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## Figure in Rosenberg Case Admits to Soviet Spying

By [SAM ROBERTS](#)

In 1951, Morton Sobell was tried and convicted with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg on espionage charges. He served more than 18 years in Alcatraz and other federal prisons, traveled to Cuba and Vietnam after his release in 1969 and became an advocate for progressive causes.

Through it all, he maintained his innocence.

But on Thursday, Mr. Sobell, 91, dramatically reversed himself, shedding new light on a case that still fans smoldering political passions. In an interview, he admitted for the first time that he had been a Soviet spy.

And he implicated his fellow defendant [Julius Rosenberg](#), in a conspiracy that delivered to the Soviets classified military and industrial information and what the American government described as the secret to the atomic bomb.

In the interview with The New York Times, Mr. Sobell, who lives in the Riverdale neighborhood of the Bronx, was asked whether, as an electrical engineer, he turned over military secrets to the Soviets during World War II when they were considered allies of the United States and were bearing the brunt of Nazi brutality. Was he, in fact, a spy?

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, call it that,” he replied. “I never thought of it as that in those terms.”

Mr. Sobell also concurred in what has become a consensus among historians: that [Ethel Rosenberg](#), who was executed with her husband, was aware of Julius’s espionage, but did not actively participate. “She knew what he was doing,” he said, “but what was she guilty of? Of being Julius’s wife.”

Mr. Sobell made his revelations on Thursday as the [National Archives](#), in response to a lawsuit from the nonprofit National Security Archive, historians and journalists, released most of the grand jury testimony in the espionage conspiracy case against him and the Rosenbergs.

Coupled with some of that grand jury testimony, Mr. Sobell’s admission bolsters what has become a widely held view among scholars: that Mr. Rosenberg was, indeed, guilty of spying, but that his wife was at most a bit player in the conspiracy and may have been framed by complicit prosecutors.

The revelations on Thursday “teach us what people will do to get a conviction,” said Bruce Craig, a historian and the former director of the National Coalition for History, a nonprofit educational organization. “They took somebody who they basically felt was guilty and by hook or crook they were going to get a jury to find him guilty.”

The Rosenbergs' younger son, Robert Meeropol, described Mr. Sobell's confession Thursday as "powerful," but said he wanted to hear it firsthand. "I've always said that was a possibility," Mr. Meeropol said, referring to the question of his father's guilt. "This is certainly evidence that would corroborate that possibility as a reality."

In the interview, Mr. Sobell drew a distinction between atomic espionage and the details of radar and artillery devices that he said he stole for the Russians. "What I did was simply defensive, an aircraft gun," he said. "This was defensive. You cannot plead that what you did was only defensive stuff, but there's a big difference between giving that and stuff that could be used to attack our country."

(One device mentioned specifically by Mr. Sobell, however, the SCR 584 radar, is believed by military experts to have been used against American aircraft in Korea and Vietnam.)

Echoing a consensus among scientists, Mr. Sobell also maintained that the sketches and other atomic bomb details that the government said were passed along to Julius Rosenberg by Ethel's brother, David Greenglass, were of little value to the Soviets, except to corroborate what they had already gleaned from other moles. Mr. Greenglass was an Army machinist at Los Alamos, N.M., where the weapon was being built.

"What he gave them was junk," Mr. Sobell said of Julius Rosenberg, his classmate at [City College of New York](#) in the 1930s.

The charge was conspiracy, though, which meant that the government had to prove only that the Rosenbergs were intent on delivering military secrets to a foreign power. "His intentions might have been to be a spy," Mr. Sobell added.

After David Greenglass was arrested, Mr. Sobell fled to Mexico and lived under false names until he was captured — kidnapped, he maintained — and returned to the United States in August 1950. He said he was innocent, but his lawyer advised him not to testify at his trial. He was sentenced to 30 years imprisonment and was released in 1969. The Rosenbergs were executed in the electric chair at Sing Sing in 1953 after President [Dwight D. Eisenhower](#) turned down an appeal for clemency.

In an interview for a 2001 book by this reporter, "The Brother," Mr. Greenglass acknowledged that he had lied when he testified that his sister had typed his notes about the bomb — the single most incriminating evidence against her. His allegation emerged months after Mr. Greenglass and his wife testified before the grand jury and only weeks before the 1951 trial.

