

## **JULIUS AND ETHEL ROSENBERG**

### **THEIR CASE, TRIAL AND DEATH AND WHAT HAPPENED TO THEIR CHILDREN**

**THIS ARTICLE IS IN THREE PARTS**

- A. OPERATION, FAILURE, BETRAYALS & CONVICTION**
- B. THE ROSENBERG SONS + ACCEPTING THEIR PARENTS' GUILT??**
- C. THE FINAL DAYS OF JULIUS AND ETHEL ROSENBERG**

**389**



#### **PART A**

### **OPERATION, FAILURE, BETRAYALS & CONVICTION**



**THIS NEW YORK CITY COUPLE WAS EXECUTED FOR CONSPIRACY TO COMMIT ESPIONAGE IN 1953, SPARKING DECADES OF CONSPIRACY TALK THAT PRODUCED NEW TWISTS IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY.**



**MARCH 25, 2020**

The story of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage in 1951, reads like something out of a John le Carré novel with its components of shadowy spies, corrupted trial proceedings and family betrayal.

It also captures the real-world dangers that were rife in these days of Cold War paranoia, the threat of a Red Scare powerful enough to bring about the controversial executions of the couple that left their young children orphaned.

#### **THE ROSENBERGS RECRUITED A FAMILY MEMBER TO RELAY ATOMIC SECRETS**

Ethel Greenglass and Julius Rosenberg were both born into immigrant Jewish families in New York City during World War I. Their time at high school intersected briefly – Ethel was nearly three years older – but they became acquainted through their devotion to the Young Communist League and were married in 1939.

Julius became a civilian engineer with the U.S. Army Signal Corps and cut formal ties with communist organizations. Still, by late 1942 he was working with Soviet intermediaries to relay military secrets to the then-American ally.

**By 1945, he had assembled an espionage ring of engineers, scientists and machinists that included his old City College classmate Morton Sobell.**

It also included his brother-in-law David Greenglass, who was then involved with the Manhattan Project – the creation of the atomic bomb – at a facility in Los Alamos, New Mexico.



*Ethel and Julius Rosenberg following their arrest by the FBI in New York City for espionage, 1950.*

#### **THE APPREHENSION OF A BRITISH SPY SET OFF A STRING OF ARRESTS**

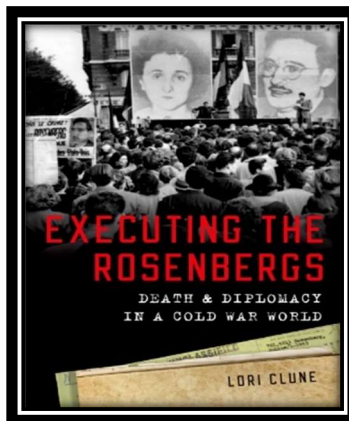
The first shoe to drop in the case came with the arrest of German-born British physicist Klaus Fuchs on February 2, 1950. Fuchs had also worked at Los Alamos and passed along information to the Soviets independently of Rosenberg's, though they shared a crucial link with their courier, Harry Gold.

In May the FBI hauled Gold, who pointed his finger at another common denominator, Greenglass. The dominoes continued to fall with Julius' apprehension in July and Ethel's arrest in August, with Sobell discovered to be hiding in Mexico at that time.

After Greenglass pleaded guilty, the trial for the Rosenberg's and Sobell began on March 6, 1951, in the Southern District of New York. Making little attempt to portray himself as impartial, Judge Irving R. Kaufman opened the proceedings by declaring: "The evidence will show that the loyalty and alliance of the Rosenberg's and Sobell were not to our country, but that it was to Communism."

#### **GREENGLASS PROVIDED CRUCIAL TESTIMONY AGAINST THE ROSENBERGS**

The case against the Rosenberg's largely hinged on the testimonies of Gold and Greenglass. Gold recalled how he had met Greenglass in Albuquerque, New Mexico, in June 1945, with the passcode "I come from Julius." After each confirmed the shared allegiance by producing a "passport" of a cut-off Jell-O box top, Gold paid \$500 for information on the atomic bomb.



Greenglass testified that the Rosenberg's began lobbying his wife, Ruth, to get her husband involved in the espionage ring by November 1944. He returned to New York City on furlough in January 1945, at which point he showed Julius his notes and a sketch of a high-explosive lens.

Even more damning, Greenglass described another meeting at the Rosenberg's' New York City apartment in September 1945, during which time Ethel typed up his shoddy, hastily scribbled notes.

