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Love, Betrayal, and the Cold War: An American Story

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Love, Betrayal and the Cold War: an American story

Phillip Deery

I wait for your touch to spring into life

Your absence is pain and torment and strife

(Helen Sobell, “Empty Hours”, 1956) ¹

Shall I languish here forgotten

On the perjured word of one

Or will valiant men and women

Cry for justice to be done?

(Edith Segal, “Thirty Years: A Ballad for Morton Sobell”, 1959)

Introduction

This article investigates, for the first time, two decades of political activism by one woman, Helen Sobell. Using previously untapped archives, it reveals how she waged a relentless struggle on behalf of her husband, Morton Sobell. She guaranteed that he did not “languish here forgotten”. Sobell was sentenced in 1951 to thirty years imprisonment after being convicted with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg of conspiracy to commit espionage. This is a story, in part, about how their relationship unfolded through four prisons, eight Supreme Court appeals² and nearly nineteen years of incarceration. It is also a story of harassment from the state, to which her FBI files abundantly attest. Ultimately, it is a story of political mobilization, stretching from the United States to Europe. This remarkable campaign was, according to the *New York Times*, “one of the most massive, most protracted efforts ever made to free a prisoner.”³ As one eminent journalist

¹ Extracted from Helen Sobell, *You, Who Love Life: A Book of Poems* (New York: Sydmar Press, 1956). According to one reviewer, this collection was a “lyrical outcry of a human soul’s brush with and triumph over despair”. “Life as Viewed by Another”, *Democrat and Chronicle* [NY], 1 May 1957, 14. Quite inaccurately, Morton said of this book of poems: “Two of the poems were to me. The others were to other guys...That was our relationship. I was powerless...Of course it hurt me”. David Evanier, “Morton Sobell and Me”, *New York Sun*, 19 September 2008, 8.

² For the Supreme Court and US Senate Judiciary Committee appeals, see Benjamin and Muriel Goldring Papers, Tamiment Library/Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University (henceforth Tamiment Library), TAM.374 (henceforth Goldring Papers), Box 8, Folders 13-14; William A. Reuben Papers, TAM.289, Box 13, Folder 35. The final appeal was denied on 14 February 1967; see *New York Times*, 15 February 1967, 1, 15; *National Guardian*, 25 February 1967, 5-6. A copy of the 79-page decision by Federal Judge Edward Weinfeld is located in the Morris Schappes Papers, Tamiment Library, TAM.179, Box 19, Folder 10.

³ *New York Times*, 15 January 1969, 44.

and commentator wrote, Helen Sobell “worked a kind of miracle; she has carried his buried face in public places, and she has touched the conscience of an extraordinary group of persons.”⁴

There is an extensive literature on the Rosenberg case,⁵ but no scholarly analyses of the related campaign to “secure justice” for Morton Sobell. The 1950s poster of the Rosenbergs with co-defendant Morton in the background looking over their shoulders is an apt metaphor for this historiographical void. While he has remained in the shadows – “the forgotten man in the Rosenberg case”,⁶ his trial a sideshow to the main “atomic spy trial” of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg – his wife is all but invisible. She is absent from history, and this article seeks to rectify that absence.

An individual biography highlights the historical context. It is, according to Barbara Tuchman, a “prism of history”.⁷ It connects the subject to the social structure. It enables the interrogation of the historical actor in the context of time and place. And it illuminates the experience of living through a particular time. This subjective dimension, therefore, can tell us much about the lived experience of a left-wing activist pursuing justice in Cold War America. At the level of personal motivation, a biographical approach is especially appropriate: it allows us, as James Barrett has commented, “to consider elements of individual development and personality in relation to the broader social and political contexts”. Historians, he added, must be prepared to restore “the place of the subjective in our understanding of historical change – problems of personal identity,

⁴ Murray Kempton, “Love Story”, *New York Post*, 7 June 1961.

⁵ That literature includes: Malcolm P. Sharp, *Was Justice Done? The Rosenberg-Sobell Case* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1956); Jonathon Root, *The Betrayers: The Rosenberg Case – A Reappraisal of an American Crisis* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1963); Alvin H. Goldstein, *The Unquiet Death of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1975); Robert and Michael Meeropol, *We Are Your Sons: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975); Walter and Miriam Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest* (New York: Pantheon), 1983 [1st ed. 1965]; Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983); Ilene Philipson, *Ethel Rosenberg: Beyond the Myths* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1988); Joseph H. Sharlitt, *Fatal Error: The Miscarriage of Justice that Sealed the Rosenbergs’ Fate* (New York: Scribner, 1989); Virginia Carmichael, *Framing History. The Rosenberg Story and the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); John Neville, *The Press, the Rosenbergs, and the Cold War* (Westport: Praeger, 1995); Alexander Feklisov and Sergei Kostin, *The Man Behind the Rosenbergs* (New York: Enigma, 2001); Emily Arnow Alman and David Alman, *Exoneration: The Rosenberg-Sobell Case in the 21st Century* (Seattle: Green Elms press, 2010); Walter Schneir, *Final Verdict: What Really Happened in the Rosenberg Case* (New York: Melville House, 2010); Lori Clune, *Executing the Rosenbergs: Death and Diplomacy in a Cold War World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶ *New York Times*, 15 January 1969, 44.

⁷ Barbara W. Tuchman, “Biography as a Prism of History” in Stephen B. Oates, *Biography as High Adventure* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 93-4. Similarly, Bernard Bailyn has commented: “The drama of people struggling with conditions that confine them through the cycles of limited time spans is the heart of all living history”. Bernard Bailyn, “The Challenge of Modern Historiography”, in William McKinley Runyan (ed.), *Psychology and Historical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 43.

emotion, and experience.”⁸ By placing the individual within history, and incorporating the personal into the political, this paper is situated within such interpretive frameworks. The paper is also consistent with one dimension of narrative theory that, *inter alia*, emphasizes the process by which individuals construct a personal identity and a relationship with the political culture they inhabit. It concerns stories that help individuals make sense of the world, and how those individuals make sense of such stories.⁹ Narrative identity, as Peter Poiana has argued, serves the individual’s pursuit of claims for justice and the recognition of particular goals.¹⁰ It provides “purposeful engagement”, drawing together diverse actions into “thematically unified, goal-directed processes”.¹¹ Helen Sobell’s “story” was Morton’s innocence and her unstinting quest for justice. How she made sense of this, how it shaped her worldview and her activism – her “purposeful engagement” – and how it illuminates the relationship between her life and the political culture are central concerns of this paper.

Helen and Morton, 1950 - 1955

Helen Sobell was born in Washington DC on March 3, 1918. Her parents, Yiddish-speaking Rose and Max Levitov, emigrated from Russia in 1908 and 1909. When she was 17, she contracted polio, which left her with a permanent limp.¹² In 1938 she married Clarence (“Casey”) Darrow Gurewitz, the secretary of the Washington branch of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). At Wilson Teachers College, from which she graduated with a Bachelor of Science in 1939, she was considered a “liberal”, not a communist.¹³ As a federal government employee of the National Bureau of Standards in the Department of Commerce since January 1942, and based on information provided by an informant that she was connected to the White Collar Workers Branch No. 12 of the CPUSA, Helen Sobell was interviewed by the FBI (under the Hatch Act of 1939) on November 3, 1944. Under oath, she “categorically” denied membership of

⁸ James R. Barrett, “Revolution and Personal Crisis: William Z. Foster, Personal Narrative, and the Subjective in the History of American Communism”, *Labor History* 43:4 (2002), 482. See also Barrett’s “Was the Personal Political? Reading the Autobiography of American Communism”, *International Review of Social History* 53 (2008), 395-423.

⁹ The relevant literature in the burgeoning field of narrative theory is vast, but see Brian Richardson, “Recent Concepts of Narrative and the Narratives of Narrative Theory”, *Concepts of Narrative* 34: 2 (2000), 168-175; Jarmila Mildorf, “Unnatural” narratives? The case of second-person narration”, in Mari Hatavara, Lars-Christer Hydén and Matti Hyvärinen (eds), *The Travelling Concepts of Narrative* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2013), 179-200.

¹⁰ Peter Poiana, “Narrative Identity”, *Literature and Aesthetics* 9 (1999), 99.

¹¹ Cited in Brian Roberts, *Biographical Research* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2002), 117.

¹² Without knowing its cause, a subsequent FBI report noted her “laboring walk”. This was without moral judgment; the description of her hair as “disheveled, sloppy” was. Memorandum, SAC [Special Agent in Charge], New York to Director FBI, 25 August 1953, “VIII. Description”, 22. Unless otherwise indicated, cited FBI documents are located in Helen Sobell’s FBI file, NY 100-109849.

¹³ SAC, Washington to Director FBI, June 7, 1944.

the CPUSA.¹⁴ After a further investigation and a review of all relevant files in the FBI's Washington Field Division, it was recommended that the case be closed.¹⁵ However, suspicions lingered and closure never occurred. She had already been assigned a file number, 100-404849, when a Security Card Index was prepared on her by the FBI in 1953.¹⁶ On March 5, 1945, Helen and Casey Gurewitz were divorced; they had one child, Sydney, now five years old. Both remarried on the same day, five days later: he to Helen Sherman, an active communist, and she to Morton Sobell, a fellow physicist, a radar expert in the United States Navy and, fatefully, a member of Julius Rosenberg's spy ring.

On June 15, 1950, Ethel Rosenberg's brother, David Greenglass, confessed to espionage.¹⁷ The next day, Morton Sobell failed to report for work at the Reeves Instrument Company. Six days later, accompanied by his wife, stepdaughter Sydney and infant son Mark, he flew from New York to Mexico City. An intensive and "elaborate" search for the Sobells, involving three FBI agents, Assistant Legal Attachés, the Naval Attaché and the Mexican Federal Security Police – who checked and monitored hotels, ports, banks, post offices, cafés and supermarkets in several likely neighbourhoods – failed to disclose their whereabouts. Finally, Special Agent Edwin L. Sweet, who spoke Spanish fluently, persuaded a local woman who rented rooms, and who "very probably believed [him] to be a Mexican citizen" to inform him of the Sobells' location. Disingenuously, he told her (and others whom he interviewed) that "the little girl in the SOBELL family was kidnaped and was being held by kidnapers."¹⁸ In fact, it was the Sobells who were about to be kidnaped. At 8pm on August 16, 1950, armed Mexican security police, with the US Legal Attaché in the background, apprehended both Sobells after "a considerable physical struggle."¹⁹ For two hours,

¹⁴ For a full transcript of the interview, see attachment to memorandum, SAC Washington to Director FBI, November 14, 1944, 7-12. Herbert E. Gaston, chairman, Interdepartmental Committee on Employee Investigations, Department of Justice, sought "additional information" on Helen Sobell. Gaston to J. Edgar Hoover, July 13, 1945.

¹⁵ Memoranda, SAC, Washington to Director FBI, August 23, 1945; October 15, 1945.

¹⁶ SAC, New York to Director FBI, 25 August 1953, 17.

