. At Stuyvesant High School he met Max Elitcher, who later was to be the chief Government witness against him at the conspiracy trial. Their friendship continued through City College, where they both knew Julius Rosenberg, a fellow student.

Sobell was graduated from City College in 1938 and in 1942 received a master's degree in electrical engineering from the University of Michigan.

A Navy Worker in War

Between 1939 and 1941, he worked in Washington as an engineer in the Navy's Bureau of Ordnance, and during the war continued to work for the Navy, in the aircraft and marine engineering division of the General Electric plant in Schenectady.

Later, he lived with his family in Flushing, Queens, and worked at the Reeves Instrument Corporation plant in Manhattan on secret work on Government contracts.

Until yesterday, Sobell had been in custody continuously since Aug. 18, 1950. The first five and a half years of his prison sentence were spent at Alcatraz. Early in 1956, he was transferred to the Federal Penitentiary in Atlanta. In 1961, he underwent a prison operation for removal of his gall bladder, and in 1963 was transferred to the Springfield, Mo., prison medical center.

At the time, Mrs. Sobell reported that his weight had fallen from 170 to 128 pounds as he continued to suffer from stomach pains. In January, 1965, he went to the Lewisburg, Pa., penitentiary.

There, Mrs. Sobell said, he was studying to be a dental technician.

"You have a choice in Lewisburg of working or studying," she said. "The only thing is that, if you study, you don't get paid. But the top rate at Lewisburg is only 35 cents an hour anyway."

A few years ago, Mrs. Sobell, a petite, dark-haired former physicist, estimated the cost of the fight to exonerate her husband at about \$1-million.

For Morton Sobell yesterday, there was no exoneration. But there was, at least, freedom.