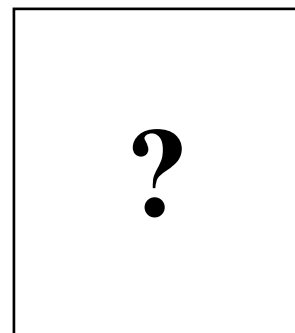
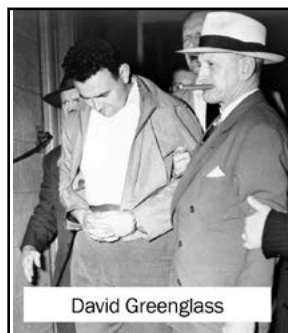
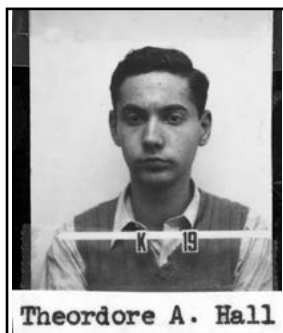


On the Trail of a Fourth Soviet Spy at Los Alamos

Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes^a



Images © Science History Images/Alamy Stock (left two) and Everett Collection/Alamy Stock

Until 1995 only two Soviet spies, Klaus Fuchs and David Greenglass (shown being arrested above), were publicly known to have stolen US atomic secrets from Los Alamos, the super-secret Manhattan Project facility where the atomic bomb was actually built. Coded Soviet cables sent during the years 1940–48 that were eventually deciphered by US intelligence, under the codename Venona, and released in 1995 identified a third Soviet agent, Theodore Hall, a young physics prodigy who had worked as a junior scientist in the plutonium bomb project.

Some students of Soviet atomic espionage have believed in the existence of a fourth unidentified Soviet spy at Los Alamos, codenamed “Perseus,” later changed to “Mlad.” This belief is based on memoirs of KGB officers published in the early 1990s. But with the opening of the Venona decryptations in 1995, it became clear that Perseus was a Soviet/Russian intelligence disinformation operation to protect Theodore Hall (the real Mlad), then still alive but not publicly exposed as a Soviet spy. The fake Perseus/Mlad was given characteristics that did not fit Hall. There was no Perseus.¹

But while there was no Perseus, there was a fourth Soviet spy at Los Alamos. For seven decades the identity of this spy has been buried in the FBI’s investigative files. Recently declassified, these documents reveal that along

with Fuchs, Greenglass, and Hall the fourth Soviet source at the Los Alamos laboratory in WWII was Oscar Seborer.

The FBI has known since 1955 that Oscar, his brother Stuart, Stuart’s wife Miriam, and Miriam’s mother all secretly defected to the Soviet bloc in 1952, living initially in East Germany but then moving to Moscow, where they lived under the name Smith. The brothers never returned from Moscow, but remarkably Miriam, by then divorced from Stuart, returned to the United States with her son (born in East Germany) and her mother in 1969, at the height of the Cold War. But the role of Oscar Seborer and his associates in Soviet espionage has remained hidden for 70 years.

SOLO and the Seborers

The story of Oscar Seborer’s atomic espionage is found in a few dozen easily overlooked pages scattered among tens of thousands of pages of FBI files released in 2011. The rest comes from partially released FBI files on Oscar and Stuart that document Operation SOLO, the codename for the FBI’s recruitment and direction of two communist brothers, Morris and Jack Childs, as informants inside the senior leadership of the Communist Party, USA, (CPUSA) from 1952 until 1980.¹

a. We wish to thank Mark Kramer and Steve Usdin for their assistance with research for this essay.

The views, opinions, and findings of the author expressed in this article should not be construed as asserting or implying US government endorsement of its factual statements and interpretations or representing the official positions of any component of the United States government. © Harvey Klehr and John Earl Haynes, 2019.

The Childs brothers begin their cooperation with the FBI during a difficult period in CPUSA history. Since the late 1940s the CPUSA had been under sustained legal and investigative attack from the US government and had been unable to reestablish the close communications it had enjoyed with the Soviets during earlier years. To the delight of the FBI, Eugene Dennis, then general secretary of the CPUSA, asked the Childs brothers to take on the task of reestablishing regular and secure high-level communications with Moscow, an arrangement that expanded under Dennis's successor, Gus Hall. Morris became the CPUSA's chief liaison with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), meeting regularly with its senior leadership to report on CPUSA activities and to receive political and ideological guidance. Jack carried out a variety of clandestine international activities for the CPUSA, including receiving and disbursing illegal Soviet monetary subsidies (\$28 million in total over the life of the SOLO operation). All the while, the Childs brothers reported their activities in detail to the FBI.

Early in the SOLO operation, prior to establishing a direct relationship with the CPSU, Jack Childs frequently traveled to Canada to meet with leaders of the Communist Party of Canada (CPC), who then served as go-betweens to funnel money and information from Moscow to the beleaguered CPUSA. One of Jack's longtime associates in the communist movement was Isidore "Gibby" Needleman. When Sam Carr, a prominent Canadian communist, faced arrest in 1945 as a result of the defection of GRU Soviet code clerk Igor Gouzenko, he had fled to the United States and was hidden in New

York by Needleman and Jack.

In 1949 several newly decoded Venona cables exposed Judith Coplon, a Justice Department employee, as a Soviet agent. In the wake of that discovery, Needleman lost his position as a lawyer for Amtorg, the Soviets' purchasing agent in America. FBI agent Robert Lamphere laid a trap, writing a memo falsely naming Needleman, who had been the subject of a series of FBI investigations, as a longtime government informant. Coplon took the bait, stole the memo, and was arrested meeting with a Soviet employee of the United Nations. At Coplon's trial in 1950, Lamphere testified that the Needleman story was not true. Nevertheless, the publicity led to Needleman losing his job at Amtorg. He continued, however, to be called upon frequently by the CPUSA to represent the party's interests in various legal proceedings and to carry out sensitive tasks.²

Needleman knew about Jack's assignment as liaison with the CCP—but not, of course, about his recruitment by the FBI in 1952—and in November 1954 he accompanied Jack to Toronto. They met with two senior Canadian party officials who had just returned from Moscow. One, Paul Phillips, met privately with Needleman for half an hour; afterwards, Jack heard him ask the lawyer how to spell Seborer. Jack passed this information on to his FBI handlers.³



Morris and Jack Childs, 1954. Image courtesy of Childs family.