¹⁷ The espionage trail, from Klaus Fuchs to Harry Gold to David Greenglass (and, then, to the Rosenbergs), is well-known. For an evocative account of Greenglass's FBI interview, confession and arrest, see Sam Roberts, *The Brother: The Untold Story of Atomic Spy David Greenglass and How He Sent his Sister, Ethel Rosenberg, to the Electric Chair* (New York: Random House, 2001), 233-53.

¹⁸ 14-page Report, Legat, Mexico to Director FBI, April 4, 1951, 11.

¹⁹ Ibid. According to the FBI, "He put up a struggle and was subdued by a blow on the head with a .38 caliber pistol butt. Mrs. Sobell ... also fought and bit". Memorandum, Mr. Ladd to Director, FBI, August 23, 1950, 1-2. For Sobell's account of the arrest, see Morton Sobell, *On Doing Time* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 6-9, and his affidavit reproduced in Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest*, 329-31. Sobell claimed that they were then preparing to return to America from their "vacation" in Mexico, which would not explain cashing in their return tickets, the discovery of airline timetables to Europe and steamship timetables to Poland in their Mexican apartment, or his unsuccessful visits to Vera Cruz and Tampico seaports to book freighter passage out of Mexico. Memorandum, Ladd to Hoover, August 23, 1950, 2. For a sympathetic account of the Sobells' time in Mexico and their abduction, see John Wexley, *The Judgement of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* (New York: Cameron and Kahn, 1955), 165-78. For a

the Sobell children were left behind, alone. To 11-year old Sydney, “it was the most terrifying couple of hours of my life.”²⁰ At 4.30am, after prolonged discussion with a “vacillating” General Inurreta (head of the security police), a convoy carrying the Sobell family embarked on a non-stop 750-mile trip to the Mexican-US border. In nearby Laredo, Texas, Sobell was formally arrested and charged with violating the Espionage Conspiracy Statute. On the morning of August 19, 1950, Americans awoke to headlines such as “Fleeing Radar Expert Nabbed as Atom Spy”.²¹ He joined Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, arrested on July 17 and August 11, as co-conspirator. By now, his close friend and workmate and acquaintance of Julius Rosenberg, Max Elitcher, had turned government witness.²²

The story of the Rosenberg-Sobell trial in March 1951 has been retold many times and its details need not concern us here. Suffice to say that Sobell, who did not take the witness stand on the advice of his defense attorneys, was found guilty of “conspiracy to commit espionage” – he was not implicated in atomic espionage – and sentenced by Judge Kaufman to the maximum 30 years imprisonment, without parole.²³ The jury judged Sobell’s “flight” to Mexico and Elitcher’s testimony²⁴ sufficient evidence to reach a guilty verdict.

Before being transferred to Alcatraz Island in the San Francisco Bay, Sobell was imprisoned in the Federal House of Detention (“The Tombs”) in Manhattan. From there he wrote his first letter to Helen, dated August 25, 1950. It foreshadowed the significant role she assumed and alluded to his expectations of her: “It seems to me that you have to have as much courage as I do. More responsibilities come your way, and to take care of all that and me too.”²⁵ She sold their house in

perpetuation of the “vacation” story, see Joseph Brainin, “The Facts about Morton Sobell” [nd. 1953], 1-2, in Abraham Unger Papers, Tamiment Library, TAM.157, Box 3, Folder 15.

²⁰ Email correspondence with Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, 14 May 2017.

²¹ *Daily News* (New York), August 19, 1950, 1. The spurious legality of their abduction (they were not “deported”, as claimed by the government) was challenged in the United States District Court, Southern District of New York, in February 1956. A copy of the brief, reprinted by the Sobell Committee, is located in Cedric Belfrage Papers, TAM.143, Box 17, Folder 22.

²² See Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1983), 130-41. Between August 5 and October 20, Elitcher was interviewed twelve times by the FBI.

²³ J. Edgar Hoover recommended the death penalty (perhaps as another “lever”), but because there was no evidence of atomic espionage, Kaufman favored prison over the chair. Unwisely, Sobell’s defense lawyers did not seek to detach his case from that of the Rosenbergs.

²⁴ Elitcher told the court, as he had previously told the FBI, that he had accompanied Sobell on a trip to Manhattan in August 1948 with a can of film to deliver to Julius Rosenberg. For a (then) persuasive indictment of Elitcher’s evidence, see *D.N. Pritt Analyzes the Evidence In the Case of Morton Sobell* (np. [1955]), 6-9.

²⁵ Cited in Helen L. Sobell, “Double Exposure: Love and Politics in the Sobell-Rosenberg Case” (unpublished autobiographical manuscript, 1994), 2; TAM.390, Tamiment Library. This unwieldy manuscript has been described, aptly, as “a poignant and very sad text ... with layers of misery, mutual bickering, sexual problems and love.” Note accompanying the manuscript, Marvin Gittleman to Peter Filardo (nd) in *ibid.*, Box 1, Folder 1. The Marxist literary

Flushing, NYC, and moved to her mother's home in Arlington, Virginia. From there she commuted regularly to New York while the first of 16 appeals to the Circuit and Supreme Courts was heard.²⁶ Immediately the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case was formed on 10 October 1951, Helen Sobell joined it.²⁷ Her gruelling schedule of travelling, writing, organising meetings and public speaking was about to begin.

At the instigation of Roy Cohn, assistant attorney to chief prosecutor Irving Saypol, and who played a key role in the Rosenberg-Sobell convictions,²⁸ the Bureau of Prisons designated Alcatraz as the preferred place of punishment for Morton Sobell. He arrived there as inmate AZ-996 on November 26, 1952. Almost immediately, the FBI placed an informant to cultivate Sobell, encourage him to confess and, importantly, identify spies. There had already been an informant in the Tombs, who spoke with Sobell "several times a day" and found him in "a highly agitated state."²⁹ The FBI believed this informant (name redacted but identified by Sobell as John Walker) had "gained the trust and confidence of Sobell, thus placing himself in a very unique position to give considerable aid to the Bureau in the investigation of this case".³⁰ Sobell was told that if he cooperated, he could avoid Alcatraz.³¹ So the FBI pinned its hopes on Sobell's willingness "to tell the full story of his relations with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg".³² At one point, it seemed possible: in a letter to Helen dated July 1, 1952 (that the FBI copied), he wrote "You know – it was only a matter of days before I'd have thrown in the sponge".³³ In October, Walker reported that Sobell was contemplating a personal letter to Judge Kaufman offering his cooperation in return for a reduced sentence; Roy Cohn advised Kaufman of this intention, and Kaufman "advised Cohn

icon, academic and activist, Dr Annette Rubinstein, wrote a thoughtful (and critical) critique of it; see correspondence, Rubinstein to Helen Sobell, 9 May 1986, Annette T. Rubinstein Papers, TAM.167, Box 1, Folder 32, Tamiment Library.

²⁶ The final appeal was lodged on 6 November 1967 and certiorari was denied by the Supreme Court (Justice Douglas dissenting) on 15 January 1968. A petition for rehearing was denied on 4 March 1968. An analysis of these appeals will be discussed in a separate paper.

²⁷ For its first three years, see Phillip Deery, "'Never Losing Faith': An Analysis of the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case, 1951-1953", *American Communist History* 12:3 (2014), 163-91. After the Rosenbergs were executed, the Committee changed its name to the Committee to Secure Justice for Morton Sobell (September 1954) and, later, to the Committee to Free Morton Sobell (from June 1966). It will henceforth be referred to as the Sobell Committee.

²⁸ See Sidney Zion, *The Autobiography of Roy Cohn* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1988), 68-70, 77.

²⁹ SAC, New York to Director, FBI, 16 May 1952; 6 June 1952. Morton Sobell FBI file.

³⁰ SAC, New York to Director, FBI, 21 May 1952, 3; W.A. Branigan to A.H. Belmont, 19 August 1952, 2.

³¹ Sobell, *On Doing Time*, 329. According to a somewhat self-pitying Sobell (315), this period in 1952 was "rough...I was thirty-five years old, and I received no birthday card from Helen...I was deeply hurt. She had apparently forgotten about me, her husband. She had become so involved with her [Rosenberg] committee work that she had forgotten what it was all about – Julius, Ethel, and myself".

³² W.A. Branigan to A.H. Belmont, 19 August 1952, 21. Morton Sobell FBI file.

³³ SAC, New York to Director FBI, 3 July 1952. Morton Sobell FBI file.

confidentially” that he was going to tell Sobell that if he cooperated fully with the Government, this “would be taken into consideration in connection with his sentence.”³⁴ Sobell, allegedly, told Walker: “I was the fall guy in this whole thing...I’ve got a story to tell – a good story to tell and they’ll listen to me!”³⁵ The same report noted:

During recent conversations SOBELL had with [blank] and the reading of the letters of Mrs. Sobell to her husband, it has become quite evident that SOBELL would like to cooperate with the Government but is being prevented from doing so because of the influence his wife exercises over any decision in this matter... There is also an indication [in her letters] of the type of double talk that she is using to undermine any inclination on the part of SOBELL to cooperate.³⁶

Again, in March 1954, after several indirect approaches from an informant, “SOBELL indicated to [blank] that he was considering such cooperation but his wife, on each occasion, deterred him from such action and strengthened him to ‘hold fast.’”³⁷ There was no middle ground for Morton: either he “ratted out” his friend, Julius Rosenberg, or he maintained the guise of complete innocence. In the end, he chose the latter.³⁸ From the FBI’s perspective, Helen, not Morton, was the *bête noir*; she, not he, governed his decisions. This theme, of Helen being the dominant partner, continued to punctuate FBI reports. On her first trip to the “Rock”, on December 31, 1952, it was reported that “Subject’s wife appeared to be the dominating influence and repeatedly reassured subject and advised him to keep a ‘stiff upper lip’”.³⁹ In 1955, Hoover was informed that “the militant attitude” of Helen was “detering Sobell from furnishing information as he does not wish to alienate his wife’s affections.”⁴⁰

³⁴ FBI Memorandum to Assistant Attorney General, Charles Murray, 20 October 1952; A.H. Belmont to D.M. Ladd, 17 October 1952. Apparently, Sobell did write a letter to Kaufman, but it was never sent. Hoover’s requests to discover why furnished no answers. Director, FBI to SAC, San Francisco, 21 August 1953; Director, FBI to SAC, New York, 17 December 1953. Morton Sobell FBI file.

³⁵ SAC, New York to Director FBI, 1 July 1952. Morton Sobell FBI file.

³⁶ Ibid. See SAC, Atlanta to Director FBI, 5 July 1951 for an earlier reference to Helen’s letters containing “a considerable amount of double talk which may have a meaning understandable to SOBELL”. In fact, Sobell did use coded language, especially when referring to his sexual needs. Sobell, *On Doing Time*, 123.

³⁷ SAC, New York to Assistant FBI Director, A.H. Belmont, 30 March 1954, 2.

³⁸ Much later, Michael Meeropol judged Morton’s silence about Julius (thereby condemning him to long-term imprisonment) as “incredible courage”. Meeropol, *We Are Your Sons*, 202.

³⁹ SAC, New York to Director FBI, 23 January 1953.

