

The Open Road Interview with Martin Sostre^(MS)

In conversation with David Spaner ^(DS)

The Open Road Interview
with Martin Sostre

In Conversation
with David Spaner

Compiled in 2021 by the
Martin Sostre Institute

Ⓐ Anti-copyright 2021

Labor Donated

Black Puerto Rican anarchist Martin Sostre recently won his release from prison after a nine year ordeal of “torture, brutality and racism.”

Martin was arrested in his Afro-Asian Bookstore shortly after the ghetto rebellion in Buffalo during the summer of 1967. Since the state couldn't implicate him in any illegal political activity, he was booked on contrived dope charges and brought before a white judge and an all-white jury where he was bound, gagged and sentenced to 30-41 years.

The prosecution's chief witness later recanted his testimony and admitted his involvement in the police frame-up. The arresting offi-

cer was later indicted himself for stealing over \$100,000 worth of heroin from the police laboratory. But Martin remained in prison. For nine years he was subjected to beatings, solitary confinement and more trials. And for nine years he was unwavering in his resistance. He refused to submit to rectal examinations or shave his beard. He organized unions, led strikes, started a prison newspaper, wrote articles and pamphlets, and became a self-taught jailhouse lawyer, winning many landmark decisions for prisoners.

Because of Martin's courageous resistance and his organizational skills, an international movement coalesced around the demand for his release. The London based Amnesty International wrote that he had been imprisoned, “not for his crimes, but for his ideas.” Finally, after years of rallies, letters, petitions, sit-ins and other actions, New York Governor Carey succumbed to the pressure and granted Martin clemency last December.

Martin's making plans to open another bookstore. He's also working through New York assemblywoman Marie Runyon's office so he can have access to the prisons where he continues to work with inmates, working in housing court to assist tenants in their struggle against slumlords, and maintaining and expanding the activities of his defense committees. The Open Road recently spoke with Martin in his office in Harlem.

The Open Road Interview with Martin Sostre

DAVID SPANER While in prison you became a ‘jailhouse lawyer.’ When did you get into law and what effects on prison life have your suits had?

MARTIN SOSTRE Well, as you know, I did a previous sentence in the fifties and that’s when I became a jailhouse lawyer. As a jailhouse lawyer I was fortunate to have won quite a few victories that advanced the struggle for human rights. Many call it prisoners’ rights but I don’t make any separation: basically it’s human rights because this is a prison out here too. As long as you are oppressed by the State and the State is in control this is a minimum security prison. Inside is maximum security.

So I won the right to read the type of literature, political literature, that prisoners were denied; the right to send letters to your attorney without them being censored: the right to not be put in the box (solitary confinement) arbitrarily by any flunky hack without being notified of the charges in advance and without going through some sort of trial, although it’s a

sham. They pervert everything, but now they have to give you charges in advance and you have a right to defend yourself in a little bullshit hearing. Whereas before some pig would grab you and say “okay, you’re going to the box.” And that was it. You wouldn’t find out what you were going for until after you were in. I also won the right to help other prisoners in their legal actions. Before, if you were a jailhouse lawyer and they caught you with another prisoner’s papers that you were helping him with, that would be enough grounds to put you in the box. In my previous sentence I also won the right of Muslims to practice their religion.

DS Your legal suit, *Sostre vs. Rockefeller*, modified the use of rectal searches, but after another inmate, Jimmy Sullivan, overheard guards “plot and plan” to either kill you or charge you with attacking them, you were beaten by seven guards for refusing to submit to a rectal, then convicted of assaulting them. Could you elaborate on that incident a bit?

MS Yeah, sure. In 1970, when federal judge Motley first ruled that the rectal examination was dehumanizing and degrading, it would have seemed that the rectal examination would be prohibited, but it was not. You’re dealing with a closed society (in prison). They have thirty foot walls. They have gun towers. Nobody can go in. We lost an important decision last year challenging the right of the press to go in. The courts ruled that the press could not go into a prison unless they were allowed by the warden. So they get away with anything they want and again I refer to outside in this minimum security prison. Didn’t the U.S. Supreme Court, the highest court in the land, rule in the *Brown* decision—*Brown versus Board of Education*—that segregation was outlawed and that all schools were supposed to be integrated and yet, what’s happening in Boston now, in 1976? If they violate and disregard the law out here you can imagine what they’re doing in a closed society. So they continued to arbitrarily subject prisoners to rectal examinations. If you refused they would bring a goon squad of seven to assault you.

I have refused each and every time, quoting federal judge Motley’s ruling on the rectal examination. But they didn’t pay that any mind. They used to bring the goon squad to beat me up and force me. After they had me down they’d assault me. One had his foot on my neck; another one in my back; one had my arm; another was hanging onto my arm spread-eagle; one grabbed a leg and pulled it as far as he could to one side; another one pulled it to the other side. To use Jimmy Sullivan’s language, when he testified, “Gee, I thought they were gonna cut him in half.” And I was very sore all in my crotch because of that.

So this is the sort of stuff they did, especially when you don’t have anything.