In late December Jack returned from another trip to Toronto, and Needleman asked if Phillips had given him a message. Jack answered no and Needleman replied that was OK, "He shouldn't tell you of such things." As Jack prepared for another trip in February 1955, Needleman again asked him to see if Phillips wanted Needleman to come to Toronto to receive the message. Jack offered to collect any messages but Needleman demurred: "I have to handle this myself. It's too hot." When Jack met with the FBI in March, he reported that Phillips had apologized that he had no answer to Needleman's inquiry since no suitable comrade had been to Moscow. By now Jack had learned from Needleman that he was trying to get information about "several American friends who are in Moscow" and that they were the brothers of Max Seborer, Needleman's "leg man" or assistant for his

legal work. (Needleman and Max had become friends when both attended Cornell University as undergraduates.)⁴

Jack considered the possibility that Needleman was doing a favor for Max and simply trying to learn if the two were in good health. He rejected that notion, telling the FBI, “Needleman is too self-centered an individual to be engaged in a humanitarian pursuit requiring his making trips to Canada.” Jack, the FBI noted, “is more inclined to believe that Needleman’s interest in the Seborers is due either to past associations with the Seborers, which now constitute a threat to his security or to his intention to use them in future apparatus activities.”⁵

Several other factors led Jack to the conclusion that there was something significant going on. He was puzzled that neither Needleman nor Max Seborer ever had mentioned to him the existence of the two brothers, Oscar and Stuart, despite mentioning another brother, Noah. He “also considered it odd that Needleman should seek information regarding the Seborers through the Canadian CP instead of through the Russian embassy or through Amtorg officials with whom he apparently is friendly.”⁶

Not until August 1955 were Jack’s suspicions confirmed. Needleman told Jack that the Seborers—he never said their names but wrote them on a piece of paper and then burned it—had to “beat it” when “trouble started” in 1951 and were now in Moscow. The “situation is we have to make contact; it’s been three years since we heard from them [and] don’t know if they are alive or dead.” Jack promised on his next visit to Canada

Jack pressed and asked if this was a political situation, and Needleman angrily replied, “I can’t put a spoon in your mouth; isn’t it enough to you that I mentioned New Mexico—that is it.”

to ask Tim Buck, general secretary of the Canadian CP, to see if he could inquire about them in Moscow.⁷

One month later, responding to Needleman’s criticism for not making progress on this request, Jack replied that he was not going to jeopardize his relationship with Buck without having more details about the issue. Needleman then said,

Listen carefully. Oscar was in New Mexico—you know what I mean—I won’t draw you a diagram. Later he was at a submarine base. What happened was they were anticipating trouble. The FBI started making inquiries about them so they went over there on their own account and traveled to West Germany. In West Germany our friends helped them to get to the other side and then to the big city. Since then not a word was heard. We don’t know if they are alive or dead and “they” are worried. There must be a good reason why no word comes through. The boys here [Soviets] have heard nothing.

Jack pressed and asked if this was a political situation, and Needleman angrily replied, “I can’t put a spoon in your mouth; isn’t it enough to you that I mentioned New Mexico—that is it.” The FBI noted that he laced his comments with obscenities.⁸

Although Needleman never used the words “atomic bomb” or “Los Alamos,” his implication was clear. He also told Jack that “during the

war and for a period thereafter while their purchasing commission was still here, they [the Soviets] had dozens of apparatuses here,” which were “pretty busy.” Jack agreed to check with Buck. Jack’s recollection of the conversation was confirmed by the FBI bug planted in Needleman’s office.⁹

In mid-October 1955, Jack met first with Phillips and told him that Needleman was seriously concerned since the Seborer family was “likely to become hysterical and cause considerable embarrassment and trouble” unless they learned something about their relatives. Phillips responded that pressuring the Russians would not work. They still had not admitted that the “missing Britons”—a clear reference to Donald Maclean and Guy Burgess—were in Moscow. Jack then met with Buck and pleaded for him while in Moscow to assist the CPU-SA “in a very delicate matter” about which Phillips was aware. Buck agreed to help and said he would talk to Phillips about it.¹⁰

The delicate maneuvering got more complicated in late November as Jack prepared to return to Toronto to brief Buck before his journey to Moscow. Phillips had unexpectedly died and Jack now needed to know details that Needleman had given him about the Seborers. Needleman wrote four names on a piece of paper—Oscar and Stuart Seborer, Stuart’s wife Miriam, and her mother, Anna Zeitlin. Next to Oscar’s name, he wrote, “He handed over to them the formula for the ‘A’ bomb.” He then burned the paper. He then took Jack

Like many Jewish families from Eastern Europe, the Seborers came to the United States in stages.

into another room in his office and explained:

Look—the two brothers, one an engineer on the “A” bomb project and the other an Army captain who was heroic during the war. They were in touch with a guy here [a Russian]. I was the intermediary between “this guy” and the brothers. When the Rosenberg case became “hot,” it was the Army guy who brought information that things were getting hot. The Army guy forewarned them. Things got so hot, it was necessary for them to blow. They picked themselves up and blew. The mother went because Miriam is an only child. What more can I tell you? Maybe they won’t listen to Tim [Buck]. Maybe he should not know about this.

Needleman, reported Jack, was visibly worried, with misgivings about providing this information to Buck. Jack responded that he couldn’t let Buck go to Moscow and look like an idiot and promised to use his judgment about what to tell him. Needleman agreed and indicated that the Soviets should be told the inquiry came from him. Asked if the Soviets knew who he was, Needleman answered, “Of course.”¹¹

The Seborers

Like many Jewish families from Eastern Europe, the Seborers came to the United States in stages. Abraham, born in 1876, and Jennie, born in 1881, left Poland with their eldest son, Max, born in 1903. They trav-

eled to Great Britain, where another son, Noah, was born in 1905. Stuart, born as Solomon, came along in 1918. By the time their only daughter, Rose, was born in 1919, the family had been living in the United States for a decade. The youngest child, Oscar, followed in 1921.

Although neither parent had more than a sixth grade education, the Seborer children, with the exception of Rose, all went to college while Abraham worked as a clerk. Max and Noah both attended Cornell University on scholarships, and Oscar and Stuart went to City College of New York. Stuart also won a New York State scholarship and enrolled in the ROTC program. Abraham and Jennie lived in Palestine from 1934 to 1938 before moving back to New York. Oscar apparently went with them, but Stuart, enrolled at CCNY, stayed in the United States and may have lived with Max.