⁴⁰ Confidential letter, Director FBI to William P. Rogers, Deputy Attorney General, 3 January 1955. According to Helen’s obituary writer, the FBI believed she was “the real cause of their inability to exact information about espionage from her husband.” *New York Times*, 27 April 2002, 18.

Even if true – and most likely it was not (he had a controlling personality, not she) – it says much about the prevailing antipathy towards strong or independent women who deviated from established sex roles and were therefore characterized as “un-American.”⁴¹ This formed part of the hostility towards Ethel Rosenberg.⁴² Much was at stake here. In Cold War America, according to Laville, “Strongly defined gender roles served as a bulwark against internal subversion and dangerous political ideologies...American popular culture frequently explained political instability and consequent vulnerability to communist subversion with reference to weak or abnormal family structures.”⁴³ By not conforming to such clearly defined gender roles of housewife and mother, Helen Sobell transgressed the dominant cultural consensus; her personal choice had become a political position. Two examples: a FBI informant (67D) judged one of her public addresses as one given by “the crusading wife”, a judgement full of derision: “She almost seemed to enjoy the role”.⁴⁴ A party member stated at a CPUSA meeting (attended by an informant) that Helen was “enjoying basking in the limelight and running the show herself without regard for her husband’s freedom”.⁴⁵ A degree of misogyny existed at both ends of the political spectrum.

Not only were Helen’s visits closely monitored and their correspondence closely examined, their relationship was also keenly scrutinised. In order to “break her influence on the subject”, the San Francisco office recommended that “derogatory information” about the private life of Helen Sobell be obtained, which would then be shared with her husband. In particular, the office sought to obtain information “concerning the personal activities of subject’s wife to know if she may be engaged in any extra-marital relations”.⁴⁶ However, this approach was overruled by the FBI Director, J. Edgar Hoover, due to the “possibility of unfavourable publicity to the Bureau coming from such activity”.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, there remained a readiness to exploit any tension between the Sobells.

⁴¹ See Mary Runte and Albert J. Mills, “I Love Lucid: The Cold War, Feminism, and the Ideation of the American Family”, Paper presented at Critical Management Studies Conference, University of Lancaster, July 2003. <http://www.mngt.waikato.ac.nz/ejrot/cmsconference/2003/proceedings/thecoldwar/runte.pdf>

⁴² See Carmichael, *Framing History*, 104-7, 180-1.

⁴³ Helen Laville, “Gender and Women's Rights in the Cold War”, in Richard H. Immerman and Petra Goedde (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 525. For a more general discussion of these issues, especially “domestic containment”, see Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

⁴⁴ SAC New York to SAC San Francisco, 16 May 1967, “Report on 50th Birthday Meeting to Honor Morton Sobell”, 4, in FBI Sobell Committee file.

⁴⁵ Report from SA Herbert D. Clough, Jr., New York, 2 April 1959.

⁴⁶ Air-Tel, SAC, San Francisco to New York, 16 April 1954.

⁴⁷ Note by Hoover in *ibid.*

When Helen previously visited Morton in the Tombs in New York, she was accompanied by “an unidentified male negro” and this was made known to Sobell whose response, reportedly, was passive: “Ordinarily the fact that an inmate’s wife is unfaithful would have a terrific impact on the morale of the inmate. However, Sobell is not an ordinary individual”. The New York office believed that even if Morton were given definite proof that Helen was “unfaithful”, it would have “little effect on SOBELL.”⁴⁸ This was wrong. When he was in Alcatraz, she did have an affair – consistent with a mutual agreement reached in early 1953⁴⁹ – and he was (to use Helen’s description) “devastated”. She agreed to “refrain from any outside relationship” because of the “distress” it caused him.⁵⁰ It is unclear if the FBI were aware of her extra-marital relationships. What is clear is that their letters were read by the prison authorities, and then transferred to the FBI, which, pleasingly, found “growing friction” between in their relationship.⁵¹ For example, “I received your letter this morning and was hurt by it. More perhaps than you wanted me to be, perhaps not. I oscillate between anger and tears... If you make me cry when I have no shoulder in the whole world to lean upon, I shall hate you.”⁵² In September 1953, she wrote: “I have every right to be sharply, bitterly angry with you. Am I so unethical, immoral and untrustworthy...? Do we not have an agreement?... Next time, I lose my temper.”⁵³ When the Rosenbergs were executed in June 1953, and Helen was leading a picket line in front of the White House, Morton wrote a “strong” letter, “castigating [Helen] for forgetting that I was a person, with an identity, and turning me into a symbol.”⁵⁴ There were frequent disagreements about the best approach to legal appeals, which lawyers to enlist and, especially, the role of the Sobell Committee, which she chaired. Helen thought it her prerogative to take the lead, given she was in the organizational front line, but this was not always agreeable to Morton. In frustration, she wrote: “I love you, my dear, but I can’t be pushed around quite so much”.⁵⁵ Two years later, this was still a problem:

⁴⁸ Memorandum, SAC, New York to Director, FBI, 21 April 1954.

⁴⁹ According to Sobell, “we agreed that Helen would...tell me if she wanted to engage in sex with another; after which we would discuss it before she took any action,” Sobell, *On Doing Time*, 373. If monitored, this agreement may have been the basis for the FBI’s assessment that their relationship was “un-natural”. Memorandum, SAC, New York to Director, FBI, 21 April 1954.

⁵⁰ Sobell, “Double Exposure”, 160. This evidently did not last: a “good friend” confessed his love for her and they spent the Memorial Day weekend (1964) together, while “another lover seeks her attention”. Ibid., 501.

⁵¹ Confidential correspondence, Hoover to William P. Rogers, Deputy Attorney General, 3 January 1955. Sobell himself refers to their “tension”, Sobell, *On Doing Time*, 321; see also 319-20.

⁵² Sobell, “Double Exposure”, 53.

⁵³ Ibid., 186. This foreshadowed the bitter bickering at the time of their divorce in 1983: “I don’t know why you give me such a hard time with respect to money matters. I never treated you this way. You should realize that if I had not turned over the apartment and furnishings to you, you would have had no claim on it at all.” Letter, Helen to Morton, 12 December 1983, Sobell Papers.

⁵⁴ Sobell, *On Doing Time*, 410. According to Helen, writing in third person, Morton at this time (during the White House vigils), became “more demanding and questioning Helen’s devotion while she works night and day to save the Rosenbergs.” Sobell, “Double Exposure”, 33.

⁵⁵ Letter, 7 October 1952, Sobell, “Double Exposure”, 46.

Morty, if you don't want my thinking, but only my obedience to your direction, I think you are wrong, and impractical. If this is your considered opinion I will do what I can to carry out your instructions, because nothing I do has meaning if you feel I'm working against your interests. The enlistment of aid which you hold against me is absolutely, completely a wrong attitude...Are you offended by such stratagems?⁵⁶

There were also countless letters expressing deep and abiding affection, but they were presumably of less interest to the FBI looking for a chance to drive a “wedge” between the two.⁵⁷

The FBI also pursued more direct intervention. On the pretext of returning items and documents seized when Sobell was kidnapped in Mexico, a veteran FBI agent, Fred R. Elledge, interviewed Sobell on October 27, 1954 and on three subsequent occasions by the same agent “to afford him an opportunity to cooperate”. It was hoped that Elledge could “develop a personal relationship with SOBELL, leading to an eventual disclosure of his espionage activities.” An issue recurrently raised was the efficacy of the Sobell Committee’s activities pursued on his behalf. At the fourth interview, on December 22, 1954, as interpreted by Elledge, “SOBELL expressed utter dejection and despondency” over the wisdom and effectiveness of the Committee’s methods and “whether such methods would ever benefit him.” As we shall see, those methods were wide-ranging in scope and of constant concern to the FBI. It is likely that the Committee’s activities were discussed deliberately, and negatively, to weaken Sobell’s resolve and to “pierce [his] armor”. The interviewing agent noted that Sobell’s initial “supercilious and cocky attitude” soon changed to one of “dejection and uncertainty”. At the end of the interview, they shook hands and wished each other good luck.⁵⁸ Sobell may have been despondent but he was not ready to confess; consequently, this was the final visit to Sobell in Alcatraz by an FBI agent.

Helen was outraged by these FBI interviews. After the third interview, and having just returned to New York from visiting Morton in Alcatraz, she wrote to Hoover protesting against “what your agents have been trying to do to my husband.” She alleged that, on the third visit, the interviewing

⁵⁶ Letter, 4 May, 1954, Sobell, “Double Exposure”, 114. She did not act unilaterally. In a letter dated 2 October 1953, she outlined three “stratagems” and sought his views; on 15 October she wrote: “You must show me real arguments if you are opposed to the present proposed legal action”. Ibid, 190, 192.

⁵⁷ This term was used in a SAC San Francisco memorandum, 16 April 1954. It unwittingly echoes J. Edgar Hoover’s recommendation to the Attorney General on 19 July 1950 that Ethel Rosenberg could be used as a “lever” against her husband; see Radosh and Milton, *The Rosenberg File*, 99.

⁵⁸ SAC, San Francisco to Director FBI, 23 December 1954. See also Alman, *Exoneration*, 338-41.

agent told Sobell that he could no longer help the Rosenbergs; that he was sacrificing his youth, his home and opportunity see his children; that he should start thinking about his own future; and that “confidential sources available to the F.B.I. had information that [he] was being deserted.” She accused Hoover of “using Alcatraz and your F.B.I. as a rack and pinion with which to destroy my husband” and urged him to stop further visits. “My innocent husband”, she concluded, “will not perjure himself. He will betray neither his ideals nor other innocent people.”⁵⁹ This defiant letter was reproduced in the *Daily Worker* accompanied by an article headlined “Sobell Defies Threats By FBI: Refuses to Lie”,⁶⁰ and circulated to a well-attended fund-raising dinner organised by the Sobell Committee in Washington on November 20, 1954.⁶¹ Presumably, Sobell, knowing he was not innocent, consented to these interviews with Bureau agents, perhaps to explore options. In the judgement of the FBI, that they “deeply disturbed him” was “undoubtedly” why Helen Sobell wrote to Hoover seeking to stop them. And “The tenor of [her] letter would indicate that she is extremely perturbed by her husband’s conversations with us.”⁶²

The Sobells pledged uncompromising openness with each other, whatever the cost. In June 1952 he wrote, unequivocally, that there was “absolutely nothing between us – no instance big or small ... nothing that was reserved – we always lived each to the other – we lived within each other as much as within ourselves...Let us keep it that way as long as we possibly can...even while separated we can live as one – for one.”⁶³ Indicative of this was their reading of the same book “together” and discussing it in letters. In his papers there are 38 letters covering 30 pages of closely typed pages written by Helen throughout 1953: they are punctuated with similar sentiments, even when there are disagreements over strategy. But throughout his entire incarceration, Helen Sobell publicly proclaimed his innocence. She repeatedly stated, “As the wife

⁵⁹ Letter, Helen Sobell to J. Edgar Hoover, 1 November 1954. Copies were placed in each of the Sobells’ FBI files and in the Sobell Committee file.

