

Out of Prison a Month, Segretti Tries to Pick Up

By JOHN M. CREWDSON
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LOS ANGELES, April 20—The tall, tanned lawyer suddenly stopped in midstride, peered through the dim light of Perino's Restaurant Bar at a tiny form huddled over a corner table, and slowly walked over to extend his hand to the smaller man.

"Uh, glad it's over for you," said Herbert W. Kalmbach, the tallest convicted Watergate figure, to Donald L. Segretti, the shortest. "I—um—just wanted to stop and wish you the best. Awfully rough for you."

Then the Newport Beach lawyer, who two years ago this month was plying Mr. Segretti with secret Republican campaign funds to finance the White House political sabotage ring he directed, flashed a sheepish grin, withdrew his palm and quickly moved off into the gloom.

That is the way it has been going for Mr. Segretti, a diminutive, 32-year-old lawyer who last month became the first to put Watergate behind him when he was released from Federal prison. A few embarrassed encounters with former aides to President Nixon, averted glances from long-time friends and no offers of work.

On March 25, after serving four months and three weeks of a six-month sentence, Mr. Segretti walked out of the tree-shrouded, minimum security Federal Correctional Institution at Lompoc, Calif., ending an ordeal of imprisonment that still awaits the handful of others, including Mr. Kalmbach, who have pleaded guilty to Watergate-related charges.

Mr. Segretti returned home last week to search for the pieces of the free-spending, sports car-driving bachelor life that was shattered on the morning of Oct. 10, 1972.

That was the day the first published accounts appeared naming him as one of 50 "undercover Nixon operatives" employed by the White House and the Committee for the Re-election of the President to spy on and disrupt the primary campaigns of the major Democratic Presidential candidates.

Not So Ambitious

The "Segretti operation"—his name, which means "secrets" in Italian, has now become synonymous with campaign "dirty tricks"—eventually proved to be far less ambitious or consequential than portrayed in early news accounts.

Mr. Segretti enjoyed the trappings of the assignment, the cross-country airplane flights, the clandestine meetings with his stable agents who knew him only as "Don Simmons," the low-slung Mercedes-Benz that he financed with part of the \$45,000 he received from

Mr. Kalmbach.

He had not bargained, however, for the visits from stern-faced agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation or the waves of newsmen who were attracted to his expensive bachelor apartment in the affluent singles enclave of Marina Del Rey. All the young lawyer had wanted was the "fun" promised by Mr. Chapin, whom he had known at the University of Southern California 10 years before, and the Government job his friend had hinted would be waiting in Washington after the election.

'Something to Do'

"At that point in time in my life and at that point in American history," Mr. Segretti reflected, "a lot of people would have gotten involved as I did."

He paused for a moment, then added, "It was something to do. I didn't have anything else to do."

Although he is troubled now by some of the Watergate revelations, Mr. Segretti explained that when he first went to work for Mr. Chapin and Gordon Strachan, an aide to H.R. Haldeman, "I really believed in Richard Nixon. I believe in the election of Richard Nixon."

Mr. Segretti is convinced that most of what he did in the service of the President was politically harmless, and that none of it altered the outcome of the Democratic primary elections or, as was earlier thought, aided the selection of Senator George McGovern as the party's Presidential nominee over Senators Edmund S. Muskie or Hubert H. Humphrey.

Some of his "pranks," he thinks, were even humorous. He still chuckles over the memory of viewing from across the street the confusion created by the arrival of a stream of unordered food, unemployed entertainers and uninvited guests at a Washington fund-raising banquet for Mr. Muskie on a spring night in 1972.

Mr. Segretti expresses regret, however, over the incident that served as a basis for the misdemeanor charges to which he pleaded guilty—the mailing, during the 1972 Florida primary, of a letter on stolen Muskie stationery that falsely accused Senators Humphrey and Henry M. Jackson of sexual misconduct.

Although Mr. Segretti characterizes himself as an "apolitical" person concerned with issues rather than parties, he admits to "a citizens's feeling of outrage" over Watergate, of which he does not really feel himself a part.

"What really bothers me," he says with a shake of the head, "is why is 18½ minutes of

that tape just not there?"

Should President Nixon, whom he once believed he was helping to re-elect, now resign? "I think it would be wrong for him to resign."

Should he be impeached? "Maybe."

His passage through the criminal justice system, Mr. Segretti says, has given him an insight few lawyers ever gain into the problems of the indicted and convicted.

"Our system is out of the reach of the middle-class American," he declares, noting that the financial considerations of mounting a legal defense were an important factor in his decision to plead guilty. "I'm like a lot of people who are not wealthy who have to consider that in reaching any decision." Until he reached the agreement with lawyers in the office of the special Watergate prosecutor, Leon Jaworski, to plead

guilty, he pointed out, he had to pay even the transportation costs associated with his case, including a trip from Los Angeles to Tampa to appear at his arraignment.

The guilty plea was formally entered last Oct. 1, and Mr. Segretti was sentenced to a six-month term on Nov. 5. One week later, he entered the Lompoc facility, where he was installed in an Army-style barracks with "about 20 other guys" and assigned a job in the prison carpentry shop where he earned 28 cents an hour.

Mr. Segretti felt himself something of a celebrity in

prison. Nearly everyone, he said, knew or soon learned who he was and why he was there, and has met with a certain amount of animosity from some of the more liberal inmates.

Many there, he said, had been convicted of tax evasion and minor narcotics charges, and some were well educated, but he never really got to know anyone well, because "you don't make any friends in jail."

Mr. Segretti acknowledged that the Lompoc facility, a prison without fences but with tennis courts in the coastal foothills about 150 miles north of here, was not representative of the American penal system.

But, he said, "I listened a lot. You hear about what goes on in other prisons."

He does not plan to take up full-time the cause of prison reform, however, he says, "I certainly have some definite views. I've seen it from the inside. The prison system definitely needs to be overhauled."

"The safehouse" at Fort Holabird, near Baltimore, where he stayed while testifying at the Chapin trial, has sheltered such other Watergate figures as E. Howard Hunt Jr. Mr. Segretti described his experience there as a cross between "living in a fraternity house and a police station."

His testimony at the Chapin trial helped to bring his old friend's conviction last week on charges of having lied to the F.B.I. when he claimed to have little knowledge of the Segretti operation.

But, Mr. Segretti said, he felt no animosity toward Mr. Chapin for having dismissed in court his friend's undercover efforts in behalf of Mr. Nixon as "junk" that had "bored" him to the extent that the accounts of it he received from Mr. Segretti in the White House mail soon went unopened.

Nor, he said, did he believe

Mr. Chapin was angry with him for having testified at the trial that he kept his friend informed of the sabotage tactics he was employing in the field and received admiring and encouraging comments in return.

Doubts Animosity

"What's happened is past," he said. "I don't think any of us feel any animosity for each other."

Someone else is living in the bachelor apartment in Marina Del Rey now, Mr. Segretti is staying with his widower father, a hotel limousine driver,

in nearby Culver City, while he tries to find a job. He still drives the white Mercedes, but it is no longer running well and needs mechanical work that he cannot afford. He has seen only one of his pre-Watergate friends, a woman, since he was released from prison.

He telephoned the U. S. C.

alumni placement center the other day, for example, to add his name to a list of applicants awaiting referrals of job offers. The secretary who answered the call routinely asked for his name, which he spelled for her.

"There was this stunned silence," Mr. Segretti said.

the Pieces of His Old Carefree Life