All of the children gravitated toward the CPUSA. In fact, the Seborer family was part of a network of people connected to Soviet intelligence. Max was brought into the communist movement by his Cornell friend Gibby Needleman. He was a teacher for a number of years before going to work for Needleman’s law firm. His first wife’s sister, Rose Biegel Arenal, was married to Luis Arenal, implicated in the KGB plot to kill Leon Trotsky. Rose herself serviced a mail drop for communications between the Mexican plotters and Soviet intelligence. After his wife’s death, Max married Celia Posen, introduced to him by Needleman. Celia had been a nurse in the communist-dominated Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil

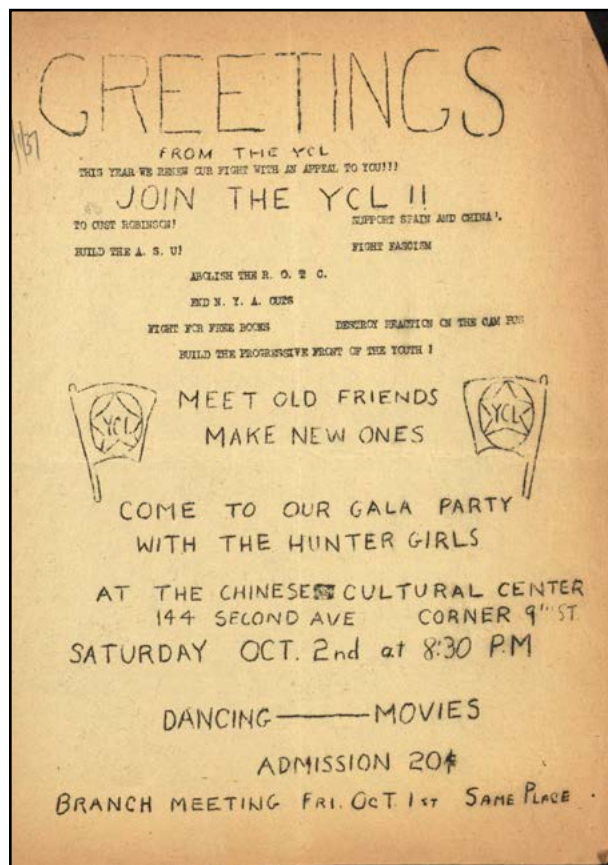
War and was friends with Soviet spies Harry Magdoff, Irving Kaplan, and Stanley Graze. Her uncle, Alexander, had married the former wife of Boris Soble, brother of Soviet spies Jack and Robert. Despite all these connections, Max had never formally joined the communist party. He later told an FBI informant that Needleman had advised him not to do so.¹²

Noah, also a teacher, was a party member. In the 1950s he moved to Mexico as many American communists at the same time did and was employed by an ice cream company started by several communist emigrés. He was close to Frederick Field and Maurice Halperin, both onetime Soviet agents, and blacklisted screenwriter Albert Maltz. Sister Rose served in a number of administrative positions in the New York Communist Party.¹³



Stuart Seborer’s 1939 photo, in ROTC uniform from CCNY’s yearbook, *Microcosm*. In it he was still going by his original given name, Solomon. No image of Oscar could be found.

For a number of years, Stuart and Oscar appeared somewhat removed from their siblings' overt communist ties. Stuart had joined a communist-dominated group at CCNY, but years later several of the most active communists at the college could not remember him. He was hired as a statistician by the Treasury Department in 1941, where he worked under three Soviet spies, William Ullman, Frank Coe, and Harry Dexter White. His wife, Miriam Zeitlin, whom he married in 1940, expressed pro-Soviet views, but neither one appeared to join the CPUSA. He joined the Army in 1942, rose to the rank of captain,



City College was a hotbed of communist activism when two of the Seborers sons attended. Source: City College of New York CUNY Academic Works Collection, CCNY Antiwar Notices archive, "Greetings from the YCL [Young Communist League]," October 1937, http://academicworks.cuny.edu/cc_arch_antiwar/188.

It was not until after the war that Stuart and Oscar began to run afoul of security agencies.

and earned a Silver Star. Several of his essays on his experiences as an armored cavalry officer in Europe are cited in military histories. Miriam underwent a Hatch Act investigation in 1942 while working at the Census Bureau and denied communist sympathies or membership. She joined the Waves (Women's Naval service) in 1942, serving until 1946, most of the time at the US Bureau of Shipping.¹⁴

Oscar had attended college in New

York before enrolling at Ohio State to study electrical engineering but joined the Army in October 1942. In view of his engineering training, the Army assigned him to the Special Engineering Detachment that provided technically trained soldiers to fill a variety of specialist posts in the Manhattan Project. He worked at Oak Ridge before being transferred to Los Alamos in 1944 and remained there until 1946. He was present at Trinity site, near Alamogordo, as part of a unit monitoring seismological effects of the first explosion of an atomic bomb, as a technician fifth grade.¹⁵

It was not until after the war that Stuart and Oscar began to

run afoul of security agencies. After his discharge from the Army in 1946, Stuart became a civilian employee of the Army's Civil Affairs Division, first as a research analyst and then as chief of the European Unit. His wife Miriam, meanwhile graduated from George Washington University Medical School in 1950.

In January 1949 an Army memo recommended that he be fired because of communist associations. There was conflicting information in the report and Gen. Leland Eberle ordered that he be interviewed. In June, Eberle dropped the proceedings, noting that Stuart's affidavit had answered the charges, sources who knew him vouched for him, and all the accusations were anonymous. At his loyalty hearing Stuart had been indignant. He denied knowing of his brothers' and sister's communist ties, insisting that he had had little contact with them for years and that he should not be tarred by their beliefs. He declared: "I resent it being said that I have ever had any connection, or implied connection with the Communist Party or any other subversive organization. I am vigorously and emphatically opposed to communists and communism." Although he was being considered for a job at the State Department in 1950, Stuart was informed in mid-August that he would not be granted a security clearance.¹⁶

Oscar applied for a civilian position at Los Alamos on 28 May 1947 but withdrew his application just one month later for unknown reasons. He then resumed the engineering studies that had been interrupted by the war. He attended the University

In fact, the first indication the FBI or any other security agency received of their involvement with Soviet espionage was Needleman's conversation with Jack Childs in 1954.

of Michigan from September 1947 to August 1948 and received his master's degree in electrical engineering. He then was hired at the US Navy's Underwater Sound Laboratory in New London, Connecticut, the center for naval research on sonar for ships and submarines.