⁶⁰ *Daily Worker*, 15 November 1954, 8.

⁶¹ SAC, WFO to Director FBI, 29 November 1954.

⁶² SAC, San Francisco to Director FBI, 23 December 1954. The FBI interviewer also commented that Sobell “demonstrated that sex is uppermost in his mind.” (Ibid.) Much later, Sobell responded: “I wouldn’t say it was uppermost but it did occupy an important position.” This was confirmed by Sydney: “I was present at visits between them [in prison], and felt that sex was his greatest interest” (email, 3 march 2017). Morton continued, “We would try to make love, even under these cramped conditions, whenever we felt the urge. One had to be inventive to be sure.” Morton Sobell Papers, TAM.552, nd, Box 19, Tamiment Library (henceforth Sobell Papers. These papers, consisting of 28 boxes, are unsorted, uncatalogued, unkempt, and sometimes intensely personal.) Notwithstanding Morton’s liberal definition of “making love”, the regulations in force at Alcatraz prohibited conjugal visits or even physical contact during visits. In 1958 Helen sought permission from the director of federal prisons, James V. Bennett, for a conjugal visit and the request was denied. “‘We Want a Baby’, Pleads Wife of Convicted Spy”, *Arizona Republic*, 24 September 1958, 4; “Sobell’s Wife Loses Plea”, *New York Mirror*, 30 September 1959, 4; Sobell, “Double Exposure”, 262.

⁶³ Copy of letter, 13 June 1952, in memorandum, SAC, New York to Director FBI, 16 June 1952.

of Morton Sobell I know that he is truly innocent”.⁶⁴ It was her conviction that the atmosphere of McCarthyism directly impinged on the 1951 trial and that Judge Kauffman’s sentences were political as much as judicial. It was this conviction, as well as her strong love for Morton, that drove her to fight for him to the point of exhaustion.⁶⁵

The campaign commences

Fortified by that conviction, Helen Sobell took her campaign to the American public. As was customary during America’s domestic Cold War, activists discovered that mainstream radio time could not be booked, advertisements could not be lodged, and halls could not be hired. But her Committee found ways and means of circumventing such obstacles. What follows is an indicative sample only: a comprehensive discussion of her myriad activities is beyond the reach of this article. Two months after the Rosenbergs were executed, Helen addressed a huge rally at Randall’s Island, NYC, attended by approximately 10,000 people; “it was inspiring”, she wrote.⁶⁶ Two FBI informants were also present. One noted how she “struck the human touch repeatedly” by reading excerpts from her husband’s prison cell letters.⁶⁷ Soon after, she flew to Toronto, Canada, for a speaking tour.⁶⁸ On January 8, 1954 she reported on her visit to Alcatraz to a meeting in Detroit, as she did to a brunch in New York on January 24. She spoke to the 8th anniversary dinner of the Civil Rights Congress, attended by 300 guests on April 9, 1954 in NYC.⁶⁹ A week later she addressed “in a very low soft spoken voice” a small party of 30 supporters – and one agent of “known reliability” – in a private apartment (5D, 593 Riverside Drive). She stated that Morton was a “living reminder” of what must be done in memory of the Rosenbergs’ martyrdom; \$80 was collected.⁷⁰ She addressed further meetings in May 1954, at the May Day rally in Union Square, a Mother’s Day reception and luncheon in Queens, and a Sobell Committee meeting in the Bronx. A FBI report listed the dates and locations of no fewer than 55 meetings addressed by Helen Sobell in 1954. Helen’s “Southwestern Tour Report” underscores the frequency of meetings.⁷¹ These included meetings with (and organized by) newly-formed Sobell Committees across the country.⁷²

⁶⁴ Circular, 30 August 1965, Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 4.

⁶⁵ More than once she had been “too tired to write”, letter, Helen to Morton, 31 May 1953, Sobell Papers. In 1960 she wrote, “I’ll have to begin to discipline myself since I find I’m working much too long and hard.” Sobell, “Double Exposure”, 325.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁶⁷ SAC, New York to Director FBI, 26 September 1953.

⁶⁸ SAC, Richmond, to Director FBI, 14 July 1953, Clune, *Executing the Rosenbergs*, 109.

⁶⁹ “Information Concerning Helen Sobell as Reported in the Daily Worker”, 12, FBI file, Helen Sobell.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷¹ “Southwestern Tour Report” [nd], in Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.

⁷² Committees were formed in Chicago, Denver, Des Moines, Iowa City, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Phoenix, San Diego, San Francisco, St. Louis, St. Paul and Tuscon. The highly active Bay Area Sobell Committee

Their aim was to secure Sobell's transfer from Alcatraz, to obtain a new trial and, ultimately, to secure his release.⁷³ After one multi-city trip, she wrote: "In all of the years since 1950 I have never found such interest, concern and response as I did within these last ten days. Whether it was the newspapers, the attorneys or the clergymen, we found the same willingness to take action..."⁷⁴ She clearly had an ability to evoke such interest and concern. As a member of the Los Angeles Sobell Committee, who had initial misgivings, privately commented: "I have listened to her now...and she is able to make the audience feel a strong desire to 'do' something."⁷⁵

This punishing schedule was repeated in 1955. One highlight was a two-day conference in Chicago in February 1955 attended by representatives from all regional and national Sobell committees, at which a program of action was agreed upon.⁷⁶ Another, which required considerable preparatory organization but was indicative of the diversity of activities and strategies, was a boat trip for up to 3000 supporters up the Hudson River to Bear Mountain Park. The biggest highlight was a meeting at Carnegie Hall attended by 1800 people on September 29, 1955. The Committee's records testify to the massive organizational effort required (and three more – in 1956, 1963 and 1968 – were held).⁷⁷ In a long and detailed letter to Morton about the event, she described it as "sensational!!" Helen spoke and, again, read from Morton's letters before introducing the keynote speaker, the maverick Senator and former Governor from North Dakota, William Langer; he had been under "terrific pressure" to withdraw.⁷⁸ Langer's participation was largely responsible for the five-column inch report in the *New York Times*.⁷⁹ The packed program stretched over 3¼ hours; the last speaker was Rose Sobell, Morton's aging

(San Francisco) published its own monthly newsletter. The October 1954 issue reported that "weekly mobilizations" had netted 900 signatures petitioning the Director of Prisons (James V. Bennett) to transfer Morton from Alcatraz; Helen had spoken at seven different functions on her recent trip to San Francisco; a large newspaper advertisement had been placed; and 50 house gatherings to "explain the facts in the Sobell case" were planned for November. Sobell Papers. See also its flyer, *Flash! Amicus Brief Gathers 1000 Names in First Week of Bay Area Drive*, in Goldring Papers, Box 5, Folder 15.

⁷³ Sobell was transferred from Alcatraz to the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary on 7 March 1958, but not due to the Committee's pressure. After 20 months at Springfield Medical Facility for Federal Inmates, he was transferred to Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary on 30 January 1965, where he served out his remaining four years.

⁷⁴ Letter to Muriel Goldring, 18 June 1957, Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 9.

⁷⁵ Letter to Annette Rubinstein nd [1956?] from "Me". Rubinstein Papers, TAM.167, Box 1, Folder 32.

⁷⁶ See 6-page report, prepared by David Alman, 1 March 1955, "The New Phase in the Sobell Case", in Goldring Papers, Box 8, Folder 15. Alman noted the diversity of opinion concerning the Sobell case: some wanted to free him; some a new trial; some a review of his case; some simply his relocation from Alcatraz.

⁷⁷ CSJMS Records, Box 4, Folder 12. Fro the subsequent meetings, see Box 4, Folders 13-14 and Box 5, Folder 1.

⁷⁸ Letter, Helen to Morton, 1 October 1955, Morton Sobell Papers.

⁷⁹ "Justice for Sobell Urged by Senator Langer", *New York Times*, 30 September 1955, 4. A leaflet featuring Langer speaking at Carnegie Hall meeting was subsequently produced and widely circulated; see "U.S. Senator William Langer Asks Justice for Morton Sobell", in Committee to Secure Justice for Morton Sobell, 1946-1969, Records, MSS 7, Wisconsin Historical Society Archives, Box 14, Folder 8 (henceforth CSJMS Records).

mother.⁸⁰ Approximately \$3000 was collected. According to Helen, “Everybody agreed it was a real stepping up to a higher level.”⁸¹

FBI harassment

On the same day as the Carnegie Hall rally, September 29, 1955, Helen Sobell was, to use FBI parlance, “tabbed for DETCOM”.⁸² She was already included on the FBI’s Security Index – an FBI list of individuals deemed “definitely dangerous or potentially dangerous to the internal security of the country” – and designated a Key Figure, but this was a higher-level category. It stood for “detention of communists”, and it meant that if a national emergency were declared Helen would be among the first to be arrested and detained without the writ of habeas corpus.⁸³ That she was regarded as such a serious threat now seems ludicrous. But this was indicative of the ongoing importance of the Rosenberg-Sobell case in the FBI’s quest to uncover the full extent of Soviet espionage in America, and the level of its concern about the apparent (successful) efforts of Helen to stymie any cooperation from her husband who could “name names”. The FBI was also concerned about her ability to sway the court of public opinion. It was not just “cottage” meetings or Carnegie Hall rallies⁸⁴ of like-minded supporters that were the problem. When she appeared on television and shows, her potential to influence hundreds of thousands uncommitted Americans increased. The FBI obtained three verbatim copies of her October 11, 1957 interview with John Wingate on his “Night Beat” TV program.⁸⁵ On a Los Angeles TV news program in which she appeared, the host, Lew Erwin, announced “he was giving her a chance to tell her side of the issue” and flashed Sobell Committee literature on the TV screen before interviewing her.⁸⁶ Helen was also interviewed sympathetically on the Ira Blue Show on KGO Radio, San Francisco,⁸⁷ and

⁸⁰ Rose ardently believed in Morton’s innocence, exemplified by her heart-rending plea to Judge Kaufman: “I will swear before God and man of my son’s innocence...”. She appealed as “a mother whose eyes are never dry and whose heart is broken.” Letter, Rose Sobell to Irving R. Kaufman, 29 December 1952, in Sobell Papers, Box 16. Unsurprisingly, the FBI had opened a file on her (100-128869). For a sympathetic portrait, see Madelaine Provinzano, “Learned to be unafraid, says Sobell’s mother”, *Daily World*, 18 January 1969, 10.

⁸¹ Letter, Helen to Morton, 1 October 1955, Sobell Papers.

⁸² SAC, New York, to Director FBI, 29 September 1955, 1-2.

⁸³ Memorandum, “Personal & Confidential”, Assistant Attorney General, Criminal Division to Attorney General, 11 July 1946, “Detention of Communists in the event of sudden difficulty with Russia”, in <https://ia800208.us.archive.org/5/items/CustodialDetentionDETCOMDept.ReferredRetdMaterial.pdf>

⁸⁴ A further mass meeting at Carnegie Hall was held on 15 May 1956.

⁸⁵ See SAC New York, to Assistant to FBI Director, L.B. Nichols, 14 October 1957, 1-9; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 12 October 1957, 2. Not to be outdone, the Sobell Committee obtained sound films of the TV interview and urged local Sobell committees to screen it at house parties. Circular, 18 October 1957, NCSJRC records.