They don’t let you have any personal property in the hole (solitary), not even a straight pin. So what are they looking for? If you don’t have anything except your law books and the toothpaste and toothbrush that they give you, what could they be looking for in your asshole? This is just to dehumanize you. When you bend over and spread them, they’ll be leering and saying, “Yeah, look at that asshole he’s got.” Three or four of them saying, “I’d like to ram this club up in there” and stuff like that. Well, I’m not going to submit to that sort of dehumanization. To me it’s a worse injury to do that than to take that beating from those seven goons. At least I would maintain my personhood and I would maintain my spirit unbroken. They destroyed my bookstore and they had me in a cage but one thing they could never take was my personhood and my personal freedom and that was what I held onto all those years.

DS How could they rationalize accusing you of assaulting them? What happened in the trial itself?

MS Well, it’s just like out here in the street when you get stopped by a cop, especially if you have long hair, a beard, or show any lifestyle that is contrary to the system. I spent years in solitary because of this quarter inch beard. If the police out here want to shake you down just because they don’t like your attire or your demeanor or your lifestyle and you refuse and question, “What are you gonna shake me down for? What are you looking for? Do you have a warrant? Am I a ... Shut up! Get up there against the wall!” And if you question them further they will assault you, throw you up against the car or bend you over the hood of the car, beat your ass, shake you down. Then in order to cover up for their brutality they arrest

you, put you in the police car, take you to the police station and book you for resisting arrest and assaulting an officer. You'll end up with a gang of charges in order to justify their assault on you.

This is a favorite device of making the victim the criminal and making themselves the victim. So here's a fifty-one year old man charged with assaulting a goon squad of seven guards. They're all football players. They don't have any small pigs on that goon squad. They're all overgrown, half my age and six footers that weigh anywhere from two to three hundred pounds. Here I am in solitary confinement, buck naked and I weigh only a hundred and sixty-five pounds. Yet the jury believed them and found me guilty of jumping on a goon squad of seven guards.

DS You've criticized what you call "righteous cooperators." Sell-described revolutionaries who don't act to end injustices upon themselves and others.

MS Yeah, during the time I was in the box I resisted their rectal examinations and resisted the beard. Before that in Auburn and in Walkill prisons I organized unions. I helped organize a plateshop strike in Auburn prison where they make the license plates for the whole state of New York. While I was resisting, the overwhelming majority of the prisoners were cooperating in their own oppression; because of repressive acts, solitary confinement, threat of loss of parole, threat of a beating, the threat of being denied visits from your loved ones, your attorney and friends.

When the pig tells them "bend over boy," they bend over. And as I said, they leer at them and make sexist remarks while they're bending. They would tell them "okay, shave those sideburns" because they have the rule there where your sideburns are not supposed to extend below

your ear lobes. "You got too much fuzz under your chin. Shave it." Your moustache is not supposed to extend below the corners of your mouth. The length of your hair is not supposed to be below the collar of your shirt. Yet these people who cooperate wore beards when they came in. When they were arrested they had long hair. They wore long sideburns down to their jaws but how, all of a sudden they've become straight because the pig tells them to do these things. And they don't question. They'll accept anything, any injustice that is heaped upon them. They'll not only obey like a slave, but they'll cooperate and persons like me who resist become more or less like the enemy. These cooperators consider us a threat because we're rocking the boat, we're making the prison officials angry and they figure this will bring repression down – don't make the prison officials tighten up on what ever little crumbs they're getting.

Just like out here the way some of the Left went against the SLA and go against any comrade who wants to do more than just spout rhetoric or quote Marx. Right sway they say that this is "anti-revolutionary" and they'll label you a "terrorist," that you cause repression to come down on them, while they aren't even doing anything. They'll use the same terms as the straight press. The way so-called movement papers came down on the SLA was indistinguishable from the straight press.

DS Some people have made the point that it wasn't the SLA that brought down repression on the left, but rather the left that brought down repression on the SLA.

MS Exactly. These righteous cooperators, inside or outside, are cooperating with the system, thinking it will give them certain privileges or leave them alone and

let them do their thing. For example, when we had the plateshop strike these righteous cooperators started going around urging people not to join the strike. As a matter of fact, that's one of the reasons why it failed. We only got forty out of about two hundred so they locked up the forty and broke the strike. Yet when the benefits accrue or we make a breakthrough, when we further the cause of human rights, they'll be right there benefiting from them as prisoners because every little thing we gained affects all prisoners, cooperators or non-cooperators. So these are not only righteous cooperators. These are parasites that lay on the side and criticize you but when you achieve a victory against the enemy that furthers the cause of freedom they'll be right there with their plate out getting some of the goodies.

DS Prisoner's unions and prisoner support groups have been forming all over North America. Do you foresee a national prisoner's union or organization of some sort developing?

MS Yes, eventually. It's gonna be hard because prison officials have fought us bitterly; have used the repressive instruments of solitary confinement, clubbings, gassings, denial of parole, the threat of an additional sentence on top of what you're serving. This has a deterrent effect upon the overwhelming majority of prisoners. Then they'll use the righteous cooperators and their snitchers in the population to spread the gospel of "cool it" of "don't follow those troublemakers" of "keep your nose clean" of "you're gonna get in trouble and you'll never get out," to spread fear among the prisoners. Just like they do here. They've their agent provocateurs and propagandists who are hanging out in the neighborhoods spreading the State's gospel.