In August 1949, the commanding officer recommended removing him as security risk. Three weeks later, on 29 August, a Loyalty Review Board overturned the decision and asked for further investigation. At the end of April 1950, the lab decided he could be retained, but Oscar transferred to the Electronic Shore Division of the Navy's Bureau of Ships in Washington. At his new job he was involved with planning the installation and supervision of electronic equipment in American and European harbors. The equipment itself was unclassified but the location of the devices was secret. Shortly after Oscar was hired, an officer who had known him in New London reported him as a security risk. The only man in the unit without a security clearance, he was "a marked man" and resigned his position on 1 June 1951.¹⁷

The Disappearance

The Seborer brothers' problems with getting security clearances coincided with a growing concern about espionage. Following the Soviets' atomic bomb test in 1949, Klaus Fuchs was arrested in Great Britain in February 1950 and confessed to spying while he was at Los Alamos. Three months later Harry Gold, his

courier, was arrested, and he led the FBI to David Greenglass in June. By July, Julius Rosenberg was in custody. By the time the Rosenbergs and Morton Sobell went on trial in 1951, many of their friends from CCNY's communist movement were under suspicion and one, William Perl, had been convicted of perjury. Several others, including Joel Barr and Alfred Sarant, had vanished. Decades later Barr and Sarant were identified as living in the USSR under assumed names.

Stuart and Oscar Seborer also decided it would be prudent to leave the United States. Together with Miriam and her mother, Anna, they booked passage on the SS *Liberte*, bound for Plymouth and LeHavre, on 15 Feb-

ruary 1951 and sailed on 3 July. The long delay between purchasing the tickets and actually leaving indicates that they were not fleeing some kind of fear of imminent danger—unlike Morris and Leona Cohen, two Soviet agents, who vanished from their New York apartment suddenly in June 1950. The Rosenbergs had been sentenced to death in April 1951, and the hunt was on for other spies, but neither Seborer brother was in the crosshairs of any espionage investigation. They had become identified as security risks because of their association with communists, but indications of possible espionage had not surfaced in their security reviews. In fact, the first indication the FBI or any other security agency received of their involvement with Soviet espionage was Needleman's conversation with Jack Childs in 1954.¹⁸

For more than a year, the traveling foursome seemed nothing more than

| LINE No. | FAMILY NAME—GIVEN NAME ADDRESS IN UNITED STATES | AGE (Years) | SEX (F-M) | U.S. PASSPORT No. | PLACE OF BIRTH DATE AND PLACE OF NATURALIZATION | LENGTH OF TIME PASSENGER INTENDS TO REMAIN ABROAD |
|----------|--|----------------|--------------|----------------------|--|---|
| 1 | PALEY Gussie 559 Willoughby Ave. BROOKLYN, N.Y. | 42 | F | 443833 | U.S.A. | 2 Mos |
| 2 | PEPPER Rebecca PHILADELPHIA, Pa. | 14 | F | 446490 | U.S. | |
| 21 | SEBORER Stuart 535 Mellom Str. WASHINGTON, D.C. | 32 | M | 34231 | U.S.A. | 6 Mos |
| 22 | SEBORER Miriah | 32 | F | 38883 | U.S.A. | " " |
| 23 | SEBORER Oscar | 30 | M | 380876 | U.S.A. | " " |
| 24 | SAFREN Sidney 2301 Ocean Ave. BROOKLYN, N.Y. | 36 | M | 450150 | U.S.A. | 2 Mos ✓ |

Portions of the manifest of the SS *Liberte* showing a 3 July departure for Le Havre, France, with three Seborers on board. Source: Ancestry.com.

American tourists. Miriam had told friends she was pursuing a medical internship in England. Stuart mentioned setting up an import-export company. Anna Zeitlin told friends she was traveling with her only child. The group arrived by air in Israel on 3 September, after obtaining visas in Paris, to visit Abraham and Jennie Seborer, who had again emigrated to Israel in August 1950 and were living in Gan Yavne. In the latter part of 1951, Max Seborer obtained a passport, indicating he planned a three-month trip to England, France, Italy, and Israel. There is no direct evidence if he met his siblings, but he returned to New York in January 1952. His brothers did not. The party of four renewed their passports in Vienna that month. Apart from a handful of innocuous postcards to a few friends and relatives over the next six months, nothing more was heard from the Seborers. They had vanished.

In October 1952, Anna Zeitlin's niece, Rose Mendelsohn, contacted the State Department, worried that she had no word from her aunt. She feared that the group might have strayed into Russian territory and been captured. The State Department responded that it had no knowledge of the whereabouts of any of them.¹⁹

In 1955, the FBI fretted about what Jack should do with Needleman's information. Jack was reluctant to relay Needleman's story of Oscar's involvement in atomic espionage to Tim Buck. If Buck didn't want to become involved in espionage, he might conclude that Jack was mixed up in it and sever ties with him. Almost as bad, if Buck did raise the issue with the Soviets, they might think that Needleman had breached security

Needleman had hinted that their decision to flee was linked to increasing pressure during the period when the Rosenberg ring was being rolled up.

and break ties with Buck, severing a major source of information for the FBI via Jack Childs. The FBI advised Jack to avoid mentioning atomic espionage and just say the Seborers were "apparatus [i.e., CPUSA] people" who had feared exposure.

On 6 December, Jack met yet again with Buck, described the Seborers as "apparatus people" about whom Needleman—and not the CPUSA—wanted information. He emphasized that he himself had never met them. Buck was confident there would be no problem—he had traced people before. Back in New York, Jack met with Needleman and assured him he had never mentioned espionage or the atomic bomb. Gibby was relieved: "After I told you I was sorry that I did. Forget about it now, will you."²⁰

Needleman's statements, which the FBI judged to "constitute admission of guilt on his part that he was involved in espionage with Seborers," galvanized the FBI into action. The Bureau's first impulse was concern that it had overlooked a significant case of espionage. A memo to Hoover's assistant, Clyde Tolson, explained that the loyalty investigations of the Seborer brothers had turned up communist connections but not a hint of espionage. Not until Needleman had confided in Jack Childs did that concern arise. Hence, the FBI was "not vulnerable" for any delay in investigating espionage.²¹

Several lines of investigation were laid out.

- Were the Seborers connected with the Rosenberg spy ring?
- How much did Max Seborer know about what his brothers had done?
- Why was Needleman so insistent on learning about the Seborers?
- What secrets had Stuart and, particularly, Oscar, been privy to?

