

Books of The Times

'Atom Spy' In From the Cold

By RICHARD R. LINGEMAN

ON DOING TIME. By Morton Sobell. 525 pages. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. \$10.95.

In all the recent revival of interest in the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg case, including a television documentary, a book by their two sons, legal actions aimed at reopening the case, campus demonstrations preventing the trial judge from speaking, Morton Sobell has been the forgotten man. Although his memory has been kept green by the left, most people don't remember that Mr. Sobell was convicted of conspiring with the Rosenbergs to commit espionage against the United States in what the newspapers of the day liked to call "the atom-bomb spy case." Because he was not linked directly to the nuclear-secrets aspect of the conspiracy, Mr. Sobell was given a 30-year sentence, rather than the electric chair.

Mr. Sobell was released in 1969 after having served his full sentence, minus "good time." Judge Irving Kaufman, who presided over the trial, had recommended against parole in his sentencing speech and indeed felt a stern compulsion to avoid doing the "popular thing" in handing out the 30-year maximum.

Since in 1951, when the trial took place, electrocution was more likely the "popular thing," Judge Kaufman's remarks have a slightly Alice in Wonderland ring when read today, but no matter. After several byways in the Federal prison system, Mr. Sobell was dispatched straightaway to Alcatraz. Alcatraz, now defunct, was a Federal prison for hard-core, unredeemable offenders—the end of the line in the system. Mr. Sobell thinks that Alcatraz was a threat held over him by the Government in order to force him to confess; when he wouldn't cooperate they sent him there anyhow and forgot about him.

An Unheroic Struggle

For Morton Sobell, Alcatraz marked the starting-point of 18 years of unheroic struggle to retain his sanity and humanity, and the best part of "On Doing Time" is concerned with that struggle. Morton Sobell is no George Jackson. In fact he seems rather dull and perdurably middle-class—a C.C.N.Y. Jewish intellectual of the thirties who loved his wife and found solace doing engineering problems. His prose galumphs along in stout, sensible shoes.

He survived mainly by doing his time, becoming a savvy, low-profile longtimer who did not fight the system. The one prison rebellion he observed, at Alcatraz, he did not join in except passively because of a middle-class, rather than Gandhian, abhorrence of violence. His main sustenance was his determination early on that he would maintain a symbolic life outside, as well as surviving inside. He would remain the husband of Helen Sobell and father to their two children. Bringing this off was roughly akin to a Chinese acrobat riding a bicycle while balancing a stick with a whirling dish atop it on his chin. He speaks of it as a "double life," only made possible by his wife's unswerving devotion and subject to emotional roller-

coaster rides from depression to elation and back again.

In 18 years much happens, of course. His wife was sexually unfaithful to him not long after he went in, and the knowledge of this briefly broke his spirit. They had maintained a sexual life at a distance involving passionate letters and autoerotic fantasies fueled by the sheer blouses she wore (and sometimes unbuttoned) during visits. Yet this crisis passed and eventually he was encouraging her to enter other affairs.

This love and Mr. Sobell's quiet endurance in prison make by far the most compelling part of the story. Less satisfying is his account of the events leading up to the imprisonment. He speaks straightforwardly, and rather leadenly, of his career in the party, which seems—unless, of course, the prosecution in the Rosenberg case can be unreservedly believed—to have been a rather dull one. A kind of old-left mildew seems to have gotten to the story. He joined the party, he says, because there was no social justice under capitalism, and, although he admits that his critical but full support of the Soviet Union was ultimately a matter of faith, his allegiance to the god that failed otherwise seems rather intellectual and impersonal—rather like those engineering problems he solved.

Bending and Unbending Friends

These were loveless comrades he sketchily describes, many worried about losing their civil-service jobs in Washington. The parade of former cellmates who testified against him (under Government pressure, he alleges) further suggests that Communism may have summoned up in them latent power-drives rather than any altruism. Only the Rosenbergs emerge as heroes in this narrative—they because they did not bend, even with the electric chair facing them.

Mr. Sobell's account of the trial also seems—unavoidably—rather old-left parochial now, for all the valid questions he raises about the Government's prosecution of the case under then United States Attorney Irving H. Saypol, as well as Judge Kaufman's conduct of the trial and the shaky, if not ersatz, nature of some of the evidence against him. The disputed points of evidence—such as a dubious "sketch" of the atomic bomb allegedly passed by David Greenglass—have already been worked over pretty thoroughly. Not that Mr. Sobell emerges with lamblike purity; his account of his flight to Mexico, for example, can be read as the act of a fugitive, rather than the panic of a man unhinged by anti-radical repression in the States. I find it a difficult leap of faith to believe that the Government's entire case was concocted.

Still, one hears much from members of the Government team such as Roy Cohn about all the damning evidence the Government withheld in the case; now, it seems, would be a good time to produce that evidence. But it is not the legal points Mr. Sobell scores that gain him respect; it is the man who emerges in the compelling description of his 18 years of survival in prison.