In an atmosphere like prison where one is separated from his or her loved ones, the repression is many times more effective. Many times I was the only one resisting the rectal examination in the box, out of thirty five or forty and out of a total population in the prison of two thousand. Occasionally I would get one or two to join me but as soon as I did that they shipped them off to another prison. At Clinton prison which has a population of about 1,800 to 2,000, there was never at one time, more than four resisting the rectal examination. Four out of two thousand. You can see what the odds are.

Now mind you, there's quite a few prisoners who call themselves revolutionaries but they are just like some of these revolutionaries, militants, activists out here who are that only in words and not deeds.

DS What sorts of things did you do to keep yourself busy during your daily prison routine? I read that you practiced yoga.

MS Yes, I've been a yogi since 1956. The first thing I do in the morning, after I wash up and cleanse my nasal passages, are my yoga exercises. However, the type of yoga I practice is unlike the traditional yoga. I pick just enough yoga exercises to keep myself physically and mentally fit, not with a view to achieve nirvana or further my incarnation because I don't believe in that, so I'm not trying to achieve that. but to strengthen my body and mind in order to fight oppression. If you're going to be a real yogi you'll have to isolate yourself from the mundane things. You're going to have to concern yourself, like most yogis I've heard about, with just self-advancement. You'll have to become a righteous cooperator because the yogis of the past, despite all of the outstanding things they did, never attacked the oppres-

I'm a revolutionary yogi just like I'm a revolutionary anarchist and my exercise, everything that I do, is to prepare myself for physical and mental combat against this oppressive State in the struggle to overthrow it.

sor. Especially in India where they were just concerned with their own reincarnations and became oblivious to suffering. In fact, they rationalized it away as the way things are supposed to be, that you have to go through all the different incarnation to achieve whatnot.

I'm a revolutionary yogi just like I'm a revolutionary anarchist and my exercise, everything that I do, is to prepare myself for physical and mental combat against this oppressive State in the struggle to overthrow it. Besides, I love too many things in this world. I love women; I love sex; I love money; I love to get high – marijuana, you know what I mean. So I'm not about to give up any of these things, to isolate myself in a cave and do away with worldly things. I love worldly things but only in the context of, first, to destroy this repressive State and replace it with an

egalitarian society; and, second, to spread the goodies that have been monopolized by a very few so that all of us can live in relative luxury because there's enough on this planet for all of us. And, like I said, these things; are here for us to enjoy and I'm not about to deny myself and my fellow comrades any of the good things in this world.

So this is the type of unorthodox yoga that has been effective as far my resisting. As you can see I'm fifty-three years old and I'm still in shape. I attribute it partly to that. I have been able to resist and keep my spirit from being broken to a large degree because of my physical and mental discipline, and to me this is a weapon. Just like money is even a weapon. Money is bullets to be used against the system. I'm not adverse to money at all.

DS In 1967 weren't you really busted for operating a radical bookstore and organizing in the black community, rather than the contrived dope charges on which you were prosecuted?

MS Yes, I was, along with many others. That's the way the State deals with its dissenters. My store was more than just a radical bookstore. It was a hangout. It was a base. The way I perceived it from the very beginning it was what Che Guevara called a foco, only on a small scale. It was the only bookstore that sold that type of literature in Buffalo and it was raising consciousness. It became the hangout for the street youths, many of whom participated in the rebellion during the long hot summer. That was what brought everything to a head. When they saw the same youths who were hanging out in the bookstore, out in the street participating in the rebellion, they decided to frame me and destroy the bookstore.

The rebellion was a spontaneous

thing, unlike what they put in the papers - that I was paying them to riot, using the basement to teach them how to make molotov cocktails and all of that. This was a spontaneous thing, just like all the other rebellions throughout the country during the long hot summer. It grew out of the repression of the State, the racism and police brutality under which the black and Puerto Rican community had been suffering for so long. It finally reached the point. like a boiler when the pressure of steam has no outlet, where it just exploded into spontaneous rebellion and naturally they sought a scapegoat. So I became the scapegoat and they buried me with forty-one years in prison.

DS Many of the young people who were attracted to the store had started coming around when you began blasting music out into the street from it. What relationship do you see between culture and the revolutionary process?

MS Well, culture is a weapon. I've always said, we have to employ all means necessary, and culture is part of the revolutionary struggle. It projects revolution and attracts masses. The interpretation of the progressive aspects of culture, of art forms, of every aspect of society has to be mobilized to raise the consciousness of the people and get the message over. Culture should always be used as a medium to project our revolutionary anarchist message – through plays, movies, performing, lifestyles, dress, language, art, dance, music, posters. If the artist is projecting raised consciousness and interpreting the revolution in simple strokes of his pen or brush a poster is a very effective form. In fact, I used them at the bookstore after the pigs broke my windows and there was a fire next door. The firemen put the hose in the bookstore to destroy and water

down my books, and I had to put plywood on the windows. I never closed. I put up wall posters and cut out clippings from the newspapers to make the plywood panels that were replacing the glass into a neighborhood bulletin board. I got the idea from the Chinese wall posters. They used them very effectively.