Needleman had hinted that their decision to flee was linked to increasing pressure during the period when the Rosenberg ring was being rolled up. Agents learned that Stuart and Julius had been enrolled in one math class together at CCNY in September 1934 and Perl and Stuart had shared another class in February 1935. Apart from that, they could find no evidence of a connection. Neither Ruth nor David Greenglass, Harry Gold, or Elizabeth Bentley could identify a picture of the Seborers or knew anything about them. Nathan Sussman, a Rosenberg associate who led the communist cell at CCNY and partially cooperated with the FBI, did not recall either one. Several college classmates of Julius did not remember the Seborers.²²

The FBI quickly learned that Stuart had continued to receive veteran's disability checks for several years after he left for Europe. For a while, they went to Max's address. Until February 1952, they had been cashed in Europe, so he had obviously forwarded them. Thereafter, checks allegedly signed by Stuart and countersigned by Max were deposited in Max's bank account. In a letter to the Veteran's Administration, Max was

Extensive interviews with colleagues of Stuart and Miriam from their days in the armed forces, at the Underwater Sound Laboratory, and Bureau of Ships yielded little information.

listed as having power of attorney, although no such authority seemed to exist. That, and his 1951 trip to Israel, suggested that Max was in collusion with his brothers.²³

As to Needleman's insistence on learning about the Seborers, Jack had not thought much of the idea that a humanitarian concern for the family of his legman had motivated him.²⁴ The FBI speculated that Max Seborer might be part of a current clandestine apparatus and Needleman had to assuage him. If its members feared exposure and having to flee, the absence of news about Oscar and Stuart might have them worried that they would be purged if they did reach the USSR. Or Needleman himself was worried that he might have to flee and wanted a signal that the USSR was a safehaven.

Extensive interviews with colleagues of Stuart and Miriam from their days in the armed forces, at the Underwater Sound Laboratory, and Bureau of Ships yielded little information. FBI documents released under FOIA as of early 2019 do not contain any significant information about Oscar's Los Alamos career or the FBI's investigation of his work there.

The FBI was constrained, in any case, from launching an all-out investigation of the Seborers. If it started to question people about Oscar and Stuart, word about its inquiries was bound to make its way to their relatives and back to Needleman. Without any obvious pretext, that would surely lead him to suspect Jack

Childs either of being a government informant or carelessly gossiping about a very sensitive issue. In either case, Jack's usefulness would certainly be jeopardized.

To provide a reasonable excuse, the FBI seized on Rose Mendelsohn's old letter to the State Department. After assuring itself that she was not a communist, it prevailed on her to write to Max expressing her concerns and conducted several interviews using her letter as a cover. As it had suspected, word leaked back to Needleman of the inquiries, but he apparently accepted the explanation that the low-key investigation had been triggered by an anxious relative.²⁵

The Seborer Brothers Resurface

Tim Buck's overtures did produce results. On 23 November 1956, technical surveillance of Needleman's office picked up a telephone call in which Max Seborer excitedly reported that someone had delivered several letters, and he had to write an immediate reply. "They" were in East Germany, he gushed. Needleman wanted to see the letters and Max showed up at his apartment that evening at 10:45 and stayed for an hour. Max returned to his apartment and made a call to his brother Noah in Mexico City. Needleman later told Jack that Max had received a letter from someone in the Soviet embassy that included a picture of the family. Max, though, was still frustrated that direct contact was impossible.²⁶

Not until July 1958 did Max get a second letter from his brothers, reporting that they had had a hard time in East Germany, but things were better now in Russia. He showed Jack Childs the letter, with photographs of Oscar, Stuart, Anna Zeitlin, and Miriam and her child born sometime after her departure from the United States. Oscar was doing engineering research, Stuart scientific translations. Although they were living comfortably, language still remained an issue. They had made a mistake by selling their car in Germany and had to wait three years to obtain a new one. Grateful to Jack for his help, Max asked him to inquire if he or Noah's wife could visit them. Jack advised him to consult with Needleman; the FBI urged Jack not to facilitate a visit between Max and his brothers.²⁷

To date, the FBI has only released files on the Seborers through 1956, with no indication of when the files from later years might be processed. Bits and pieces of the Seborer investigation have, however, emerged from the SOLO files on Morris and Jack Childs. They indicate that Morris informed his handlers after a trip to Moscow in November 1961 that he had heard rumors among Americans living in the USSR about a "mysterious group of Americans known only as the Smiths, two couples plus the mother of one of the women. One of the men had had an affair with a Russian woman, and his wife visited the American embassy but was informed by the Soviets that she would not be allowed to leave. When she tried to visit the embassy again, she was arrested, threatened, and finally released. The two men were perhaps scientists."²⁸

The details were filled in after Jack met with Needleman in September 1963 following the attorney's return from a monthlong stay in a Soviet sanitarium. During his visit, Needleman met with the Seborers. Both had apartments in the same building, worked for the Academy of Science, and were paid 300 rubles a month. Miriam had indeed gone to the American embassy seeking to return to the United States and been "exiled" to Alma Ata in "protective custody," Needleman told Jack. The brothers no longer had any interest in her. Both Stuart and Oscar were completely "Russified and Sovietized." They told Needleman they would be executed "for what they did" if they ever returned to the United States. Oscar had been the "main man in the operation" and had given Needleman plans for the A-bomb, which had then been turned over to someone at Amtorg.²⁹

Over the years additional details drifted out. Tim Buck told Jack that he and Needleman had been invited to a party in the fall of 1963 at the Moscow apartment of Arthur and Dorothy Adams at which the Seborers were present. Adams had been a GRU (Soviet military intelligence) officer whose last assignment in the United States during WWII had focused on stealing atomic secrets.

Adams was observed meeting with a Manhattan Project scientist, Clarence Hiskey in Chicago, and a search of his New York apartment turned up espionage paraphernalia. Adams evaded FBI surveillance in 1944 and fled the country. He had worked for Amtorg in the 1930s and was associated with several scientific companies run by American communists at the time of his disappearance.

In view of the seriousness of the allegations of atomic espionage, he refused to approve closing the case and ordered periodic reviews "to insure that the subjects do not escape."