⁸⁶ Memorandum, P.J. Baumgardner to A.H. Belmont, 3 November 1959 (CSJMS [Sobell Committee] FBI file). Co. Two days after the interview, Erwin told the Los Angeles Sobell Committee that his job was in jeopardy. Ibid. Previously (25 October 1959), she appeared on the Dan Lundberg TV show (Los Angeles) in which she addressed the topic “Should Prisoners be Allowed Connubial Visits?”

⁸⁷ See transcript attached to memorandum, SAC, San Francisco to SAC, New York, 17 December 1963.

enlisted the support of the well-known TV celebrity, Steve Allen. More troublingly, in 1959 the FBI reported that Helen had successfully persuaded the executive committee of the Council of Ministers in Phoenix, Arizona to pass a resolution in support of her husband.⁸⁸ The report noted:

The danger here goes far beyond the signing of a resolution, for it can be expected that these ministers, convinced that an injustice has been done on Morton Sobell's case, will mention this fact to their congregations. Thus, a great many people will be influenced by Helen Sobell's propaganda inasmuch as the average person places considerable reliance on a statement made by his minister.⁸⁹

Accordingly, and "[i]n order to counteract the propaganda this woman is spreading", the FBI did three things. First, it instructed agents to request from their informants not only advance details of Helen Sobell's itinerary, but also the identities of "unsuspecting nonsubversive" civic groups and organizations she was scheduled to address. These groups would then be contacted by the town press (through "our friends" in the newspaper industry) to run a "true account" of the Sobell case. In this way the local bona fide civic groups would be apprised of "the facts" and withhold endorsement. This was deemed "a most effective method of neutralizing Helen Sobell's activities" without the hidden hand of the FBI "ever" being revealed.⁹⁰

Second, an energetic FBI operation was commenced in 1960 to discover the addresses (and any other details) of the 360 clergymen who signed the "Clergy Appeal for Morton Sobell". The search was nationwide and involved 23 FBI offices. The names and addresses of 267 of the signatories was sent by J. Edgar Hoover to the House Committee on Un-American Activities with a request that each be sent a copy of HUAC's pamphlet on the Rosenberg-Sobell case, *Trial by Treason*.⁹¹ That clergy were in a position to influence public opinion seemed confirmed by a report that a Unitarian Minister of Los Angeles (identity redacted, but probably Erwin Gaede), who "thought SOBELL's sentence was too severe", had devoted one entire sermon to the Sobell case before his congregation.⁹²

⁸⁸ As the local paper commented, "An attractive, soft-spoken, intelligent brunette named Helen Sobell came to Phoenix last week to sell a bill of goods – and she found an amazing number of takers." "He's no Dreyfus", *Arizona Republic*, 22 September 1959, 7. She also organized a Phoenix chapter of the Sobell Committee; "it was a productive visit". Ibid.

⁸⁹ Memorandum, P.J. Baumgardner to A.H. Belmont, 9 October 1959 CSJMS FBI file, 1.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 2. See also memorandum to Director FBI to SAC, New York, 11 January 1960, CSJMS FBI file.

⁹¹ Memorandum #4166, 4 October 1960, Sobell Committee FBI file.

⁹² FBI report from Carlyle W. Miller, New York, 24 March 1961, 9.

Finally, and more ominously, the Sobell Committee was brought within the jurisdiction of the secret Counterintelligence Program, or COINTELPRO. On April 13, 1962, Special Agents handling the investigations of the Committee and Helen Sobell's activities were instructed to advise the Special Agent coordinating COINTELPRO of all information regarding meetings, picket lines and demonstrations to enable the preparation of "suitable counterintelligence operations".⁹³ There is no subsequent record in the files of the Sobell Committee of these operations. However, that they were undertaken or, at the very least, planned is a measure of the perceived success Helen Sobell achieved in her campaign. Quite possibly (although we cannot be certain), the FBI's sometimes successful efforts to stifle and/or manipulate media coverage of Walter and Miriam Schneirs' *Invitation to an Inquest* (1965) was under the COINTELPRO umbrella.

With its forensically-researched and persuasively-mounted case for the innocence of Sobell and the Rosenbergs,⁹⁴ Helen believed that *Invitation to an Inquest* provided the Sobell Committee with "a mighty instrument" to be used for the freedom of her husband and the vindication of Julius and Ethel. Numerous events were planned to promote the book, popularise its findings, "meet the authors", and raise money.⁹⁵ The FBI was alarmed at this prospect, and "all field officers were instructed ...to keep the Bureau advised regarding this publicity campaign."⁹⁶ In October 1965, the FBI learnt that the Schneirs had approached a Chicago TV station to discuss their book. An assistant FBI director, William C. Sullivan, used an intermediary (a Chicago lawyer) to "instruct" the TV host to "not permit the Schneirs to go on his television program for no good could accrue from it." Sullivan recommended that the Bureau "take careful steps to secure the cooperation of friendly television stations and prevent this subversive effort from being successful. It should be kept off television programs and smothered and forced out of the public eye." Sullivan also recommended that the FBI put the Schneirs "in proper perspective" as part of a strategy to refute

⁹³ Director FBI to SAC New York, 13 April 1962, CSJMS FBI file.

⁹⁴ Nine (generally favourable) reviews of the book in mainstream periodicals and papers can be found in Schappes Papers, Box 19, Folder 10.

⁹⁵ Helen Sobell to "Dear Friend", 24 May 1965, Sobell Committee records. "Helen becomes the organizer for the events around the book...The national tour begins with 10,000 books having been sold": Sobell "Double Exposure", 519. At a memorial meeting for the Rosenbergs on June 17, 1965, at the Sheridan-Atlantic Hotel (NYC), each of the 250 audience members was given a brochure for the Schneirs' new book. Copy of FBI informant's report, "Rosenberg Memorial Meeting, 6/17/65", SA [blank] to SAC New York, 30 June 1965.

⁹⁶ Memorandum, Mr. A. Jones [SAC Cleveland] to Mr. DeLoach, 8 November 1965, Sobell Committee FBI file.

and expose their book.⁹⁷ The Schneirs were also scheduled to appear on November 9, 1965, on Cleveland radio station WKYC for a special 90-minute program with a live audience devoted to their book. The Cleveland FBI office requested authority from FBI Headquarters to communicate with WKYC. Authority was granted and the program cancelled.⁹⁸

Predating, but foreshadowing, COINTELPRO initiatives against the Sobell Committee, Sydney's suitcase went missing on a flight from New York to San Francisco in early 1955. In fact it was stolen (and later returned) by the FBI, which photocopied a trove of documents relating to the Committee's work and which were then placed in her Bureau file. The FBI also increased the number of informants devoted to reporting on the activities of Helen and the Committee. Indicative was their attendance at small events – whether a picnic or a musical evening or a “cottage” meeting in an apartment or home – with only a few dozen people. One instance was a meeting of the sympathetic Far Rockaway Reading Club Circle, attended by 21 in a private home.⁹⁹ Another was a small gathering of the Connecticut Committee for Social Action to whom Helen spoke about her Europe trip; two informants were present.¹⁰⁰ Again and again, an informant's reports included the caveat from the SAC that utmost care be used in reporting the information prior to dissemination in order that the identity of the confidential informant be fully protected. More churlish than infiltration was the FBI's disruption of the “Sobell Thrift Shop”, a rummage store run by Rose Sobell in Washington Heights. Relying on donated goods and (insufficient) volunteer help, it contributed paltry amounts of money to the campaign.¹⁰¹ The FBI headquarters instructed its New York office to explore “effective means” to “combat” the store; it contacted the Investigations Unit of the NYC Excise Tax Division, which in turn ordered the shop to close until full paperwork was received.¹⁰²

Campaigning in the 1960s

In the early 1960s the campaign hit the streets. The picket became the favored tool of maximizing publicity, and President Kennedy was the target. She was tired, Helen said, of using conventional channels to free Morton. By herself, on the Jewish day of atonement, September 20, 1961, Helen Sobell picketed the main gate leading to the White House carrying a placard “Mr. President:

⁹⁷ Memorandum, Sullivan to Director FBI, 16 October 1965; “F.B.I. Tried to Bar Spy Book from TV”, *New York Times*, 2 June 1974.

⁹⁸ Memorandum, Mr. A. Jones [SAC Cleveland] to Mr. DeLoach, 8 November 1965, Sobell Committee FBI file.

⁹⁹ SA [blank] to SAC, New York, 15 October 1964.

¹⁰⁰ SA [blank] to SAC New Haven, 5 March 1964.

¹⁰¹ *National Guardian*, 5 June 1961, 2.

¹⁰² Director FBI to SAC, New York, 3 March 1964; SAC New York to Director FBI, 5 April 1964.

Today is Yom Kippur. Free my husband, Morton Sobell". On October 9, dressed in black, she was joined outside the White House for two hours by Sydney and Mark, hoping their presence might "have some effect in influencing more people to help us".¹⁰³ She had written to Jacqueline Kennedy advising her of the date and requested that she "Please reach out your hand to help".¹⁰⁴ A month later, on November 14, the Sobell family (now including Rose) again picketed the White House and on November 23, the Kennedy home in Hyannis Port, where the President celebrated Thanksgiving.¹⁰⁵ When the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, was accosted by a group of about 20 pickets outside the Lincoln Center, he called to Helen Sobell to "come to Washington where there are people everyone can see"; Sydney replied, "We've tried to see you. We've tried for 11 years to get our father out of jail", while 12-year old Mark simply pleaded "Please, Mr. Kennedy, my father is innocent".¹⁰⁶ On December 17-18, in the rain and the sleet, a weekend vigil in Washington commenced.¹⁰⁷

Throughout 1962, Helen Sobell was the leading organizer and public face of some high-profile picketing. This included the Federal buildings in Chicago, Cleveland, Connecticut, Los Angeles, New York and Washington; hotels in which President Kennedy was staying; the University of California (whose president, Clark Kerr, stated "People have the right to picket peacefully"¹⁰⁸); the US Mission to the United Nations, where Helen directly handed a petition to Ambassador Adlai Stevenson;¹⁰⁹ Independence Hall in Philadelphia; and, again, the White House. At one of the White House pickets, a courageous supporter, the Methodist Minister Rev. David Andrews was arrested for repeatedly kneeling in prayer at the White House fence; he later lost his job.¹¹⁰ At another, Rose Sobell attempted to get herself arrested by slipping through the West gate entrance to the White House and blocking traffic on a driveway. When escorted away, she staged a brief sit-down until sub-freezing temperatures defeated her.¹¹¹ By the spring of 1962, there were now well-

¹⁰³ *Washington Daily News*, 10 October 1961, 8.

¹⁰⁴ Letter, 2 October 1961, Helen Sobell to Jacqueline Kennedy, in Sobell Committee records; memorandum from Protective Research Division, United States Secret Service, to FBI, 10 October 1961, Helen Sobell FBI file.

