

Brief Biography of Morton Sobell

Morton Sobell was born in New York City in 1917. He was educated at the College of the City of New York (CCNY) and the Graduate School of Engineering at the University of Michigan. In 1951, during the height of McCarthyism, Sobell was found guilty, along with co-defendants Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, of conspiring to commit espionage for the Soviet Union. The Rosenbergs were sentenced to death and electrocuted in 1953 while Sobell was sentenced to 30 years in prison. He served almost twenty of those years, starting with five at Alcatraz.

Since then, hundreds of articles and dozens of books have been written about this famous case. Recently, over one million pages of FBI documents have been obtained under the Freedom of Information Act. These documents demonstrate that there was full collusion between the FBI, the prosecution, and the judge and that the Rosenbergs and Sobell were framed for reasons consistent with the entire thrust of McCarthyism.

Sobell was released from prison in 1969. Since then he has worked continuously for the causes he believes in - for black human rights, for the independence of Puerto Rico, and for the self-determination of Third World countries like Viet Nam and Nicaragua. In fact, a couple of months ago he was arrested again, this time for protesting U.S. aid to the Contras.

Sobell's work in support of Third World countries has gone beyond his political activism. He received B.S. and M.S. degrees in electrical engineering before going prison and somehow managed to keep up with his rapidly changing field while locked away for twenty years. Since his release he has worked in the field of medical electronics. He has made several trips to Viet Nam, helping them build heart monitoring machines and is currently involved in helping them produce hearing aids, which he designed, for all in the country who need them.

Sobell wrote, at the conclusion of his autobiography, On Doing Time (Charles Scribner, 1974):

"[During my first day out of prison] it made me feel better than anything else could to be part of this scene [of the renewed struggle of the 60s]. I knew that I could find a place in it after so many years of submission to authority in that closed society called prison."

This is the essence and spirit of Sobell. Few people are as capable of explaining the McCarthy era, the "criminal justice system," or the situation surrounding political prisoners in the U.S. Since his release, he has spoken to campus organizations, churches, and political groups across the country about prisons, their relationship to society, and political activism. Now 72 years old, Sobell's energy and strength, as well as his optimism, remain abundant.