To this point, the government's case against Ethel was largely nonexistent; now, her brother had portrayed her as a willing co-conspirator. Chief prosecutor Irving H. Saypol leaped all over this account, dramatically telling the jury how she "sat at that typewriter and struck the keys, blow by blow, against her own country in the interests of the Soviets."

Julius and Ethel took the stand in their defense, but other than denying the charges, they largely evoked the Fifth Amendment on matters of espionage and their involvement in the Communist Party, their silence amplifying the testimony against them.



*Ethel and Julius Rosenberg at the courthouse*

#### ALBERT EINSTEIN AND THE POPE LED CALLS FOR CLEMENCY

On March 29, 1951, the jury returned a verdict of guilty against the trio charged. Judge Kaufman imposed the death penalty on Julius and Ethel, telling them, "I consider your crimes worse than murder." He spared the life of Sobell, who was not involved in the passage of atomic secrets and sentenced him to 30 years in prison.

A death sentence, especially for the parents of two young boys, became a major source for debate, with Albert Einstein and Pope Pius XII among the influential figures who urged the U.S. government to show mercy. However, the legal appeals and requests for clemency, to President Truman and then-President Eisenhower, all fizzled.

After a last-minute stay of execution was overturned, on June 19, 1953, Julius and Ethel were electrocuted at Sing Sing Prison in Ossining, New York, making them the first American civilians to be executed for espionage during peacetime.

#### GREENGRASS LATER ADMITTED TO LYING ON THE STAND

The case remained a source of intrigue for scholars who argued about the evidence against Rosenberg's, the clear bias of the presiding judge and the harshness of the verdict.

But there were more twists to be uncovered. In 1995, the National Security Agency released a half-century-old trove of decrypted Soviet messages from the Venona Project which provided clear evidence of Julius' espionage.

Four years later, Sam Roberts' *The Brother: The Untold Story of the Rosenberg Case* contained new bombshells from the reclusive Greenglass, including the admission that his wife possibly typed up the notes during the infamous September 1945 meeting, and that he told a different story on the witness stand to protect his immediate family.

The release of grand jury testimony in 2008 seemingly confirmed that account, while also providing inconsistencies between what Gold said in private and in public.

That year, Sobell also went on record to confess to his and Julius' involvement with the Soviets, though he insisted that his colleague's information was useless to the Eastern power, and that Ethel was guilty only of "being Julius' wife."

The various revelations have prompted the Rosenberg's' surviving sons, Michael and Robert Meeropol, to launch an effort to have their mother formally exonerated. They were unable to win over President Obama, but there may be more chapters to come in this long-running Cold War saga.

---

## **PART B**

### **THE ROSENBERG SONS & ACCEPTING THEIR PARENTS' GUILT??**

#### **MICHAEL AND ROBERT ROSENBERG BECAME ORPHANS WHEN THEIR PARENTS WERE EXECUTED FOR ESPIONAGE. THEN WHAT HAPPENED?**



*10-year-old Michael Rosenberg pats his younger brother, Robert, 6, and tries his best to comfort him, as the youngsters ride away from Sing Sing prison after visiting their parents, convicted atom spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, just a few days before their execution.*



UPDATED FEB 27, 2019

Michael Rosenberg was listening to The Lone Ranger on the radio when his entire world crumbled. The seven-year-old was engrossed in his favorite program in the summer of 1950 when men burst into his New York apartment and took away his father. Soon, his mother was under arrest, too.

His parents were none other than Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, and they were accused of being Russian spies who passed on secret information about nuclear technology as the Cold War kicked into high gear. The arrests started a chain of events that would lead to their execution. But it also changed the life of Michael and his brother Robert forever.

Their story didn't end with their parents' deaths. Rather, the executions put them on a path of pain. As the children of America's most notorious Red Scare-era figures, they were associated with their parents' supposed crimes. And as they grew, they went on a dramatic search for answers—a search that opened up even more questions about their parents' past.

Neither child had any conception that their parents might be Soviet spies. Their childhood in New York City was typical of its time, and both Michael and Robert remember parents who were energetic, affectionate and happy.

That all changed in 1950 when Julius and Ethel were indicted for 11 acts of espionage. Both pleaded not guilty but were convicted and sentenced to be executed.

Meanwhile, Robert and Michael were left without parents. Three and seven years old at the time, they were first sent to live with their grandmother.

But as the case became a national phenomenon, she tried to send them to other relatives—all of whom refused to take them in.