DS Recently, many Leftists have abandoned the cultural revolution and subordinated such struggles as those against sexism and racism to strictly organizing the working class. How do you view this development and which people in this society do you see as most open to revolutionary ideas at this time?

MS Well, as I said, the cultural revolution is a segment of revolution. So I believe that it's wrong to abandon it and not mobilize it to raise consciousness. As long as you don't get caught up in just a narrow cultural bag, I think culture is a very important aspect to be used on a global scale to show the interrelationship between different cultures and how they're co-opted by the system to be used for oppression.

I don't have too much hope in the working class myself: just concentrating on the working class. The lumpen is a different story. They're the ones I concentrate on, who I have my faith in. I'll leave working with workers to others. The lumpen is the class that I relate to, that I come from – the detonators of the revolution as far as I'm concerned. It's the lowest and most oppressed class. Of course the revolutions have been taken over by others. But these are the ones who have started the process, the detonators, the ones who go out in the street. Blacks, in the forties and the fifties, were the ones that were out: the ones that rebelled. Later on, other groups followed their acts – protests, marches and whatnot. They're the

ones who opened the doors and fought in the courts and on every level. In the same way, the feminist struggle from way back - the old feminists like Emma Goldman - has also been in the forefront. Groups like the unemployed, Third World people and prisoners are among the most oppressed so they're the ones who rebel. The others who are not as oppressed naturally don't have the incentive.

DS You were in prison during an era of cultural and political upheaval. What impression of the revolutionary level of struggle did you have during your incarceration and what's your reaction to what you've found since your release? Has it lived up to your expectation?

MS Not really. I've found the spirit among the masses is not at the height of the Sixties. As you know, in 1967 the Black Panther Party had been in existence one year. SDS was really at its height in all the colleges. The Young Lords were organized just about that year. And there were many other politically dynamic groups that had fired the consciousness of the dynamic elements of our society, particularly the youth. Also, the anti-Vietnam War movement was at its height then. However, now all that has changed. Cointelpro, J. Edgar Hoover and the revelations now of the different programs they had to infiltrate and destroy the Left and frame up, kill, assassinate and everything - they finally destroyed that spirit.

Partly because of the repressive State and their FBI-Hoover programs. Partly because of the mistakes made and shortsightedness of the anti-war movement which was merely a one issue deal, mostly having its base on college campuses. It never established any bases or roots in the community, so when the Vietnam War ended, the anti-Vietnam war move-

ment ended. Because of this and because of different sellouts, I've noticed a lot of cynicism out here. Because of the turnaround that some of the Black Panther leaders have gone through. Like Bobby Seale with his tie and coat on - the good Democrat. After advocating destroying the pig system he tried to join it. And because of the clout of many other leaders who have been co-opted by the system: by money or positions, antipoverty jobs given to them, desks put in front of them. They sold out their original commitment.

This has made a lot of people cynical. They don't want to hear shit when you approach them. People who have suffered, who were in the Black Panther Party and the various organizations. Many were injured, had their heads beat in various demonstrations, had their eyes burned with gas, were fucked over and arrested and spent a tremendous amount of time putting out leaflets and financing some of the activities, and they're very cynical now. They aren't going for any more rhetoric. It's harder to get people. There's fewer naive people now. Fewer receptive people who will listen, who will try. They don't want to hear anything. Now everyone is into doing their own thing, as they say, which usually means nothing.

However, I've noticed another level of struggle, a much deeper and heavier level: the proliferation of underground groups, the guerrilla, particularly on the west coast. Here, in New York, the Black Liberation Army is an outgrowth of the Panthers. Many of the BLA cadre are ex-Panthers, ex-Panther 21 who were tried. On the west coast you find that many of the members of those guerrilla groups belonged to one of the radical groups. You have the Weather Underground who were part of the SDS, had their roots in SDS. And many other organizations. Now it's building. The underground is proliferat-

ing. building its network, preparing for the upcoming struggle which will involve persons at all levels. And this is a good sign.

DS Shortly after the Hearst kidnapping, you wrote that it's, "the duty of all to support by all means our SLA comrades. How do you feel about the SLA now?"

MS Yes. I feel that we should support our comrades who are in the hands of the State because their struggle is our struggle and if we allow them to go down without any support, as we have been doing, eventually this will become the thing to do. We've been letting standup comrades go down, like Lolita Lebron and other Puerto Rican nationalists. We haven't supported them like we should on a priority basis. We have to defend our own - all comrades of conscience who have put it on the line, who have opposed the State, who have risked their butts in doing so when they didn't have to. This should mean something to us and we should stop the little petty ideological struggles we have and look at the substance. These comrades are being snuffed by the state and for us to stand by as if nothing is happening puts us in the category of righteous cooperators, acquiescers in the unjust incarceration and maybe death of these comrades.

DS Have you been in contact with the SLA since their bust and what sort of development have they gone through, as far as you know?