Whether or not he was the person to whom Needleman gave Oscar Seborer's information on the atomic bomb is not known, but Buck was surprised that Needleman knew Adams so well. Nor was Adams the only ex-spy with whom the Seborers socialized—Max Seborer had learned they were friendly with Guy Burgess.³⁰

While he was in Moscow in 1964, Jack Childs talked with Art Shields, the Moscow correspondent for *The Worker* (CPUSA's newspaper), who mentioned that every three or four months the Seborers dropped by his apartment to say hello. They were "mysterious" and didn't say much. Both now worked at the Institute for World Economy. Jack asked its director, an old acquaintance, about the pair and heard that they did not do "important work" and kept to themselves. Russian employees were told to "leave them alone."³¹

Yuri Nosenko, the KGB defector whose bona fides were a matter of controversy inside the CIA, told his debriefers that during 1960–61 he had seen pictures of the two brothers in KGB offices. In 1968, Morris Childs was asked by a Russian contact in Moscow if he knew the Smith brothers living there. Stuart had told the KGB he had been a member of the CPUSA since 1938, and Morris was asked to check on his claim.³²

Aside from the SOLO files, virtually nothing from FBI or CIA files dealing with the Seborers after 1956 has been released. An FBI memo from 1963 indicated that with no more logical areas of investigation,

the New York Office had placed the case in an inactive status. By 1964 it recommended closing the investigations of Oscar, Stuart, and Miriam, but continuing the technical surveillance of Needleman. William Sullivan, the assistant director demurred; in view of the seriousness of the allegations of atomic espionage, he refused to approve closing the case and ordered periodic reviews "to insure that the subjects do not escape."³³

The technical surveillance did yield some more information. In September 1961, Miriam and Stuart were divorced. Needleman met again with the Seborers on a trip to Moscow in 1965 and upon his return, told Jack that he had seen the two brothers and that Stuart had been "compelled by government to give his former wife 25 percent of his wages for the upkeep of their child."³⁴

Miriam, her son, and her mother were able to return to the United States on 29 December 1969. Nothing in the files indicates why the Soviets were willing to allow her to leave, after detaining and rustivating her for an earlier effort. Presumably, she gave guarantees of silence. She was interviewed several times by the FBI between March and July 1970. She admitted the group had lived from 1952 to 1957 in a town near Dresden in East Germany under the name of Smith. They had kept that name when they moved to the USSR in March 1957. She denied knowing anything about espionage committed by her former husband or brother-in-law before they left for the Soviet

The Seborers did leave some additional traces, however. In 1974, after more than two decades of silence Stuart wrote a book

Union and denied that she herself had engaged in espionage.³⁵

Either before her interviews with the FBI or shortly thereafter, Miriam contacted Needleman in New York. Needleman wrote to the brothers in Moscow that she was employed as a laboratory technician and “was no longer concerned with political matters.” He also assured them that she was not “vindictive” towards Stuart, a clear indication that she had not informed the FBI about their espionage activities. In response the brothers wrote that they were pleased “she bore them no hard feelings” and that they were now members of the CPSU and completely “Russified.” Both were married to Russian women. No more information is available about the brothers in FBI files that have been released.³⁶

The Seborers did leave some additional traces, however. In 1974, after more than two decades of silence Stuart wrote a book, *US Neocolonialism in Africa*, published by International Publishers, under the name Stewart Smith; it was then published in a Russian edition in 1975. Biographical material in the Russian edition explained that “S. Smith served as a senior political advisor of the US administration in Germany, but after Washington decided to re-establish West German militarism, while in US there was McCarthyism, he left US government service. . . . He settled in the working class suburb of Dresden and worked at the factory.” He had edited translations “of a number of scientific works, including classical books of the 3rd volume of Marx’s

Capital and Lenin’s *Philosophical Notebooks*.” Smith “currently continues his research work at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO), USSR Academy of Sciences.”

The English edition was more frank, giving Smith’s true name as Stewart Seborer. He ended his preface by thanking his brother Oscar. Among those also thanked in the acknowledgments were Gus Hall, Henry Winston, and James Allen, all senior CPUSA officials, and I. G. Needleman. He also thanked Yevgeny Primakov, deputy director of the IMEMO, and “D. Macklin,” almost certainly a mangled transliteration from Russian of the name of British spy Donald MacLean, also employed at the same institute.³⁷

In 1987 Stuart, again using the name Smith, published a second book that only appeared in Russian: *Weaponry and Dollars: The Wellsprings of U.S. Foreign Policy*. Mikhail Voslensky, a Soviet dissident, wrote in the Russian edition (1991) of his *Nomenklatura: The Soviet Ruling Class*, that Smith—he did not know his real name—was an American who had moved to the USSR to avoid being nabbed as a Soviet spy and worked with Maclean there.³⁸

KGB Archival Evidence

There is documentary evidence that corroborates Needleman’s story that the Seborer brothers were involved in Soviet espionage and for Oscar being an atomic spy. In 2009 Alexander Vassiliev’s notebooks,

more than a thousand pages of extracts and summaries of KGB archival files, were made public. Some of the extracts deal with the rebuilding of Soviet networks during 1947–49. The KGB had deactivated many of its American networks in late 1945, when Elizabeth Bentley’s defection to the FBI forced it to recall KGB officers she exposed in 1945.

With a new cadre of officers installed in the United States, in 1947 the KGB attempted to reconnect wartime sources with whom it had lost contact. Among the extracts from Vassiliev’s notebooks is a message from Moscow KGB HQ directing its new officers in the United States to attempt to reconnect with a group of sources, labeled “Relative’s Group,” originally organized by “Intermediary,” who worked at Amtorg. Three of its members, “Relative,” “Godfather,” and “Godsend” (also translated as “Discovery”) were brothers and a fourth member was “Nata,” the Russian diminutive for Natalya, so likely female. The group had been created in 1945 but “had hardly been used for work [i.e., espionage] and had not been compromised [revealed to US counterintelligence] in any way.”

Godsend was singled out as having been at Los Alamos and provided information on “Enormous,” the KGB’s term for the atomic bomb project. By 1947, however, Soviet atomic sources were scarce: “Our opportunities for receiving information about ‘E’ [Enormous] were significantly cut down by the fact that certain athletes [KGB term for their spies] who had previously worked in that field (“Mlad” [codename for Ted Hall], “Caliber” [David Greenglass], and “Godsend”) switched to different

jobs for reasons beyond their control.”³⁹

The obvious reason these three sources “switched to different jobs” was that in late 1945, with the war over, the US atomic bomb program lost its sense of urgency. Thousands of workers were demobilized and returned to their previous jobs or pursued other goals. The young Mlad/Hall went to graduate school to complete his physics studies. Caliber/Greenglass returned to New York City and went into the machine shop business in partnership with Julius Rosenberg.