"We were the children of Communist spies," Robert told 60 Minutes in 2016. Being the Rosenberg's children in 1950 was almost like being Osama bin Laden's kids here after 9/11."

When nobody offered to take them in, the boys were taken to the Hebrew Children's Home in the Bronx—effectively an orphanage.

"I'm sure that it won't be long before you'll get used to your new home," Julius wrote Michael in November 1950 after they moved to the Hebrew Children's Home. "Darling don't worry about a thing."

But despite the encouraging tone of their parents' letters, things were not alright. They would never be reunited with their parents, who were convicted and sentenced to the electric chair.

The boys visited their parents in Sing Sing prison, where they looked over the electric chair and asked their parents if they were really innocent. Of course they were, they reassured them. Meanwhile, despite an international attempt to stay the execution, all of their appeals for mercy were denied.

When the Rosenberg's were executed, their sons were playing catch at the home of a family friend. They were six and ten years old. The boys were now Cold War orphans, and they were almost as infamous as their parents.

But to a group of sympathetic Americans, the Rosenberg's were seen in a different light. These supporters felt that the Rosenberg trial was an attempt to suppress progressive thinkers in an era increasingly dominated by a Communist scare. One of them was Abel Meeropol, a public-school English teacher and former Communist Party member who was also the author of the lyrics to "Strange Fruit." Meeropol and his wife, who did not have children, met the Rosenberg boys at a party at the home of W.E.B. Du Bois and took them in a week later. Eventually, they adopted them.

But though Michael and Robert—now Meeropol—went on to live successful lives as college professors, they couldn't shake their parents' reassurances that they were innocent. After living in what amounted to hiding for years, they embraced their true identities and began to reinvestigate their parents' case.

Together, they sued the CIA and FBI under the Freedom of Information Act. After a lengthy legal battle, they got the files and scoured through them for evidence of their parents' innocence.



*The two young sons of convicted spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg take part in a giant demonstration in Washington DC which is protesting their parents guilt and sentence of death*

But as they reconstructed the evidence on their parents, they came to the agonizing conclusion that their father wasn't innocent after all.

A growing amount of evidence points to Julius Rosenberg as a busy—and successful—recruiter of Soviet spies. The network he helped create stole information on all kinds of military technology. But his sons believe that though Julius did steal nuclear secrets, the information wasn't of much value.

They're even firmer on their mother's innocence. Ethel's brother, David Greenglass, was instrumental in her conviction, telling a grand jury that she typed up Julius' notes.

But later in life, Greenglass recanted and said he had made up the charges to protect his family. The Meeropol brothers believe that their father was executed on the basis of a trumped-up charge and that their mother was entirely innocent.

Now, they want their mother to be exonerated. But though they've petitioned the government to exonerate her, she's never been pardoned. Nor has the government ever admitted that Julius Rosenberg didn't pass on the kinds of secrets for which he was convicted. And so, the saga of the Rosenberg orphans continues—as unsatisfying and unresolved as ever.

#### THE BROTHERS ROSENBERG



*Michael, left, and Robert Meeropol*

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's sons tell Anderson Cooper how it felt to be the children of the infamous spies, in a story that sheds new light on a central event of the Cold War

**The following is a script from "The Brothers Rosenberg," which aired on Oct. 16, 2016. Anderson Cooper is the correspondent. Andy Court, producer.**

Before he leaves office, President Obama will have to sort through more than 13,000 petitions from federal prisoners seeking pardons or reduced sentences. But one of the most unusual requests he has been asked to consider concerns two people who were already executed, more than 60 years ago. It was called "The Crime of the Century." In 1953, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were sent to the electric chair for conspiring to provide the secrets of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. They left behind two little boys, Robert and Michael, just 6 and 10 years old at the time.

The brothers Rosenberg were the orphans of Communist spies at the height of the McCarthy era. Relatives were afraid to take them in. One town blocked them from attending its schools. What ever happened to those two little boys? They're the ones asking President Obama to proclaim that their mother was wrongfully convicted. It's a remarkable story, a piece of American history that hasn't been fully told.