MS Oh, yes. Very much so. As a matter of fact, a few weeks ago we had a fund-raising get-together in attorney Bill Kunstler's house when I spoke to Bill and Emily Harris. Bill and Emily and Joe Remiro and Russ Little are seriously looking into anarchism. As a matter of

fact they are anarchists. This change has come about recently, I would say within the last eight months, to my knowledge. They're widely read. No doubt they've read about it before and probably they've thought about it but, I mean, the decision to embrace revolutionary anarchism is recent. We exchanged letters after they were incarcerated and I was still incarcerated. I've sent them anarchist material and I've also asked people on the West Coast to send them reading material, books on anarchism to further raise their consciousness and inform them of the different facets of anarchism. The last letters I got from Bill and Emily as well as Joe and Russ, have shown that they have embraced anarchism and they're very happy about it and they're still studying, naturally, like all of us. We're still studying, analyzing. and building. It's a very heavy step and a step in the right direction because it's a step toward maximum freedom. It's a step away from the party line type of philosophy where others issue orders and you follow. It's a step toward greater independence of thought and action.

I have supported these brothers and this sister even before they were captured. I was one of the few voices on the Left which supported them all the way while they were still fugitives. So the fact that I was a revolutionary anarchist made them look into it a little heavier because they saw by my letter that it was a question of justice and a question of principle that, regardless of whether you're a Marxist-Leninist or any other type of Leftist, one should not side with the enemy denouncing a comrade because the comrade's activity does not seem correct in one's eyes. If you read some of the denunciations in the Left papers - calling the SLA terrorists and this and that - they were indistinguishable from 'what the New York Times and New York Daily News were saying.

So, these comrades in prison now are sincere comrades who should receive the help of all the Left and all persons of conscience to get them out. They're victims of the State and they've given their all. They've put their lives on the line. They went beyond just spouting rhetoric. They're definitely in the vanguard and they used all means necessary to overthrow the system. You can't ask any more than that. That's it you know. You can't give more than that; than when you put your life on the line.

So I urge everyone to support these comrades by using all means necessary to get them out of this death grip that the enemy has upon them.

DS How do you respond to the legal revolutionaries who tell us that armed action comes after mass consciousness has already been raised? That now it turns the people off. . .the people aren't ready for revolution yet?

MS Well, that's a cop-out. I've always said that's a cop-out for not doing anything. That's a cop-out to usually hide one's cowardice to confront the system, to stand up and do what has to be done. Whenever there's oppression it's time to oppose oppression by all means necessary. There's no way they can defend that the people aren't ready. The people have always been ready. It's those who make the cop-outs that are not ready and they're trying to push it onto the people.

It's just like when they have some of these marches. You get permission from the police department if you're going to march on Washington and the police department and you sit down and determine the route that you should march so everything is nice and orderly. In fact, the police will even escort you with motorcycles to make sure everything is orderly. There

may be a helicopter up ahead. You have your marshals with the armbands to make sure that nobody deviates from the preset plan which you and the State have worked out. You finally get to this place where you have the police lines with barricades. They confine you in there just like cattle in a pen, you know what I mean. Then you've got your speakers. They even know who's going to speak because you had to give there that in advance. You makes your speeches and everyone gets their frustration off. You may have a little folk music and whatnot to entertain the people. Everyone has a good time and then it's time to go home so the marshals and the police clear them and everyone gets on the buses and trains and leaves. Somewhere along-the line the original objective and the anger is pacified. Everything is nice and orderly and according to a preset plan. By the numbers, as they say in the army. And the State suffers no injury.

DS When you were in prison you went through the transition from Black Muslim to anarchist. Would you outline some of the experiences that prompted the change?

MS Well, you missed a step. It was from Black Muslim to party lineist to anarchist. I became a Marxist-Leninist of the party-line type and then an anarchist when I saw the continual fuck-ups. I didn't completely go against the ideology, or say everything Marx and Lenin said was wrong. But it was the whole structure. The whole replacement of one State by another, the restriction of personal freedom which can occur under any ideology if it's not carried out with the basic objective in mind to further the cause or human freedom to its highest degree. To me, the struggle for liberation, which is used loosely, ultimately boils down to the individual exertion of his or her faculties to the fullest extent. I

To me, the struggle for liberation, which is used loosely, ultimately boils down to the individual exertion of his or her faculties to the fullest extent.

don't care what ideology you have, it isn't good if it doesn't afford a person, first, personal freedom on its most basic personal individual level. That is my concept of the struggle or the war of liberation. It's not to replace one State by another, it's to liberate the individual. I have not seen any State or government or society, whether it's socialist or capitalist, where this freedom exists. Now, I'm not saying other States may not evolve. In fact, many party-liners and Marxist-Leninists defend some of the repression and restrictions on human rights by saying that this is merely a step along the way, that eventually it will be a stateless society, that it will wither, that it will be an anarchistic form of society, an egalitarian society and not another authoritarian State. That may be true but I can only go by what has gone on in the past, what I see now and my projections of the future. So I'm trying to make sure in my dealings, in anything I have something to do with, that it starts off right so it'll end up right. I want to start off with an anarchistic form of society rather than starting with a central headquarters and

saying "well, eventually we'll get rid of the headquarters."