Mlad is identified in Vassiliev’s notebooks and in Venona as Theodore Hall and Caliber is identified as David Greenglass. Godsend, however, is not identified. KGB headquarters in Moscow urged its American officers to reestablish contact with him. Moscow reminded its station in Washington that Godsend was thought to be attending a university and its officers should see if he might be able to return to Los Alamos in some capacity.

US counterintelligence had no knowledge of this group. The cable was not one of those decrypted by the Venona codebreaking project. And the Vassiliev notebooks contain no more mentions of Relative’s Group. Nor do the details in Vassiliev’s notebooks provide enough information to identify its members. Godsend had worked at Los Alamos but there was no indication of his job there. He had been demobilized at the end of the war but so had thousands of others. He was thought to be in college in 1947, but so were many thousands of other veterans of the Manhattan Project. He was one of three brothers who had been recruited into espionage by

While we know a great deal about the information Fuchs, Hall, and Greenglass had access to and some of the specifics of exactly what they provided the Soviets, we only know that Seborer provided something.

a Soviet operative, likely an American, working for Amtorg.

The story Needleman told to Jack Childs fills in the sparse description of Relative’s Group from the 1947 KGB message. The KGB documents said the group was originally organized by Intermediary who worked at Amtorg, obviously Needleman. Three of its members, Relative, Godfather, and Godsend were brothers. Godsend had been at Los Alamos and handed over atomic information to a Soviet intelligence officer. Oscar, clearly, was the real name behind the code-name Godsend. The directive to see if Godsend could return to Los Alamos fits neatly with Oscar’s 1947 application to return to Los Alamos to a civilian position. Brothers Max and Stuart would be Relative and Godfather. Miriam would be a candidate for the fifth, female member of Relative’s group, Nata.

How Serious was the Seborers’ Espionage?

We now know definitively that there were at least four Soviet spies at Los Alamos: Klaus Fuchs, Theodore Hall, David Greenglass, and the newly identified Oscar Seborer. While we know a great deal about the information Fuchs, Hall, and Greenglass had access to and some of the specifics of exactly what they provided the Soviets, we only know that Seborer provided something. Needleman’s claim that Oscar “handed over to them the formula for the ‘A’ bomb” and the Seborers’ own belief that if they returned to the United States

they would face execution seem to contradict that KGB message written in 1947 that their apparatus “had hardly been used for work.”

But, there is circumstantial evidence that prior to 1945, when the KGB began to oversee it, Needleman’s ring had been providing information to the KGB’s sister agency, the GRU. Not only had Needleman been involved with Sam Carr, a Soviet spy in Canada, but Carr worked for a GRU spy ring. Needleman had worked at Amtorg with Arthur Adams, a long-time GRU officer. And the Seborers and Needleman had later socialized with Adams in Moscow. In a secret search of Adams’s New York apartment in 1944, the FBI found notes on experiments being conducted at Oak Ridge. While they could have come from George Koval, another GRU agent, Oscar Seborer also worked there from 1943 to the end of 1944.

After one unsuccessful effort to evade the FBI in early 1945, Adams succeeded in sneaking out of the United States. His difficulties beginning in 1944 may have been the impetus for the transfer of his atomic assets, including Oscar, and the latter’s controller, Needleman, to the KGB’s control. John Williamson, a onetime top CPUSA functionary preparing for deportation to England, told Jack in 1955 that Needleman was “a most reliable guy,” who had been with “them”—the Russians—“for many years.” It is, therefore, possible that, via Needleman, Oscar had furnished the GRU with a significant

Oscar Seborer died on 23 April 2015 in Moscow. Among the attendees at the funeral was a representative of the FSB, the Russian internal security service.

amount of classified information from Oak Ridge and Los Alamos.⁴⁰

While Oscar was only an Army technician, not a scientist like Fuchs and Hall, he had had university engineering training. And, as David Greenglass illustrates, even an Army technician had access to sensitive material. He machined models of the implosion lens used to trigger the plutonium bomb and provided the Soviets with a physical sample of part of the triggering mechanism.

Further, we have little understanding of what Oscar might have provided to the Soviets from his post-war positions at the Navy's Underwater Sound Laboratory and the Bureau of Ships or of what Stuart might have provided from his position as chief of the European branch of the Army's Civil Affairs Division. We do know that Soviet authorities awarded Oscar the Order of the Red Star in 1964, so his contribution must have been of some consequence.⁴¹

FBI Dilemmas

The FBI faced an excruciating dilemma in trying to untangle the Seborer case. While the full extent of its investigation awaits further FOIA releases, it was constrained by the fear that too vigorous a pursuit of this spy ring might cause Needleman to suspect Jack Childs, its chief source, and endanger Operation SOLO, its premier counterintelligence operation providing vital information about both the CPUSA and the international communist movement. The chief suspects, apart from Needleman, were beyond its reach, in the USSR by the time it learned what they had done. Even after Miriam Seborer returned from the USSR in 1969, SOLO was active and the FBI had no independent evidence with which to pressure her. So, the Seborer brothers—and particularly Oscar—got away with espionage.

Jack Childs died in 1980; in 1982, Morris went into the government's

witness protection program. By that time, Gibby Needleman had died (1975). Max Seborer died in 1978. After her return from Moscow, Miriam Seborer worked as a medical technician and then was acting medical director of the United Nations Medical Service before resigning in February 1974 in protest against not being considered to be permanent director. She later worked as medical director for an insurance company. In 1996 she was placed in a nursing home; she died in 2002.

Oscar Seborer died on 23 April 2015 in Moscow. Among the attendees at the funeral was a representative of the FSB, the Russian internal security service. His brother Stuart was present in a wheelchair. A friend explained that “both brothers are communists—they maintained their convictions and language.” And both lived to see the cause for which they had betrayed their native land disintegrate. Although a Moscow apartment and phone number for Stuart Smith still were listed in 2018, no one answered the telephone or the doorbell.⁴²



The authors: Professor *Harvey Klehr* is retired from Emory University where he taught for more than 40 years. He is the author of multiple works on American communism and Soviet espionage, many in collaboration with the coauthor of this article, historian *John Earl Haynes*. Dr. Haynes served as a specialist in 20th century political history in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress and is author or coauthor of numerous other publications on US communism and anticommunism. After the fall of the Soviet Union, he worked with former Soviet archivists to acquire once sensitive documents for use by scholars around the world.