**To view this very informative video, copy and paste the below link into your browser.**

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/the-brothers-rosenberg/vp-AAj1Slc>





*Michael Rosenberg, right, and his brother, Robert, on June 19, 1953 -- the day their parents were executed.*



*Michael Meeropol and brother Robert Meeropol outside the White House at a December 1, 2016, Washington, DC, rally aimed at clearing their mother's name. (Alan Heath/Rosenberg Fund for Children)*



*In this June 14, 1953, file photo, Sophie Rosenberg is shown with her grandsons Robert, 6, left, and Michael, 10, outside the White House in Washington, DC, during a demonstration seeking clemency for her son Julius and daughter-in-law Ethel Rosenberg. (AP Photo)*



*In this April 5, 1951, file photo, David Greenglass, second from left, is led into Federal Courthouse in New York for sentencing.*

### **PART C**

#### **THE FINAL DAYS OF JULIUS AND ETHEL ROSENBERG**

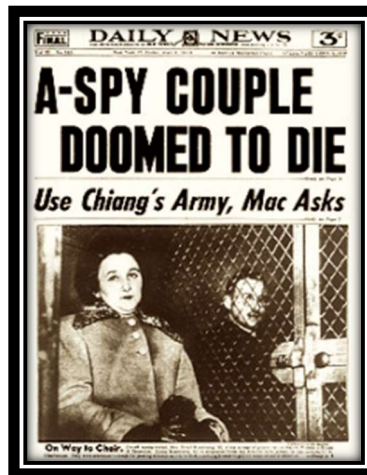


**On April 5, 1951,** Julius and Ethel Rosenberg **were sentenced** to the electric chair for committing espionage for the Soviet Union.

*For the next 14 months,* a flurry of appeals, pleas, and protests was hatched to try to save the lives of the husband and wife convicted spies, ages 32 and 35, both natives of the Lower East Side.

In March 1952, their lawyers filed an appeal in Federal court, claiming the conduct of the sentencing judge, *Irving R. Kaufman, denied them a fair trial.*

That appeal was denied, as was an appeal to the Supreme Court claiming the death penalty was cruel and unusual punishment.



*"Doomed couple in Sing Sing for 18 months take news calmly," a headline read in October 1952.*

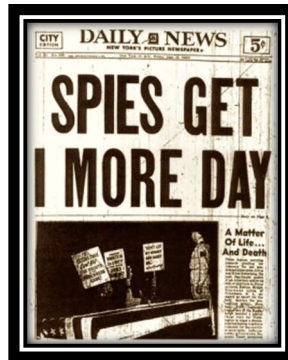
**A stay of execution pushed back their scheduled March 9 date with death.** Meanwhile, a clemency plea to the president was dismissed in February 1953.

Eisenhower replied that "their betrayal of United States atomic secrets to Russia could bring to death 'many, many thousands of innocent citizens,'" wrote **The New York Times in May 1953.**

In May, the Supreme Court ordered the stay vacated. Electrocutation was set for the week of June 15.



Religious leaders around the world cabled President Eisenhower and asked for clemency for the couple. Protesters marched in Boston, Los Angeles, and outside the White House.



A final Supreme Court ruling, with only Hugo Black and William Douglas dissenting, paved the way for their deaths on June 19.

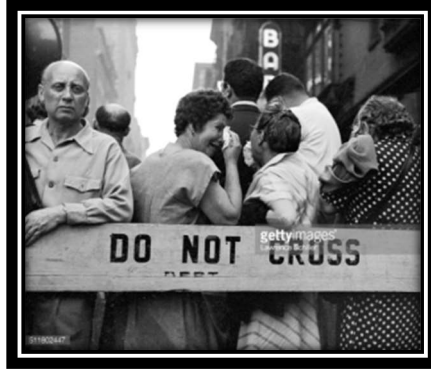
In New York that afternoon, 5,000 supporters rallied at the north end of Union Square, spilling onto East 17th Street (above).

But the execution proceeded that evening at about 8 p.m.

Julius went first. "As a clean-shaven Rosenberg neared the brown-stained oak chair he seemed to sway from side to side," wrote the *Times*.

Ethel "entered the death chamber a few minutes after the body of her husband had been removed," said the *Times*.

Wearing a green polka-dot dress and her hair close cropped, she kissed the cheek of a prison matron and was then strapped into the chair, a leather mask put over her face.



After five shocks, she was pronounced dead.

Whether the death penalty was an appropriate punishment is still a contentious topic. Both admitted no culpability, **but Soviet-era files later revealed that Julius was indeed a spy.**

Ethel appears to have been **implicated by her own brother**, who testified against her to spare his own wife from prosecution.



### DISCLAIMER

PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT EVEN THOUGH THIS INFORMATION  
HAS BEEN TAKEN FROM WHAT APPEARS TO BE AUTHENTIC WEBSITES  
I CANNOT GUARANTEE THAT ALL THE DATA IN THIS ARTICLE IS ACCURATE AND CORRECT.