That's what I'm striving for. And the fact that my defense committee, an anarchist structure, proved successful is evidenced by my being here. This has encouraged me because I have been trying to live an anarchist life on a personal level but it was never tested in a concrete form until this defense committee was organized. That was the only real test and it proved successful. But this is my intent and I intend to project anarchist philosophy through everything I do.

DS How were your defense committees structured?

MS It was unlike the average defense committee or organization which has a central headquarters. All the pigs have to do is infiltrate the headquarters and they have the files of everyone, all the activity of the whole network and they're able to deal with you. Whereas in our case if, let's say, the New York defense committee was infiltrated by pigs, or even taken over like some of the chapters in the Panther party were, it still would not have given them any intro as to what was happening in, let's say, the Tucson, Ariz., defense committee. They would have to send one of their men to infiltrate it. Each committee would have to be infiltrated individually. We're not making it easy for them. The reason for autonomy was not only security. Let's say headquarters. as often happens, issues the wrong orders or makes an error. With the wrong order issued and everyone following it like a goose, the whole network could go over the cliff. It's impossible, if headquarters are in New York, for them to know what's happening in Tucson, Ariz., or Eugene, Ore. or even in Potsdam, N.Y., just three hundred miles from New York City. This is just

common sense but evidently a lot of people don't see it. They would rather have a central committee-type of organization issuing orders hundreds, sometimes thousands of miles away, without even knowing what's happening in the area. Whereas each person knows his or her area and is better able to deal according to the circumstances, the people and the lay of the land. So I found it very effective to have a defense-committee structured that way, although I had a lot of opposition. Some of my own supporters called me crazy, said that it couldn't work, that I was hurting my own cause, that I would have to serve the forty-one years. A couple of them quit because they wanted to become the headquarters. But the fact that I'm out here now, talking to you, proves the correctness of my decision, even though I didn't have any pattern to go by. because I don't know of any other defense committee structured this way. There may be some but I don't know of any.

I saw my defense committees as a structure for the future, a microcosm of the bases I was going to build and continue even after I got out, which I'm doing. The show isn't over just because I got out. "Okay, Martin's out and we're successful. Everyone packs up and leaves." This is the basis of the continuing struggle because the struggle for human rights is what it's all about, not just prisoner's rights is or to just get Martin Sostre out. I was the priority but I never conceived of the defense committee as just an ad hoc thing that would pack up after I got out. In fact, I just came from Potsdam (N.Y.) where the Martin Sostre defense committee is stronger than before. It changed its name to the North Country defense committee and they have emerged as a political force up in the North Country. This is what I conceive. We're talking about organizing a food co-op, maybe buying some land up

there and building on it, having different co-ops like a book co-op or a dry cleaner and many other enterprises eventually. And being able to produce a microcosm of the society that we're trying to build. Something concrete to show the people instead of just rhetoric.

DS So those defense committees that were set up are going to continue to function. What's your relationship to those committees going to be?

MS At the beginning I'm going to have to be a coordinator now that I'm getting all this publicity about this victory. This was a great victory. There's very few victories we can point to. Forcing the power structure to release me, which they did only because they were forced to, is a victory that was achieved because of the unity of many people from many parts or the world. It even became an international victory with Amnesty International, with people from Holland, Germany, a lot of anarchist comrades from Japan, the anarchist group Black Cross from London, from all over. Many others contributed by writing letters, sending petitions to Governor Carey, putting my case in newsletters which evoked other letters. This victory is an example; the way we mobilized persons of conscience from all over the country and all over the world to force the State to disgorge me after they had buried me.

The same tactics could be used to put pressure on the State and force them to retreat while we advance. Only out here we're not limited to writing letters and telegrams, putting on political pressure, having Sakharov call from Moscow, sending telegrams to Ford and seizing upon the hypocrisy of United Nations delegate Moynihan when he made the resolution that all other countries should release their political prisoners. That's when we

had the London Amnesty International send him and the press a telegram saying, "okay, since you're so magnanimous and you want all other countries to release their political prisoners, why not follow your own advice and start with political prisoner Martin Sostre?" That put them up against the wall. These are the methods of the system that you have to use to show up the contradictions. But out here we're not limited to that because we will use all means necessary, including the methods used by George Washington and our founding fathers. After they exhausted everything else they had to pick up the gun. So this is what we're going to have to do to overthrow this State.

DS What's your impression of the current anarchist movement?