¹⁰⁵ Helen had already written a heart-felt three-page letter to President Kennedy on 27 April 1961, in Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 6. She later claimed, implausibly, that "between his 1960 election and 1961, [Kennedy] told her he would free her husband". *New York Times*, 21 March 1965, 80.

¹⁰⁶ "Aid Spy, Bob Kennedy Asked", *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 19 November 1961, 19.

¹⁰⁷ Helen described it as "massive beyond all hopes". Sobell, "Double Exposure", 360.

¹⁰⁸ *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 March 1962, 8.

¹⁰⁹ According to Helen ("Double Exposure", 381), he told her it would "give him great pleasure to take up the matter". There is no independent confirmation of this gesture of support from Stevenson.

¹¹⁰ See his impressive 4-page "Proposal for Action", 29 March 1960, and his 7-page "Why I am undertaking non-violent action to appeal for immediate release of Morton Sobell", in Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 2. See also his "Public Statement", Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 25.

¹¹¹ "The Anguish of a Despairing Mother", *Morning Freiheit*, 14 February 1962, 8 (translation of clipping in Rose Sobell FBI file); *Washington Daily News*, 17 January 1962, 7. Rose was never a formal member of the CPUSA, but an

attended “walks for justice” on both the east and west coasts. It was little wonder that an anticommunist columnist was concerned that “with increasing frequency, we see pictures in the non-Communist press of Mrs. Sobell [protesting and picketing].”¹¹²

In 1962, a change of strategy was favored. “Enough of petitions! There is a far more forceful method of symbolizing the depth of personal feeling and sacrifice on this case.” It was proposed, but never materialized, that 7300 supporters, including high profile figures who had signed the petitions, spend one day in jail to, symbolically, “take his place”. “Our country never will have seen anything like this, the impact of thousands of Americans, so sensitive to the personal suffering of an individual, that they are willing to give their bodies for a day in exchange for a man’s freedom... We propose that this be undertaken, and that the committee provide the appropriate forms of people throughout the country to sign to indicate their willingness”.¹¹³

Campaigning Overseas

The campaign was taken overseas, twice, in the winter of 1962, and the summer of 1963. She had already been to Canada, but this was a significant escalation. The Sobell Committee underwrote \$1000 of the cost of the European tour.¹¹⁴ Preparation for the first trip was closely monitored by the FBI, which liaised with the CIA and the State Department so that Legal Attachés in Bonn, London, Paris and Rome and their respective security services were “alerted to subject’s contemplated travel”.¹¹⁵ In turn, the Legal Attachés were encouraged to contact “your sources” and furnish them with her travel itinerary and the information provided (in the memorandum) about her “propagandizing activities”.¹¹⁶

On February 3, accompanied by her son, Helen Sobell departed for London. There, she garnered support for her husband’s case from the philosopher and pacifist Bertrand Russell,¹¹⁷ the

FBI informant describe her as the “wildest communist” he had ever seen. Summary Report, New York, 10 October 1958, 11, Rose Sobell FBI file (100-128869). Rose Pasternak, born in Poland, emigrated to the United States in 1906 and married the Russian-born Louis Sobell, in 1915, when she acquired American citizenship.

¹¹² Jack Lotto, “Pro-Reds on the March”, *New York Journal-American*, 7 April 1962, 11. This column was widely-syndicated in regional newspapers.

¹¹³ “A National Confrontation on the Case of Morton Sobell: Report to Sobell Committees on Basis for Discussion and Arriving at New Program”, [nd], Goldring Papers, Box 8, Folder 15.

¹¹⁴ Sobell Committee Records, Box 35, Folder 5; *National Guardian*, 10 November 1961, 2.

¹¹⁵ J. Edgar Hoover to Director, Central Intelligence Agency, and Office of Security, Department of State, 28 December 1960, 1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹¹⁷ Later, Russell issued a statement that Morton Sobell was “a victim of a vicious act of injustice”. *Hartford Courant*, 31 October 1962, 51. See also the Sobell Committee’s four-page flyer, “The Russell Debate on the case of Morton Sobell”, reprinted from the *Manchester Guardian*, March-April 1956; Legat Attaché, London, to Director FBI, 29

playwright Arnold Wesker, the physicists J.D. Bernal and Patrick Blackett, the Bishop of Woolich, trade union leaders, a group of Labour MPs and a range of other prominent individuals. She received sympathetic publicity from at least five London newspapers. She appeared on TV in Manchester. As she commented, “I have been able to do a great deal in a very short time”.¹¹⁸ On February 11 she flew to Brussels and had an audience with Queen Elisabeth of Belgium, and others. The French were far less welcoming. On arrival at Paris airport she was detained and refused entry. The Legal Attaché had presumably been busy. After remonstrating in vain and then refusing to cooperate, she was carried in the chair in which she was sitting in the interrogation room, and then feet first up the stairs to the waiting airplane. Subsequently, she travelled to Amsterdam and Rome. Concern was expressed about a possible pro-Sobell demonstration outside the US Embassy in Rome at the same time (February 20-22) that Attorney General Robert Kennedy was in Rome.

She was again expelled from France on July 7, 1963. The occasion was her second, two month (June 25-September 1) follow-up trip, again with son Mark.¹¹⁹ The two appeared at an East Berlin news conference on July 14 and on East German television on July 16 in a two-part program entitled “The American Dreyfus”.¹²⁰ The cultural Cold War was being waged at the crossroads of the East-West divide. In Italy, she addressed a press conference in Rome at which a representative from the US Embassy was present and reported that “Mrs. Sobell’s plea for the release of her husband took the form of an attack on Roy Cohn.”¹²¹ In Milan she spoke at a well-attended meeting in Milan, which was reported at length in the Italian Communist Party paper *L’Unità*

March 1959, 1-2. By now, Russell’s support for Sobell had been joined by other international luminaries, including Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Pablo Cassals, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Pablo Picasso. Local support extended even to those anti-communist “New York intellectuals” – Nathan Glazer, Sidney Hook, Irving Kristol – who argued (letter, *New York Times*, 16 February 1960) that, after ten years imprisonment, Sobell, although guilty, should now be released. An especially important local supporter was the chaplain at Alcatraz, Rev. Peter McCormack; see his “Alcatraz was my parish” address, 13 March 1959, in Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 25. His support was extensively used for propaganda purposes; see “Prison Chaplain Certain of Innocence”, in *Today’s Verdict* (“A Newspaper to Secure Justice in the Case of Morton Sobell”), No. 5, July 1959, 1. See also John Godwin, *Alcatraz, 1868-1963* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 184-6, which recounts McCormack’s removal from Alcatraz for his “overzealous” commitment to Sobell.

¹¹⁸ *Evening Standard* [London], 10 February 1962 (in Helen Sobell FBI file); *National Guardian*, 5 March 1962, 3.

¹¹⁹ See Sobell Committee Records, Box 35, Folder 6 for organizational details.

¹²⁰ For a report on the program, see cablegram, Legat, Bonn to Director FBI, 16 July 1963. See also *Washington Post*, 16 July 1963, 1.

¹²¹ Legat, Rome to Director FBI, 13 September 1963. Cohn had been charged with obstructing the course of justice and perjury, and Helen attended his trial in April 1964; see Helen Sobell, “A Persecutor’s Self-Infliction”, *The Minority of One* 6:7 (July 1964), 10-11. Helen and Cohn met each other on 27 November 1960 at the New York radio station WMCA when they debated “Was Morton Sobell Unjustly Convicted of Treason?” A second debate between Sobell and Cohn was held on 14 February 1963.

(June 28, 1963). According to that (translated) report, she concluded her “tense and moving” address:

Within a few days, [President] Kennedy will be among you in Milan. Make him listen to the voice that asks him for justice...Helen bowed her head. There was a long pause. Then, almost whispered, the last words: ‘My son was one year old when his father was imprisoned. Don't you think that's enough.’

L'Unità noted that her heartfelt appeal did not “fall in a vacuum”. A range of proposals for “energetic action”, including a telegram to Kennedy, were approved by the gathering.¹²² In Geneva, she was interviewed by a French reporter for the left wing *Voix Ouvrière*, whom she told: “I have been travelling for two months. Everywhere I found support and understanding...I found resolute friends, convinced of my husband's innocence and ready to act”. The reporter concluded: “Upon these hopeful words, I grasped the hands of Helen and Mark Sobell. In a moment their plane departs...”.¹²³

The support for Morton Sobell enlisted from these two “tours of Europe” echoed the world-wide campaign – concentrated especially in France¹²⁴ – on behalf of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg a decade earlier. But it was within the United States that the campaign was both sustained and intense. The list of organizational and institutional supporters was extensive, as were academics, civil libertarians and, especially, clergymen (including Martin Luther King).¹²⁵ By 1964, the remarkable sum of \$1,000,000 had been raised by the Committee, which operated on a budget of \$50,000 per year.¹²⁶ Much of this money was spent on the following: its newspaper (the irregularly published *Today's Verdict*); advertising; postal costs; venue hire costs; lawyers' fees (although most – Benjamin Dreyfus, Arthur Kinoy, William Kunstler, Marshall Perlin, Malcolm Sharp – worked *pro bono* or at cut rates); bus hire fees (to ferry supporters to its “Freedom Weekend” in Washington in November 1960); and costs incurred making a record album, “The

¹²² Legat, Rome to Director FBI, 13 September 1963, 2-4.

¹²³ Document entitled “Translation From French”, 27 September 1963, Helen Sobell FBI file.

¹²⁴ Clune, *Executing the Rosenbergs*, 59-60, 86-7, 104-5, 125-6.

¹²⁵ See, for example, Memo #59, “Sobell Case Reaching New Level This Spring”, 12 May 1960, NCSJSC Papers, for evidence of the scope and diversity of pledged support. See also the thick folder, “Correspondence: in support of Sobell, 1954-1972”, Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 8. Such support is also detailed in the 16-page Report to President Eisenhower covering the period 1 January 1959 to 1 January 1960, and “Further Developments in Morton Sobell Case Since Report to President Eisenhower was Submitted”, March 1960 and June 1960, in CSJMS Records, Box 2, Folder 7.

¹²⁶ See the six-page document “Financing Work” [1960], Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 5.

Truth Shall Set Me Free” (launched June 17, 1960), and a 30-minute, 16mm film, “Morton Sobell – A Plea for Justice” (1962).¹²⁷ It also paid Helen’s salary (\$60pw) and funded her travel. Significant costs were also incurred for the printing and dissemination of a wide range of literature that included: 8000 copies of the complete trial manuscript (a boxed set of 8 volumes at 1715 pages that sold for \$6); 10,000 copies of John Wexley’s *The Judgement of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* (1955); 5000 copies of Malcolm Sharp’s *Was Justice Done?* (1956); the 44-page *Prisoner On Our Conscience: The Story of Morton Sobell; The Sobell Case: an analysis* (by Law Professor Stephen Love); the 32-page *The Case of Morton Sobell* (by D.N. Pritt); the 10-page *The Scientist in Alcatraz: 16 Questions and Answers on the Case of Morton Sobell; The Facts in the Rosenberg-Sobell Case 1950-1964*; the 8-page *Atomic Scientist Dr Harold C. Urey Asks Justice for Morton Sobell*; voluminous reprints of favourable sermons,¹²⁸ articles, editorials, letters, reviews and speeches; and the 4-page pamphlet entitled *Innocent*. And at the epicenter of all this – writing, speaking, picketing, consulting with lawyers, reporting on penitentiary meetings with Morton,¹²⁹ and endlessly travelling – was Helen Sobell.

