



Buffalo police mug shots of Sostre.

## Sostre in Solitary

**His friends swear that black radical Martin Sostre has been framed by Buffalo authorities as part of America's colonialist suppression of black revolution.**

*"Deliberate injustice is more fatal to the one who imposes than to the one on whom it is imposed. The victim may die quickly and his suffering cease, but the teachings of Christianity and the uniform lessons of all history illustrate without exception that its perpetrators not only pay the penalty themselves, but their children through endless generations."*

Alabama Circuit Court Judge James E. Horton, June 22, 1933, overturning in the Scottsboro "rape" case the jury's guilty verdict and death sentence. The decision predictably spelled the end of Horton's judicial career.

Story by William Worthly

**U**NTIL July 14, 1967, Martin Sostre of Buffalo, New York was the proud and defiant owner of the local Afro-Asian Book Store.

Before that, he had been a Black Muslim—a religious-political convert while serving 12 years in Attica, New York state prison.

Years before that, he had been a youthful peddler of narcotics and had entered prison while in his twenties.

Today Martin Sostre, age 44, is in Green Haven State Prison near Poughkeepsie.

(Countless Yale students pass right by it all the time as they drive to weekend dates at Vassar). The charge: possession and sale of heroin. The sentence this time: from 31 to 41 years, plus 30 days. Judge Frederick M. Marshall imposed that extra month on the vehemently outspoken Sostre for supposed contempt of court. An articulate interracial defense committee charges an A - to - Z frame-up.

**R**ECENTLY at O'Hare Airport in Chicago I ran into the Harlem attorney who, early in the 1960s, helped Martin Sostre establish the legal right of Black Muslims to hold their own religious services behind prison walls. The wardens and state correction officials had all refused this right with every weapon of punishment at their command; but Sostre's persistence led to an important First Amendment victory. He himself did much of the legal work after having studied law on his own while in Attica prison. When the Attica officials were compelled to produce Sostre and his fellow plaintiffs in Federal court in Buffalo, they took them there in chains. In a memoranda photograph that appeared at the time in the Black Muslim newspaper, the scene looked medieval.

"Martin Sostre," said the Harlem lawyer as we talked between planes, "is the most extraordinary personality I have ever met. He operates somewhere in the area between brilliance and genius."

To his deeply committed friends and supporters Sostre's personal rehabilitation years ago was complete and permanent following his conversion to the puritanical Black Muslim faith. Though no longer a Muslim, he still does not smoke, drink or eat pork. His friends say it is unthinkable, personally and politically, for him ever to be involved a second time in the peddling of drugs.

**M**EMBERS of the Sostre Defense Committee, including several law professors at the University of Buffalo, point to "a chain of frame-ups" around the country. They argue that the government has hit upon an easy way to get rid of Negro revolutionaries who have criminal records by planting drugs on them and then imposing savagely long sentences as "second offenders." White middle-class juries are

only too ready to convict on the say-so of cops. Sostre's N.A.A.C.P. attorney says that even a cursory reading of the trial record shows glaring holes and contradictions in the testimony of the Buffalo and state police.

In 1964, when Malcolm X parted company with the Muslims, Sostre, an admirer of Malcolm, broke too. After coming out of prison that year—12 long years without a single letter, a single visit or a single food package from the outside had miraculously not demoralized him—Sostre worked for \$146 a week in the Lackawanna steel mill, saved what he could, and solicited and borrowed additional money to fulfill a dream: the opening of an Afro-Asian Bookstore in the Buffalo ghetto. His largely unpaid assistant, Mrs. Geraldine Robinson, mother of five, is still awaiting trial on the same heroin charges.

Shortly before his arrest in July of 1967 he took the gamble of giving up his only sure income in the steel mill, and began devoting 14 hours a day to the store which, without any pretense, was a lively center of radical political education. Sostre featured the works of Stokely Carmichael, Malcolm X, Robert F. Williams, LeRoi Jones, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and others. From abroad he imported such periodicals as *China Reconstructs*, *African Opinion* and *Peking Review*. As son of a Puerto Rican mother, Sostre is strongly anti-imperialist. He got oblique political "advice" from detectives who frequently visited the bookstore "not to sell those books, Marty."

Late in June, 1967, shortly before Newark and Detroit erupted, Buffalo had its own racial upheaval. In subsequent testimony before Senator Eastland's Internal Security Subcommittee, Police Commissioner Frank Felicetta blamed Sostre for much of the trouble. At the height of the street disorders, according to passersby, police and firemen used the pretext of a fire next door to sack the radical bookstore and to turn hoses on the literature shelves. Not book burning, book watering.

**N**EVERTHELESS, Sostre reopened the store, only to be raided at midnight two weeks later. He was arrested and beaten up. Originally he was held in \$50,000 bail

on the heroin charges. Charges of arson and rioting were dropped. Even when bail was reduced to \$12,500 cash, he could not raise that sum and remained in jail for eight months until his three-day trial in March, 1968. The head of the Buffalo police intelligence unit told the press that the same Martin Gonzalez Sostre who didn't have the money to bail himself out and who had difficulty in paying the bookstore's utility bill had been earning a profit of \$5000 a week from selling narcotics. (In England, that detective would have been jailed for prejudicial, inflammatory pre-trial press comments, and the Buffalo editors who published his remarks would have been jailed too. To the jurors who had read the local newspapers and later convicted Sostre there could not have been the slightest doubt of his guilt.)