Government prosecutors later acknowledged that they had hoped that a conviction and the possibility of a death sentence against Ethel Rosenberg would persuade her husband to confess and implicate others, including some agents known to investigators through secretly intercepted Soviet cables.

That strategy failed, said William P. Rogers, who was the deputy attorney general at the time. "She called

our bluff,” he said in “The Brother.”

The grand jury testimony released on Thursday by the National Archives appeared to poke even more holes in the case against Ethel Rosenberg, who was 34 and the mother of two young sons when she appeared before the grand jury and was arrested on the courthouse steps after her testimony.

Bowing to David Greenglass’s objections, a federal judge declined to release his testimony. But the transcripts released on Thursday reveal that his wife, Ruth, in her grand jury appearance, never mentioned typing by Ethel Rosenberg, said she transcribed Mr. Greenglass’s notes in longhand on at least one occasion herself and placed Ethel Rosenberg out of earshot during several important conversations.

“It means the grand jury testimony by Ruth Greenglass directly contradicts the charge against Ethel Rosenberg that put her in the electric chair,” said Thomas S. Blanton, director of the National Security Archive, a nonprofit group based at [George Washington University](#) that challenges government secrecy.

[Ronald Radosh](#), a scholar of the case and a plaintiff in the suit to release the grand jury minutes, said the testimony “confirms what we always suspected, that they manufactured the typing story at the last minute.”

Still, the grand jury transcripts indicate that Mrs. Rosenberg was aware of the conspiracy. Spying was broached the first time by her husband in 1944 at the Rosenbergs’ Knickerbocker Village apartment in Lower Manhattan, Mrs. Greenglass testified. “I was horrified,” she said, but added that Mrs. Rosenberg “urged me to talk to David. She felt that even if I was against it, I should at least discuss it with him and hear what he had to say.”

Mrs. Greenglass, who died earlier this year, said her sister-in-law also was in the kitchen when Julius bisected the side of a Jell-O box that a courier would use as a signal to retrieve atomic secrets from David Greenglass.

But David C. Vladeck, the lawyer who argued for the grand jury transcripts to be released, said they had inconsistencies with the trial testimony that might have been used to undermine prosecution witnesses.

“Imagine if the Rosenbergs had a good lawyer,” he said.

Among other things, Harry Gold, a confessed courier for the spy ring, told the grand jury that “everything I have done for the past 15 years, practically all of my adult life, was based on lies and deceptions.” He said he had met Julius Rosenberg, which contradicted his other accounts. And he does not invoke before the grand jury the damning password, “I come from Julius,” that he mentioned during the trial.

The nearly 1,000 pages of grand jury transcripts are peppered with aggressive, sometimes belligerent jousting by prosecutors with witnesses, insights into how they defended themselves, and factoids that aficionados of the case are likely to parse for years.

James Kilsheimer, the only surviving prosecutor of the Rosenberg-Sobell case, said on Thursday, “We always thought Sobell was guilty, and we knew that Julius was.” He said that the trial testimony about

Ethel's typing was not inconsistent with what Ruth Greenglass told the grand jury but was developed by him "during the pretrial process."

Mr. Sobell, who was never implicated in atomic espionage, has been ailing, but says his long-term memory is sound. He was interviewed a number of times over the summer by Walter and Miriam Schneir, who wrote a damning indictment of the Rosenberg prosecution years ago, but who, on the basis of decoded Soviet cables and other information, have since reconsidered their verdict that Julius was completely innocent. In those interviews, Mr. Sobell has implicated himself in espionage.

"Do I believe Morty? Yes," Mr. Schneir, who is writing a magazine article about Mr. Sobell, said on Thursday. "The details that he's given us so far we've been able to check the peripheral parts, and they check out."

Most of the protagonists in the case, Mr. Sobell included, were committed Communists at the time they spied for the Soviets. "Now, I know it was an illusion," Mr. Sobell said. "I was taken in."

Robert Meeropol, the Rosenbergs' son, said that even if he were to accept Mr. Sobell's verdict, "It's not the end of what happened to my mother and it's not the end of understanding what happened to due process."