Behind her, of course, stood the Sobell Committee and its legion of activists. However, post 1953, according to the co-founder of the original Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case, David Alman, the successor Sobell committee was split into two camps: between those who favored a vigorous campaign for Morton, and those who were “very iffy” about a campaign. This latter group, a minority – but including Emanuel (“Manny”) Bloch – were “suspicious” of him because, they believed, he had not taken the stand at the trial in 1951 “for a strategic purpose”, to give himself more freedom to make a deal with the prosecution at some point during or after the trial. In short, they believed “it was likely that Mort had cooperated with the DOJ [Department of Justice] in some way”.¹³⁰ This second camp wished to continue the campaign for the Rosenbergs “for historical and legal reasons” but were hostile to a joint campaign with Sobell.

¹²⁷ The film was sent overseas for dubbing and distribution; *Variety*, 7 November 1962, in Sobell Papers. Each print cost \$75 and the purchase of 30-minutes of TV time to screen it cost \$1716.

¹²⁸ One sermon in particular represented a powerful indictment of the sentence imposed in 1951: Rabbi Philip Horowitz, *The Case of Morton Sobell: A Sermon* (23 December 1960), copy in Schappes Papers, TAM.179, Box 19, Folder 10 (Schappes was the editor of *Jewish Life*).

¹²⁹ For an evocative account of one penitentiary visit, see the full-page article, “Let it be soon...I’m thirsty for freedom”, *National Guardian*, 15 June 1959, 3.

¹³⁰ Email correspondence with David Alman, 2 February 2014; 13 April 2017; 20 May 2017. Alman, always generous-spirited, referred to “condemnations of the man [Sobell] by those among us who denied him at least the people’s justice earned by the Rosenbergs.” As the co-founder of the original Rosenberg Committee, Alman was a hostile witness before HUAC (investigating the NCSJRC) in August 1955.

Helen undaunted

Helen would have none of this ambiguity. She was so utterly convinced that a gross injustice had been inflicted upon her husband that in 1950 she gave up her own career as a physicist and devoted herself completely to the campaign. The connection between narrative identity and “purposeful engagement” was mentioned at the outset of this paper. Her campaigning became her life, and it was certainly a purposeful (if formidable) *raison d’être*. She admitted to a Minneapolis journalist in 1960 that there were moments of sadness and despondency. “But”, she added, “my job is such a responsibility that I have no room for discouragement”.¹³¹ Later, she said, “I cannot afford to waste my internal resources on being bitter.”¹³² For 14 years, she was a full-time activist. It was not until 1964 that she took up a part time job teaching science in a progressive private school; this, she said, “gave me some perspective.”¹³³

But it did not slow her down. As she wrote acerbically to Morton: “don’t be so sarcastic about my lack of interest or involvement”.¹³⁴ With local Sobell Committees now established across the country, the travelling diminished but the meetings and the mobilising continued. And so did the FBI reports. There were no fewer than five detailed reports on one meeting-rally at Carnegie Hall on June 19, 1963,¹³⁵ although for a large meeting at Cooper Union in Astor Place, Manhattan, on April 23, 1964, the Bureau was dependent on a report in the communist Jewish paper, *Morning Freiheit*.¹³⁶ As the 1960s advanced, and the likelihood of a retrial receded, the Sobell Committee focused its energies on the commutation of Sobell’s sentence, appeals to the Parole Board, a presidential pardon and the crediting of eight months’ “time served” in 1950-51.¹³⁷ In March 1965, she dispatched an appeal for clemency to Ladybird Johnson, followed in August 1966 by a “historic petition” to President Johnson bearing thousands of signatures seeking a full pardon. In June 1966, it organised a “Freedom Rally” and “Truth Exhibit” at the Hotel Sheraton-Atlantic, NYC, as part of the “Sobell Freedom Week”. In January 1967, a mail-out of “informational material” to 40,000 people was completed, and in April 1967, Helen organised a 50th birthday

¹³¹ *Minneapolis Star*, 16 June 1960, 24.

¹³² *New York Daily World*, 16 January 1969.

¹³³ *Courier-Journal* [Louisville, KY], 21 March 1965, 39. The school was the Little Red School House in Bleeker Street, NYC (attended previously by her son, Mark, and Robert Meeropol).

¹³⁴ Postcard, stamped 2 May 1965, Sobell papers. In the draft (but not the published version) of his *Doing Time*, Morton harshly wrote: “Helen also thought up of an excuse for her inaction... As if this wasn't enough, we were also having a running battle over Helen's having joined the Book of the Month Club.” Draft, “Doing Time”, 49, Sobell Papers.

¹³⁵ Reports filed under NY 100-107111, and dated 20, 23, 29 June 1963.

¹³⁶ SAC, New York to SAC, New Haven, 11 May 1964.

¹³⁷ In June 1966, Helen was instrumental in changing the name of the Committee from Committee to Secure Justice for Morton Sobell to Committee to Free Morton Sobell; it was, she said, too late to give him justice.

celebration for Morton at the Hunter College Auditorium.¹³⁸ In 1968, she initiated a short-lived campaign to have an ombudsman appointed to review the case.¹³⁹ And all the while it issued a constant stream of circulars (written mostly by Helen) appealing for funds and informing supporters of initiatives.¹⁴⁰ “We manage to do the impossible, again and again”, Helen wrote. “You [Morton] can question the worth of the entire effort, but you must agree some steps...have been taken toward revealing the truth in this case.”¹⁴¹ By the truth, she meant his “innocence”.

Free at last

And then, finally, it happened. On January 14, 1969, Morton, thin-faced and thinning hair, was released from Lewisburg Federal Penitentiary.¹⁴² Helen heard that he was to be freed only hours before he arrived by bus at Port Authority at 8pm. Mark told a reporter, “It’s about time – my father was innocent”.¹⁴³ A journalist described the scene:

There was the central nucleus of radiant people holding flowers: his wife, his mother, his son, his [sic] daughter, some friends and supporters. From them outward was a sea of news people. Cameramen, reporters, photographers, jostling each other, swearing, pushing, breaking out in fights, pressing ever inward on the Sobell family. The bus arrived at about 8 p.m. ...The crush that followed was horrific, and it was all the family could do to stick together and get themselves into the waiting cab. Then they drove off. That was the way it happened, after the long years of waiting.¹⁴⁴

The next day Helen and son Mark appeared on New York television and some ugly, vitriolic letters began to arrive. Some were explicitly anti-Semitic. One scoffed at her “phony plea” she made on TV about “that ‘wonderful’ husband of yours. Too bad he isn’t with the other two RED [sic] scum they burned.” Another, from “An American First”, called hippy-looking Mark a

¹³⁸ Circular from Sobell Committee, 26 January 1967, Schappes Papers, TAM.179, Box 19, Folder 10; see also circular, 23 October 1967 for a detailed report on “summer activities”. Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 4.

¹³⁹ See “Is an Ombudsman the key to Morton Sobell’s freedom?” [1968], Sobell Committee Records, Box 28, Folder 18.

¹⁴⁰ These circulars from the mid to late 1960s, under the Committee to Free Morton Sobell banner, are conveniently grouped together in the Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 4.

¹⁴¹ Sobell, “Double Exposure”, 480. This was not the first time he expressed scepticism about the efficacy of the Committee and, by default, the legitimacy of Helen’s role.

¹⁴² Although initially on probation until 1981 and required to report to a parole officer, he was freed from parole in June 1976.

¹⁴³ “Morton Sobell Free as Spy Term Ends”, *International Herald Tribune*, 17 January 1969, 1.

¹⁴⁴ Nora North, “Morton Sobell comes home to a long-waiting family”, *New York Daily Herald*, 16 January 1969; see also “Return from Oblivion”, *Time* 93:4 (24 January 1969).

“repulsive hunk of shit with long hair and nauseating fungus growth...”.¹⁴⁵ Subsequently, Morton himself held a press conference, at which he affirmed his innocence and outlined plans for vindicating himself and the Rosenbergs.¹⁴⁶ In the subsequent television interviews, on February 3rd and 4th, Sobell was, according to Helen, unable to “present enough of his ideas”.¹⁴⁷ The final meeting of the Committee to Free Morton Sobell was held on Wednesday April 9, 1969. Morton attended as did FBI informant NY T-1. This informant reported that Morton was given a gift: a check of \$10,000. He said it would “be presumptuous of him to thank the Committee...because he had actually been part of the Committee in absentia.”¹⁴⁸ The lease on its Fifth Ave office expired on April 30 and was not renewed. 600 remaining copies of the trial transcript were mailed to US libraries and its 42 boxes of records were collected and catalogued by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. A threadbare “National Rosenberg-Sobell Committee” was formed – its slogan was “For Exoneration, For Remembrance” – and began to operate out of the Sobell home at 30 Charlton Street, New York. But without its main *raison d’être*, interest, donations and activism all flagged.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, Helen herself acknowledged the inevitable. The Committee, she stated at its final meeting, could have tried to continue “teaching lessons”, but henceforth “the activity of 1969 must center around 1969 issues”.¹⁵⁰

Epilogue

And, then, on September 11, 2008, the unthinkable happened. A veteran *New York Times* journalist, Sam Roberts, interviewed Morton Sobell; Roberts was seeking his response to the recent release of Grand Jury testimony during the Rosenberg case. Roberts asked, nonchalantly and “almost facetiously” whether he was in fact a Soviet spy. For the first time publicly, after 57 years of unequivocal denial, Morton Sobell admitted that he was. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, call it

¹⁴⁵ Letter from T.C. Bradley, 15 January 1968, Sobell Papers.

¹⁴⁶ Circular, Sobell Committee, 28 January 1969, Goldring Papers, Box 11, Folder 4.

¹⁴⁷ Letter, Chief U.S. Probation Officer to Joseph N. Shore, Parole Executive, 5 February 1969 concerning these television appearances. Sobell Papers.

¹⁴⁸ Document entitled “Morton Sobell” prepared by the New York division of the FBI, 6 July 1971, in Morton Sobell FBI file

¹⁴⁹ However, the Sobells did organize a small vigil marking the 16th anniversary of the Rosenbergs’ executions in Foley Square, NYC, on 19 June 1969; *New York Times*, 20 June 1969 (which carried a photo of Morton and Rose Sobell at the vigil; Helen was in hospital). Much later, a National Committee to Reopen the Rosenberg Case was formed in which the Sobells were not involved; for some of its newsletters in the late 1980s, see Virginia Gardner Papers, Tamiment Library TAM.100, Box 2, Folder 55; for its records, see TAM.174, boxes 1-22.