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Mrs. Geraldine Robinson manning Sostre's Afro-Asian Bookstore-in-exile at University of Buffalo.



Bookstore-in-exile display before the materials were burned.

### Sostre continued

Over this past summer the case began to boil on several fronts. As recently as mid-June, despite the tireless efforts of the Buffalo-based Defense Committee, the Pandora's box of the highly political trial, lack of due process, allegations of perjury by prosecution witnesses, and inhuman treatment in Green Haven Prison seemed safely and permanently sealed. The national spotlight had not focused on the case. On June 25, Sostre was placed in solitary confinement. The reason given by the warden: practicing law without a law degree. Like countless other inmates of U. S. prisons, Sostre was preparing legal motions and papers for his appeal.

A month later, on July 23, NAACP staff attorney Joan Franklin was denied permission to visit him a second time or even to continue to correspond with him. For this ruling the warden's avowed reason was that Miss Franklin is a member of the Michigan but not the New York bar. On July 26, the same warden, backed by Governor Rockefeller's Commissioner of Correction, refused to admit this reporter to the prison. And on August 2, an ordained clergyman was kept from seeing Sostre.

ONCE challenged, these administrative rulings were, of course, untenable. In its Washington edition of July 30, the Afro-American reported that Attorney Franklin was preparing a petition for a writ of

habeas corpus to be argued in Dutchess County Supreme Court just as the Republican national convention in Miami was scheduled to open. Rockefeller's penal officials would be named as defendants in the court action. Through several channels the Sostre Defense Committee passed word to the Rockefeller camp that the candidate might get an embarrassing question on the case on a nationally televised interview program. Associated Press asked permission to see Sostre in Green Haven prison, and The Globe queried one of Rockefeller's press secretaries on the novel rationale for Sostre's solitary confinement and for his total isolation. On August 7, under this multi-sided pressure, the implacable official dike—cops, judges, jailers and politicians—sprang its first leak. Just hours before the balloting for the presidential nomination was about to begin, Jackie Robinson, then Rockefeller's adviser on Negro affairs, telephoned Attorney Franklin to say that she now could visit her client again. Two days later she did.

Meanwhile, in Buffalo itself, members of the Sostre Defense Committee had received threatening letters in the mail. For no discernibly valid reason, two detectives who double on the radical and narcotic squads paid late-night visits to the Committee secretary and also to her elderly,

apolitical mother who lives alone and who reacted predictably to the midnight knock.

Most sensational of the summertime developments (but, like all the others, unreported in the Buffalo press) was the July 30 nighttime burning of \$200 worth of books and pamphlets on a state university campus in Buffalo and the dean's prompt promise of restitution out of public funds. A University of Buffalo janitor had picked up two plainly marked hundred-pound boxes of books from their usual overnight storage spot in the student union, dragged the boxes to the campus incinerator, and burned them to cinders. Among the books were the "Autobiography of Malcolm X", the classic biography of John Brown by W.E.B. DuBois, works on Negro history, and anti-war, anti-imperialist pamphlets from Hanoi and from the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. The books were the property of the Afro-Asian Bookstore-in-Exile, which was set up by white and Negro students at the University of Buffalo in tribute to Martin Sostre after his imprisonment. Students and campus groups that had no connection with the bookstore protested vigorously to the administration about the book burning.

For a northern industrial community Buffalo is exceptionally conservative. The pattern of repression there tends to be more raw and more unabashed than one might expect in the Empire State. If Martin Sostre is even half the remarkable person that those who know him say he is—and I myself do not know him—his removal at this time from the Buffalo ghetto and the closing of his bookstore is a serious intellectual and leadership setback to the local movement, even if a year or two from now the higher courts release him from prison on appeal. He could be released right now on bail if New York had the counterpart of the courageous San Francisco judge who on June 11, 1968 freed author-activist-Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver, on the grounds that his parole had been revoked two months earlier for purely political reasons. Cleaver, a Ramparts magazine staff writer, is a classic example of highly gifted hoodlums, dope peddlers or even murderers who become wholly rehabilitated

while serving long terms and who then emerge from prison to join and help lead an anti-colonial revolution going on outside. Those who saw the prize-winning film "The Battle of Algiers" will recall the parallel moral and political transformation of a tough underworld figure in a French prison in Algeria.

**S**ostre's imprisonment is a major setback. But by no means a final defeat. It's nothing new. The British, French and other colonialists tried similar methods to crush Afro-Asian independence movements. In the end, the European powers probably deepened and extended revolutionary anti-colonial militancy by these methods, and hastened their own violent expulsion from the colonies.

Here in the United States, there is no logical reason to expect a qualitatively different end product from the accelerating

pace of racial repression. The future, they say, comes with the same degree of violence that is used against it. In Buffalo, the cops who raided Martin Sostre's Afro-Asian Bookstore and beat him up may well have created more teen-age revolutionaries and more urban guerrillas than did the books of ideology that Sostre used in his classes on black nationalism and sold to his customers to eke out a precarious living.

Such is the destiny of a frightened white society when it permits the de facto reign of the police mentality and the triumph of right-wing brains. ■

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*In his foreign travels William Worthy, a 1957 Nieman Fellow in journalism at Harvard, has met many former colonials who served long prison terms after being framed in colonial courts.*