MS The current anarchist movement is not dynamic enough. There's no life like there should be. Anarchism itself, by its very nature, is a dynamic, natural force. It can be revived at any time through spirit raising examples like the anarchists in the old days of Bakunin. This is what anarchism thrives on. On deeds instead of words, on action instead of inaction. I am trying my damndest to bring this about through my personal conduct, by bringing this to the attention of many anarchists who have become indistinguishable from party lineists. I call them armchair anarchists. I'm confining my remarks to this country because, as you know, there are heavier anarchists in other parts of the world, like in Germany. But here, I think that the coming tide of fascism will force many comrades to come out of their lethargy and put into practice the original anarchist tradition of being not only the detonators of revolution, but also of making it an objective reality. Not just detonating the revolution to have it ripped off by par-

"Anarchism is the spontaneity of the people."

ty lineists as has traditionally happened, but to give it an objective life and a sustained life to build the first anarchist base from which the other bases will emerge and from which the deeds will inflame the spirit of the masses. In revolutionary anarchism we have an abundance of examples. All through history, including the Russian revolution, the anarchists have been the detonators. The rebellion of the long hot summer, although it was not recognized as such by even the Leftists, what was that if it wasn't anarchism? Anarchism is the spontaneity of the people. This is a natural thing, not something you have to ponder too much. It's just like when somebody tries to break into your crib (home) or somebody attacks you in the street. There is a natural response to oppression, to aggression. This is a natural response which is inherent in the mechanism that all of us have for survival. I don't see where anarchism is anything different than just human survival. It's the natural response with which all of us are endowed but which has been dampened by society, by the State, to make it appear that it's a bad thing, that you should not respond in this manner, and that you should respond according to some pattern those others set out for you.

DS What's your attitude toward Marxist-Leninist anti-imperialist struggles like the Viet Cong or MPLA?

MS My attitude toward those is that they help weaken the imperialist octopus and will make it easier for us anarchists

to deal with it. There's going to be much competition. I perceive a situation emerging something like Angola itself, where the different factions contended for power even though they were fighting against the Portuguese. I don't see it as a simple thing where all the different factions will join. There's going to be competition. There is competition now between the Leftist groups. I see that state of affairs, especially when the United States, this monster main base of imperialist oppression, starts tottering, it'll be up for grabs. I can see many groups, not only the Marxist-Leninists fighting among themselves, just like China and Russia are contending now. Or it may be a situation like in Russia where the anarchist Nestor Makhno fought, had an army, and controlled a certain area until he was ripped off. That's why we've got to strengthen and prepare ourselves. We better for our own survival. We better start building our army. We better start building our bases. We better start preparing because it's coming very soon. Imperial intervention is on the demise. Now they're getting ready to battle for South Africa and Rhodesia, which they're going to lose just like they lost the Vietnam War and Angola. That is the demise of this country. In the not too distant future this State will be overthrown and we better be at the helm for our defense. If other State rises we anarchists — well, I don't have to tell you what's going to happen.

DS What are the terms of your parole now?

MS My parole ends in the year 2001. However, if I stay out without violating (terms of parole) for five years I have a chance to get that parole off me. But the parole officer intimated that I shouldn't be speaking like I am. Agitating and advocating overthrow of the government

using all means necessary, at universities and everywhere I speak. When I went to report to him several weeks ago he had some clipping from a local newspaper of a place where I had spoken. He questioned whether or not this type of public speaking would be harmful to me. Naturally he couldn't tell me to stop speaking because there's freedom of speech and legally he can't do it. But he hinted that this type of thing might be detrimental to me. So I told him that I didn't think it would be, that I think it's my duty to speak and tell and let the people outside know about the brutality, the racism and the torture that I've been subjected to. And it's the people's right of information to know what's going on and what their tax dollars were used for. I feel that it's my duty, the same way that I resisted the rectal examination and the unconstitutional acts against me. I think I have a right to tell the people and the people have a right to know under the First Amendment (to the U.S. Constitution). I'm exercising this right and I don't see any way it could hurt me. So he shrugged his shoulders and told me, "Well, Martin I don't know, maybe you should think about it a little more you know." Then he changed the subject. They're not pleased at all that I'm attacking the government. I'm using the bi-centennial as an example for emulating what was done in 1776 when all other means were exhausted, which in my estimation they have been — legal means because there's no justice in the courts; administrative means because these politicians couldn't care less. They throw complaints in the waste basket and nothing is done. So the people are going to have to use all means necessary which includes revolution. The same as George Washington and the so-called founding fathers, and picking up the gun and everything else. They don't like that type of talk.

So if they violate me, you know where that stems from. And they can because I'm vulnerable. Being on parole I'm merely out on a leash. They can pull the leash back.

DS Are there any final comments or statements you'd like to make?

MS Yes, I wish to thank all of the thousands and tens of thousands of supporters, nationally and internationally, who combined resolutely to force the power structure to release me. Many of you wrote to Governor Carey and the other politicians, demanding my release. Many of you participated physically in demonstrations and sit-ins. Many of you signed petitions that eventually were sent to Governor Carey and the other officials. Many of you contributed funds which were used to print leaflets, buy stamps, print brochures and make posters to publicize my struggle. Many of you have worked actively in the defense committees, stuffing envelopes, running mimeographs and doing other work. Some of you were members of the defense committees and went to meetings that mobilized people, showed the film on my case and did other work.