¹⁵⁰ FBI document entitled “Morton Sobell”, 2. One “1969 issue” was the Chicago 8 conspiracy trial; the Sobells called for donations to the Chicago Defense Fund. Sobell Papers. In the summer of 1974, they visited Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union; see Helen’s letter detailing their “experiences and impressions” in Simon and Sophie Gerson Papers, Tamiment Library, TAM.330, Box 10, Folder 11.

that”.¹⁵¹ This became a front-page scoop the next day. In fact, he admitted as much to Walter and Miriam Schneir on July 28 during the first of eight interviews. The *New Yorker* had already expressed interest in a longer piece written by the Schneirs concerning Morton’s espionage, and was about to proceed with publication when Sam Roberts “scooped” them. Consequently, the *New Yorker* dropped the idea, leaving the Schneirs, who had submitted a detailed proposal, highly disappointed.¹⁵² Irrespective of its timing, his confession certainly, according to stepdaughter Sydney, “complicated history and the personal histories of the many millions of people, all over the world, who gave time, energy, money and heart to the struggle to support his claims of innocence.”¹⁵³

Sobell was not a mere bit player implicated in espionage only when Russia was “our gallant ally” during WWII.¹⁵⁴ Over the July 4 holiday weekend in 1948, he, Julius Rosenberg, the aeronautical engineer William Perl, and a fourth man frantically copied classified documents that, apparently, were of significant value to the Soviet military. On the Monday, Perl returned them, and Sobell and Rosenberg together delivered a large box filled with canisters of undeveloped 35-mm film to Russian agents on a Long Island Rail Road platform.¹⁵⁵ In the summer of 1948 there was also a second espionage operation.¹⁵⁶ So Sobell, whose KGB cover name was SENYA, was a key figure in the nine-person Rosenberg spy ring, both during and after WWII.¹⁵⁷ This fact, it seems, was kept from his wife, mother, son and stepdaughter while each in varying degrees petitioned, picketed, fundraised, travelled and spoke on his behalf. His rationale for duplicity was spelt out much later:

I never thought of my conviction as simply a frame up...but as part of our national policy at a particular period in history... Nor did I feel that my life had been wasted ...The struggle is the thing. It is the development of the people in the course of the struggle that became most crucial during the heyday of McCarthyism...[My] case served as a vehicle for many

¹⁵¹ Sam Roberts, “57 Years Later, Figure in Rosenberg Case Says He Spied for Soviets”, *New York Times*, 12 September 2008, A1, A14; Sam Roberts, *The Brother: The Untold Story of the Rosenberg Case* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014 [2nd ed.]), 506. In contrast, when Alger Hiss died in 1996 at the age of 92, he was still proclaiming his innocence, as does his son, Tony, to this day.

¹⁵² Telephone conversation with Miriam Schneir, 6 May 2017, email correspondence 12 May 2017.

¹⁵³ <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/21/weekinreview/21roberts.html>

¹⁵⁴ In a letter to the *New York Times* (18 September 2008, 2), he wrote “As for me, I helped an ally (admittedly illegally) during World War II.”

¹⁵⁵ <http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-sobell-confession/article/554817>. FBI documents on William Perl can be found in the Reuben Papers, Tamiment Library, Box 20, Folder 32.

¹⁵⁶ Schneir, *Final Verdict*, 148.

¹⁵⁷ For the scale and significance of Sobell’s espionage in 1944-45, see Feklisov and Kostin, *The Man Behind the Rosenbergs*, 149; Steven T. Usdin, *Engineering Communism: How Two Americans Spied for Stalin and Founded the Soviet Silicon Valley* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 106-7.

progressive people to register their opposition to the Establishment's policies during the most crucial days of McCarthyism.¹⁵⁸

One who certainly knew the truth at the time was Alexander Feklisov, a KGB colonel and the “handler” of the Rosenberg spy group. He had decided to “go public and tell the true story in the Rosenberg case”, when interviewed for a television documentary “The Rosenberg File: Case Closed”, screened on March 23, 1997.¹⁵⁹ In that context he wrote an imploring private letter to Morton on January 22, 1998. He addressed Morton as one of “Julius’s surviving comrades-in arms”, and expressed admiration for “standing firm” in not confessing. He wrote: “I plead you [sic] let us all stand up together and [you] go into the records of history as courageous person and reliable friend”.¹⁶⁰ Sobell did not answer and, for another decade, kept his silence.

While Feklisov certainly knew, that all-important question remains: did Helen? Here we enter that phenomenological territory where the “place of the subjective” (alluded to earlier) is restored. Injecting the subjective enlarges our capacity for historical understanding, but is also perilous. A line is crossed where, in the absence of direct access to the past, the historian becomes more reliant on making assumptions, drawing inferences and judging moral positions. Subjectivity also means we depend on the stories historical actors tell themselves and others. In attempting to grapple with “did Helen know” – which is highly pertinent to whether she was complicit in or betrayed by Morton’s false claims of innocence – we must turn to these stories and to that most subjective of sources: the perspectives of husband and daughter.

Morton was interviewed on eight occasions between July September 2008 by Walter and Miriam Schneir. In the first interview, he stated explicitly that Helen all along knew of his espionage activities and “may have participated on one occasion [in espionage]”.¹⁶¹ This interview was not

¹⁵⁸ He added: “By 1965 I felt that the case had outlived its usefulness in this regard, hence I urged Helen to disband it” (which she didn't). Draft, “Doing Time” 3, 5. Sobell Papers. This did not appear in the published version. The pagination of this draft manuscript is highly unreliable.

¹⁵⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/1997/03/22/arts/a-spy-and-his-wife-or-2-spies-or-none.html>

¹⁶⁰ Letter to Morton Sobell, 22 January 1988, in Sobell Papers. The letter was given by Feklisov to Ed Wierzbowski, the executive producer of the documentary when Wierzbowski was filming in Moscow. In his memoir, Feklisov wrote: “he [Sobell] says he doesn't know who I am. I am not about to condemn him. My intent in naming him is to rehabilitate the name of the Rosenbergs as well as his own. How can one do that without telling the truth?” Feklisov and Kostin, *The Man Behind the Rosenbergs*, 335.

¹⁶¹ It is possible (but unproven) that this “one occasion” may have occurred in April 1955. Allegedly, Reino Häyhänen and Rudolf Ivanovich Abel (aka Vilyam Fisher), both senior Soviet intelligence officers, were instructed by Moscow to deliver \$5000 to Helen Sobell with a view to recruiting her as an agent; because her apartment was guarded by the police, they instead buried the money in Bear Mountain Park on the Hudson and the payment was not effected. According to his testimony in the Federal District Court, Brooklyn, on 15 October 1957, Lt. Col. Häyhänen, who

taped but notes were carefully taken and checked afterwards. They were re-checked in May 2017. In subsequent interviews, according to Miriam, “Morty never said anything to contradict his statement that Helen knew and may have participated once”.¹⁶² If, indeed, Helen conspired with Morton to keep silent about his spying, and loudly proclaimed his innocence to enlist supporters and sustain the campaign, we may judge her harshly. After all, those self-sacrificing members of Sobell committees across the country, those multitudes who donated, marched and signed petitions, and – significantly – her own children who campaigned alongside her, were all knowingly and deliberately deceived. In this narrative she believed, like Morton, that “the struggle is the thing”, that commitment to the cause transcended commitment to the truth, that the government was repressive and the trial corrupt or flawed or dictated by the political excesses of McCarthyist America. However, we must remember that in 2008, when Morton spoke to the Schneirs, Helen could not contradict his story: she was dead. That story, quite plausibly, was told by Morton conscious of posterity’s judgment. It meant he had *not* deceived or betrayed his wife when she had continually denied his guilt throughout his long incarceration. And it was a story that convinced the Schneirs.

There is a contrary narrative. Helen’s daughter, Sydney, remained extremely close, both personally and politically, to her mother throughout the last decades of her life. She is firmly convinced Helen was not complicit in Morton’s strategic lies. “I’m certain”, she said, that Helen never thought he was guilty. “I’m sure Helen went to her death thinking he was innocent, as we all did.” As a highly principled person with a “deep sense of morality” Helen, she emphasised, was “incapable of participating in a cover-up”. Furthermore, “I never saw a bit of guilt or responsibility for spying in Helen’s conversation leak out. Never.”¹⁶³ For the historian, there is no indication in any of the historical records (including intensely private correspondence) that Helen was duplicitous. The evidence of a woman ready and willing to perpetrate a massive con trick on her children, her committee or her supporters, is simply not there. What is possible, of course, is that she learnt the truth from Morton *after* his release. If so, this would accord with the recollection of the

defected to the West in May 1957, subsequently “had located Mrs. Sobell and given her the money [a second \$5000].” FBI report, William D. Donahue, 28 February 1958, Helen Sobell FBI file; *Gastonia Gazette*, 16 October 1957, 15. In February 1962, Abel was exchanged for U2 pilot Gary Powers on the “Bridge of Spies”, Glienicke bridge in Berlin.

¹⁶² Telephone conversation with Miriam Schneir, NY, 6 May 2017; email correspondence 8 March 2014, 12 May 2017. Morton’s second wife, Nancy, learnt the truth only when she sat in on one of the interviews with the Schneirs. The Schneirs also urged Sobell to tell his son, Mark, the truth before Roberts’ *New York Times* story appeared. According to Michael Meeropol (conversation, 10 May 2017), he did not.

¹⁶³ Email correspondence with Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, 22 February 2017, 1 March 2017, 3 March 2017, 12 May 2017.

Rosenbergs' elder son, Michael Meeropol, of a conversation with both in the early 1980s from which he inferred that she knew.¹⁶⁴

Whatever judgement one makes, it cannot be denied that it was primarily due to Helen that Morton did not fade away in prison, personally or publically, and was able to say, not without hubris, "I didn't survive. I thrived".¹⁶⁵ Instead, she made him a *cause célèbre*. And she made people care. As Morton acknowledged, "the only reason he remained alive was because people on the outside cared".¹⁶⁶ She was assertive, articulate, resilient, tenacious and tireless. Her pivotal role in mobilizing support from such a diversity of sources, from so many locations and over such a long period of time was a remarkable achievement. With the exception of the civil rights movement, very few political campaigns in modern American history can match hers for its longevity, and its varied and imaginative strategies. By becoming a celebrity in left-wing circles, and by engaging in politically meaningful work, she gained a distinctiveness that her career in physics, abruptly halted in 1950, would never have provided. She had, in fact, constructed her own "narrative identity". And although hidden from history, her contribution was substantial: as one correspondent noted in 1967, "your own single-minded dedication to the case of Morton's freedom and the larger cause of justice in America has put us all in your debt."¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Personal conversation with Michael Meeropol, Cold Spring, NY, 10 May 2017.

¹⁶⁵ His response to a comment that it was a miracle that he had survived in prison; the occasion was the screening of Ivy Meeropol's "Heir to an Execution", *Spokesman Review*, 10 February 2005.

¹⁶⁶ SAC New York to SAC, Newark 9 December 1965, 2.

¹⁶⁷ Undated note [April 1967] from J.J. Weinstein in response to invitation to speak at "50th Birthday Rally" for Morton Sobell on 11 April 1967, Schappes Papers, Box 19, Folder 10.