

Sobell Protests His Innocence, but Says

By SIDNEY E. ZION

A generally philosophical, occasionally acerbic, sometimes humorous Morton Sobell spoke publicly for the first time yesterday about his trial and subsequent imprisonment of more than 18 years for conspiracy to commit espionage during World War II.

In a lengthy interview at his lawyer's office and later at a news conference at the Empire Room of the Waldorf-Astoria, Sobell, who was released from Federal prison on Tuesday, said he was "without bitterness" over his long incarceration.

But he insisted he was "completely and unequivocally innocent" of the charges that he conspired to deliver secrets to the Soviet Union.

'Pawns of the Establishment'

Looking fitter than many of his friends had expected, the 51-year-old electrical engineer said his conviction in 1951 with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg was a "fraud" occasioned by the "corporate establishment's" determination that a political trial was "a necessity" during the "early days of McCarthyism."

"It may seem unreal or even phony," he said in the interview, "but I bear no bitterness to the trial judge, the prosecutors, the jury, the appeals judges.

"I view matters rationally and I see the entire trial as an unfortunate play in which the court and the prosecutors acted their parts as pawns of the Establishment and we, the

defendants, were unlucky enough to be dropped in as actors."

Sobell, who noted that he was not yet free because for the next 12 years he is required to report to parole officials monthly, chided the news media for often calling him an "atomic spy."

The Rosenbergs were executed in 1953 after being convicted for conspiring to deliver what was termed the basic secret of the atomic bomb to Russia. Sobell was not charged with stealing atomic secrets, but he was convicted of being a member of an espionage ring. He received a 30-year sentence from Federal Judge Irving R. Kaufman.

"I suppose it doesn't really matter what you call me," Sobell told the newsmen at the press conference, "but what upsets me is the apparent carelessness of much of the press which indicates an underlying lack of knowledge of the case. With few exceptions reporters seem to be satisfied with the old cold-war news clips of the trial."

Earlier yesterday in the Midtown law offices of Marshall Perlin, who has represented him for 15 years, Sobell discussed his trial, his prison life and his plans for the future. Lunching on cottage cheese and coffee, with his wife, Helen, by his side, Sobell made the following assertions:

NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, JANUARY 16, 1969

He Is 'Without Bitterness'

¶He was more angry at his chief trial lawyer, the late Edward Kuntz, than at "anyone else connected with the case," because Mr. Kuntz "would not let me take the stand in my own defense, and threatened to quit the case if I did."

¶His "greatest mistake" was to use false names in Mexico before his arrest and after the Rosenbergs had been seized. This, he said, was an "irrational act" that he felt "cinched the case" against him, particularly since he did not testify in his own behalf to explain it.

¶Federal officials tried to "pressure" him into "cooperating" while he was at the West Street Jail by telling him that if he "was a good boy" they

would not send him to Alcatraz penitentiary.

¶Federal prisons were "in the 18th century" when he began serving his sentence and were now "in the 19th Century."

Trial Counsel Assailed

Sobell was highly critical of his trial counsel, who he asserted had "made me back down" from his demands to take the witness stand.

"The prosecution told him that if I took the stand they'd destroy me on the Mexican business, hinting that they had far more stuff against me than they had let on to," he said. "And Kuntz went for the bait, which was totally false."

Sobell said that his trip to

After More Than 18 Years in Prison

Mexico in June, 1950, had "started as a normal trip, with my family." He asserted that the trip was "normal" in the sense that he was not "fleeing," but that it was "not normal" in the sense that he "wanted to get out of the whole scene, Korea, witch-hunts, the rest."

While in Mexico City, he said, he became more and more upset over what he saw as a "totalitarianization" of American life. Then, when the Rosenbergs were arrested, he said, he "panicked," because he viewed the arrests as "absurd" and "frightening."

Sobell said he had known Julius Rosenberg at the City College of New York, where both were members of the

Young Communist League. Later he and his wife visited the Rosenbergs "a couple of times a year socially."

As a result of the Rosenberg arrests, he said, he left his family in Mexico City and traveled to Vera Cruz and Tampico, using false names and inquiring about passage to Europe and South America for the entire family.

This, he said, "was my downfall," though he insisted that he quickly changed his mind about "this irrational idea" and was about to return to the United States when he was arrested.

Sobell said he intended to go back to engineering school. "I have become an obsolete engineer while in prison," he ex-

plained. He also said that he would "probably" write a book.

Sobell became acquainted with a number of top racketeers while in prison, notably James R. Hoffa, Mickey Cohn and Vito Genovese.

"Hoffa's a solid guy, a solid guy," Sobell said. "He has the complete respect of all the inmates and the guards at Lewisburg, where he makes mattresses, of all things."

Recently, Sobell recalled, Hoffa noticed him looking closely at a picture another inmate took of Sobell and his wife, while she was visiting at Lewisburg.

"Whattaya got there Morty blueprints?" Hoffa said, laughing.