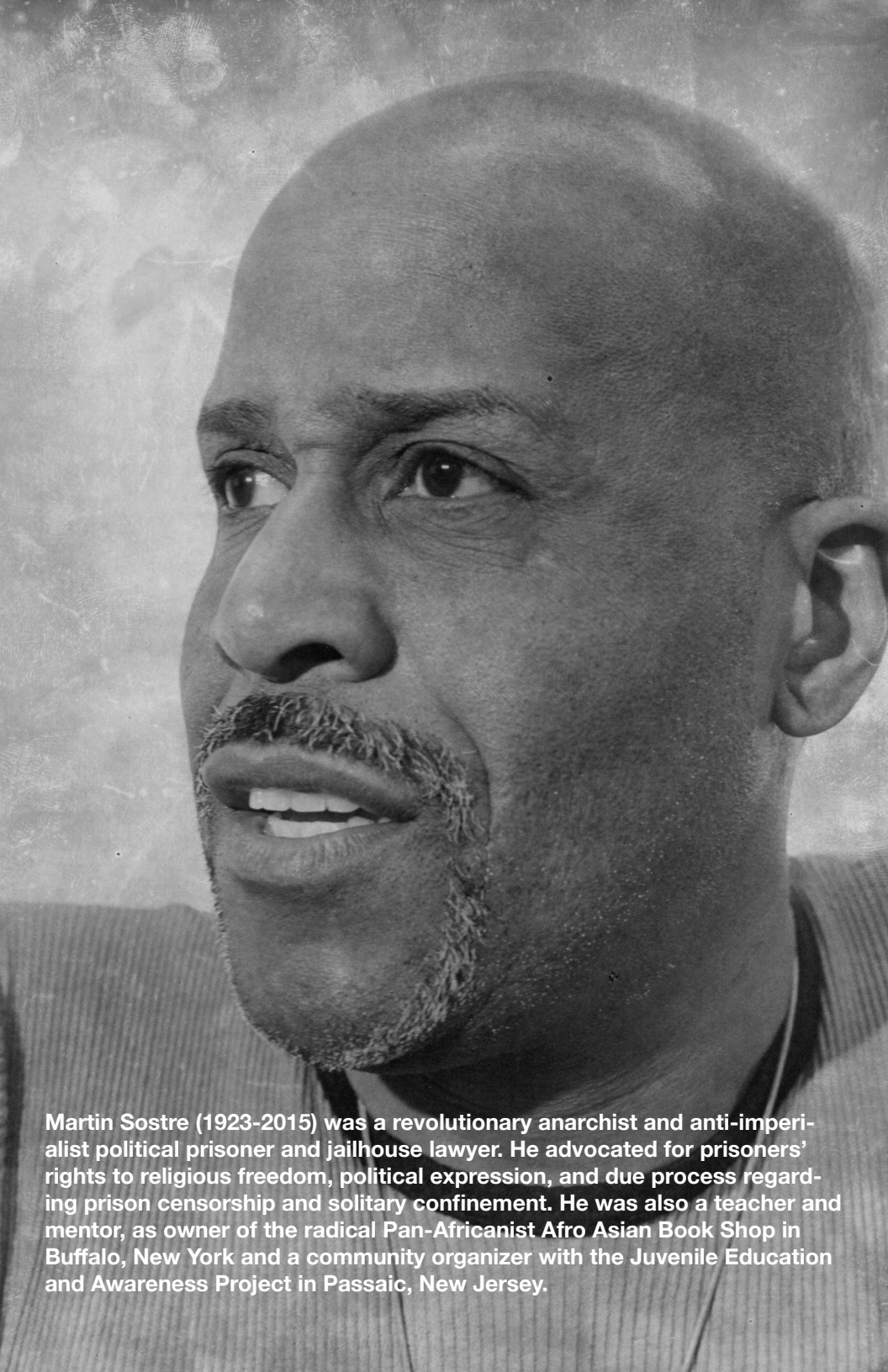
It was the sum total of all this activity that finally forced the repressive State to disgorge me from the dungeons. Otherwise I would have been killed because I absorbed eleven beatings and I know that the cumulative effect of that eventually would have gotten to me and destroyed me. And that was the purpose; to destroy me physically since they couldn't break my spirit. They knew the pounding on me would eventually have its toll. In addition to the tear gassings and being locked in the cage twenty-four hours a day without sunlight and necessities, I was put out of doors buck naked in six degrees sub-freezing weather. So not only do I wish to thank

you but I wish to keep in mind the example of this victory. The same principles apply in effecting change, in forcing the State to do what we want, because only through this combination of pressure and acts against the State can we achieve change. So I say that we escalate, that we use all means necessary and I mean they're not limited to these thin. I just mentioned — all means that are necessary — to over-throw this repressive, sexist, racist State and replace it with an egalitarian society where we can all exercise our faculties and our personal freedoms to the maximum, without having the State co-opt it, then parcel it out, crumb by crumb, whenever they want to.

This interview was originally published in the first issue of Open Road (Summer 1976).

Layout design for this version by Zachary Norman.

Edited by Garrett Felber.



Martin Sostre (1923-2015) was a revolutionary anarchist and anti-imperialist political prisoner and jailhouse lawyer. He advocated for prisoners' rights to religious freedom, political expression, and due process regarding prison censorship and solitary confinement. He was also a teacher and mentor, as owner of the radical Pan-Africanist Afro Asian Book Shop in Buffalo, New York and a community organizer with the Juvenile Education and Awareness Project in Passaic, New Jersey.