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To Family, Chin's Conviction 'a Horrible Error'

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Roberta Mauri was surprised when she heard that former CIA analyst Larry Wu-Tai Chin had been arrested on espionage charges. The man described in news reports as an accused spy and compulsive gambler did not resemble the man she and her brothers Homer and Peter Chin knew as their father.

Yesterday, five days after he committed suicide in jail, the three talked in detail about Chin. They described a man who raised them to be 100 percent American, who was generous but disciplined and who would never knowingly have harmed the United States.

"Spying is not the right word," said Mauri. "To us, he was a goodwill ambassador who was misunderstood . . . and his conviction was a mistake, a horrible, horrible error."

Chin was awaiting sentencing next month for his conviction on charges of espionage, conspiracy and tax evasion when he was found dead in his jail cell. According to testimony at his trial, he sold secret information to Chinese intelligence officials for more than 30 years in exchange for thousands of dollars, which was deposited in Hong Kong bank accounts.

Mauri, a 35-year-old mother of four, and Peter, 34, and Homer, 30, both physicians, sat around a circular, glass-topped dining room table in the high-rise Alexandria apartment where Chin lived with his wife Cathy, their stepmother.

Because Chin "can no longer defend himself," Mauri said, they wanted to speak out.

All three, now living in California, were born outside the United States and were relocated as teenagers.

"Our father raised us as Americans. Our relationship with China is minimal. His views on China were never discussed with us," said Mauri.

Chin always spoke to them in English, said Peter Chin, who is completing a residency in anesthesiology. "I still have a hard time speaking Chinese," he said.

So American was Mauri that her friends called her "a banana" when she lived in the 1950s on a U.S. military base in Okinawa, where her father worked for the CIA's Foreign Broadcast Information Service.

"That meant I was yellow on the outside, but white on the inside," she said.

When they were children Chin told them to tell their friends he worked at the State Department. They learned he was a CIA employee only when they became adults, they said. "We didn't talk about what he did or why he did it," said Peter Chin.

His children say he never prepared them for his possible arrest, and they believe he thought he would never be discovered. The news of his arrest last November shocked them, they said. "I felt that maybe there was some mistake," Peter Chin said, "and the CIA would step in and say he did this because we told him to."

But Chin's explanation that he had passed classified information—not military secrets—to the Chinese as part of a personal "mission" to reconcile the United States and China made sense to them, they said.

"My dad felt he did not hurt the United States at all," said Peter Chin. "I think he felt that things he had done were not that severe. He didn't think the documents were that crucial. When he was arrested, he called my stepmother and told her, 'I will be home tomorrow.'"

"He felt he had done nothing seriously wrong . . . He didn't pass any secret codes like the Walkers," he said, a reference to John, Michael and Arthur Walker, who were convicted last year of espionage.

Chin testified that he had only chosen information that cast the United States in a favorable light.

"There is no hard evidence that he harmed the United States," said Homer Chin, a graduate of Dartmouth Medical School who is doing research in medical computer science at Stanford University.

"To us, his crime was so minor and his goal was so great," said Mauri.

"When you say he had a secret life," said Mauri, "it was just a facet of his life. I'm sure when you look at his life as a whole, it was a minuscule part."

The money he received from passing classified information to the Chinese, more than \$180,000 according to trial testimony, was incidental to Chin, his children said.

Mauri also denied that her father was a compulsive gambler, saying that he approached it like a business, writing down in a small book his losses and gains as well as the time he spent at each table in the casino.

"He was completely in control of his gambling . . . There's nothing compulsive about my dad. He had the strongest self-control of anyone I know."

Homer Chin also disputed published reports that his father's rental properties were worth \$700,000. Most are mortgaged, he said, leaving a final equity of only about \$100,000.

The Chin children, who took their father's body to California yesterday for burial, said they still are confused about the circumstances surrounding his death. Chin was found in his cell last Friday with a plastic bag tied around his head with shoelaces. His death was ruled a suicide.

The Chin children cannot understand why Chin, who wrote almost obsessively in his diaries about his activities, did not leave a note explaining his suicide.

His last letter to his wife, written the day before he died, described efforts he was setting in motion to ask the Chinese government to come to his assistance. He described himself as "in a good frame of mind," said Peter Chin.

"I've never known him to be depressed," said Mauri. "Homer and I said Dad will be all right in jail because he's such an adaptable person. He was always looking to have extra time to write his memoirs."

"To leave those unfinished was out of character," added Peter Chin.