Endnotes

1. See “The Perseus Myth” in Joseph Albright and Marcia Kunstel, *Bombshell: The Secret Story of America’s Unknown Atomic Spy Conspiracy* (Times Books, 1997), 267–77; Gary Kern, “The PERSEUS Disinformation Operation,” H-HOAC, 17 February 2006, <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-hoac&month=0602&week=c&msg=Lb%2bREHUoud/%2bSFUeQbPTMA&user=&pw=>; John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America*, (Yale University Press, 2009), 556, note 3; and John Earl Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Venona: Decoding Soviet Espionage in America* (Yale University Press, 1999), 317–18. The SOLO operation became public in 1981 with the publication of David J. Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King, Jr.: From “Solo” to Memphis* (W.W. Norton, 1981). Garrow updated his account in David J. Garrow, “The FBI and Martin Luther King,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July/August 2002. Although journalistic rather than scholarly, the most detailed account of the operation is John Barron’s *Operation SOLO: The FBI’s Man in the Kremlin* (Regnery Pub., 1995). Barron’s book was prepared with considerable FBI cooperation as well as the cooperation of Morris Childs and his family.
2. Robert Lamphere and Tom Shachtman, *The FBI-KGB War: A Special Agent’s Story* (Random House, 1986), 107.
3. Special Agent in Charge (SAC) New York (hereafter SAC NY) to Director FBI, 21 December 1954, pp. 53-55 in FBI file 100-56579-966. The story of Needleman’s trip to Toronto with Jack is also included in more detail in SAC NY to Director FBI, 21 December 1954, in FBI file 100-1222443, no serial number (Oscar Seborer’s file).
4. SAC NY to Director FBI, 21 December 1954 and SAC NY to Director FBI, 22 March 1955 in FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
5. SAC NY to Director FBI, 22 March 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number. “Apparatus” in this context referred to nonpublic CPUSA work.
6. SAC NY to Director FBI, 1 July 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
7. Airtel SAC NY to Bureau, 24 August 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
8. Belmont memo to Boardman, 4 October 1955, FBI file 1222443-10; New York FBI report, 25 November 1955, FBI file 1222443-16.
9. SAC NY to Director FBI, 7 November 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number. “Purchasing commission” refers to the Soviet Government Purchasing Commission that operated in the United States during WWII as a conduit for Lend-Lease aid to the USSR.
10. *Ibid.*
11. SAC NY to Bureau, Washington Field Office (WFO), and PH, 26 November 1955 FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
12. “The Seborer Family-Some Highlights,” https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000014731.pdf.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Belmont to Boardman, 30 August 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Belmont to Boardman, 1 December 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number; Washington, DC FBI report, 11 July 1955, FBI file 100-1222451-6. File 1222451 is the FBI file for Stuart Seborer.
17. Airtel WFO to Director FBI, 6 December 1955 FBI file 1222443-22.
18. Airtel SAC NY to Bureau, 3 October 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
19. Philadelphia FBI report, 16 September 1955, FBI file 1222443-8.
20. SAC NY to Director FBI, 22 December 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
21. Mason to Tolson, 9 December 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
22. SAC NY to Director FBI, 1 March 1956, FBI file 1222443-86; NY FBI report, 17 February 1956, FBI file 1222451-98; Albuquerque FBI report, 7 February 1956, FBI file 1222443-69.
23. Airtel New York to Bureau, 1 February 1956, FBI file 1222451 no serial number; Legal Attache Rome to Director FBI, 8 February 1956, FBI file 1222451-81; Report of the FBI Laboratory to SAC WFO, 3 February, 1956, FBI file 1222451-87; Branigan to Belmont, 7 February 1956, FBI file 1222451 no serial number.
24. Airtel SAC NY to Bureau, 20 December 1955, FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
25. As one example, FBI agents questioned one acquaintance, who told Rose Arenal, who informed Needleman. SAC WFO to Director FBI, 17 October, 1955, FBI file 1222443-14.
26. Belmont to Boardman, 24 November 1956, FBI file 1222443, no serial number.
27. SAC NY to Director FBI, 15 August 1958, Jack Childs FBI file NYC-15, pp. 179–82. Jack Childs FOIA FBI files are online at: <https://archive.org/details/JackChilds/page/n6>.
28. SAC Chicago to Director FBI, 5 January 1962, FBI 100-428091 (hereafter the SOLO file), FBI SOLO file part 40, pp. 26-28.
29. SAC NY to Director FBI, 11 September 1963, FBI SOLO file part 48, pp. 137–41.
30. SAC NY to Director FBI, 15 January 1964, FBI SOLO file part 56, pp. 22–23.
31. SAC NY to Director FBI, 29 June 1964, FBI SOLO file part 64, pp. 221–22.
32. Federal Bureau of Investigation: “Isidore Gibby Needleman,” March 3, 1971 in Jack Childs FBI file NYC 16A-18A, pp. 102–107; SAC NY to Director FBI, 3 July 1968, FBI SOLO file part 124, pp. 265–71.
33. Branigan to Sullivan, 22 June 1964, FBI file 1222443-290.
34. SAC NY to Director FBI, 6 April 1965, FBI SOLO file part 84, pp. 143–48.
35. Federal Bureau of Investigation: Isidore Gibby Needleman, March 3, 1971 in Jack Childs FBI file NYC 16A-18A, pp. 102–107.

36. Ibid.
37. Stewart Smith, *U.S. Neocolonialism in Africa* (International Publishers, 1974); Стюарт Смит, Американский неокOLONИализм в Африке (*American Neocolonialism in Africa*) (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975).
38. Стюарт Смит, Оружие и доллары. Истоки внешней политики США (Progress Publishers, 1987); Восленский М.С., Номенклатура. Господствующий класс Советского Союза. М., 1991.
39. Vassiliev Black Notebooks, pp.127-128, 130. Vassiliev's original notebooks are held by the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress and are online at <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/collection/86/Vassiliev-Notebooks>.
40. SAC NY to Director FBI, 1 June 1955, FBI file 100-56579-1062.
41. Alexsei Turbaevsky posting in Livejournal, April 25, 2015. Turbaevsky is a biotechnology engineer and physicist at the P.N. Lebedev Institute of Physics, who at one time worked on projects for the Foreign Intelligence Service. Livejournal is a popular Russian web forum.
42. Details of the funeral are contained in Turbaevsky's posting in *Live* journal, April 25, 2015.

