

# ***A Rosenberg Takes On the Government, This Time Using the Law as a Means of Protest***

The New York Times

February 5, 2006 Sunday, Late Edition - Final

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**Section:** Section 1; Column 1; Metropolitan Desk; Pg. 31

**Length:** 1117 words

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## **Body**

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A profile of Rachel Meeropol, the lead lawyer for a group of Muslim immigrants suing the United States **government**, explains why she went to work for the Center for Constitutional Rights.

"Rachel's interest in prisoners' rights work stems from her family's firsthand experience with the destructive impact of the criminal 'justice' system on communities and individuals," the profile explains cryptically, without mentioning the most famous members of her family.

The best-known Meeropol may be Abel, a lyricist who (under a pseudonym) wrote "Strange Fruit" and "The House I Live In." But the child he adopted, a young boy named Robert, holds a special place in Cold War history. When he was 6, the boy's birth parents, Julius and Ethel **Rosenberg**, were executed at Sing Sing on June 19, 1953, for conspiracy to commit espionage for the Soviet Union.

"It was something that I always knew, the way you know your name," Ms. Meeropol, Robert Meeropol's daughter, once recalled. "I was in first grade, and my teacher asked if any of the kids in the class knew of any holidays that happened in June. And I raised my hand and said, well, on June 19 in New York City people celebrate my grandparents. And the teacher said, 'I'm sorry I've never heard of that holiday.' "

More than 50 years later, it is widely accepted that in the 1940's Julius **Rosenberg** was, in fact, a Soviet spy. His network passed along military and industrial secrets, most notably details about the atomic bomb, most of which the Russians had obtained from other sources. Legally, Ethel **Rosenberg** is considered much less culpable: Within the last few years, her brother, David Greenglass, who was also charged in the conspiracy, acknowledged that he had lied when he delivered the most incriminating evidence against her.

Ms. Meeropol said of her grandparents, "I don't know what they did, but I know they couldn't get a fair trial, that the death penalty was wrong, and that they weren't guilty of what they were convicted of."

Suppose Soviet archives conclusively revealed that her grandfather was a spy?

"It's not something I've spent much **time** thinking about," she replied. "What I take from my understanding of them is a sense of strength, resistance, being involved in political struggle. I think I have a pretty fully formed opinion of what they were like as people. It's not something that's dependent on Russian sources or the latest document disclosure."

"Today, I'm sure they would still be progressive people," she said. "And they would be terrified by the parallels in targeting and repression."

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Ms. Meeropol, a staff lawyer at the center -- where the median salary is about \$60,000 -- is representing Muslim immigrants, among hundreds of noncitizens who were rounded up for visa violations in the weeks after 9/11. Many were held for months in a federal detention center in Brooklyn as "persons of interest" to terror investigators and then deported. The class-action lawsuit against government officials and guards charges that the immigrants were abused and that they were deprived of due process because of their religion or national origin. Several of the immigrants returned to New York to give depositions in a Manhattan hotel last week.

"The kind of torture, interrogation and arbitrary detention that we now associate with Guantanamo and secret C.I.A. facilities really started right here, in Brooklyn," she said.

Ms. Meeropol is herself a plaintiff in a suit filed last month by the Center for Constitutional Rights, contending that her communications with clients at the detention center may have been monitored illegally by the National Security Agency.

The granddaughter of the Rosenbergs accusing the government of spying? It is an irony that has not been lost on conservative Web logs. "It's incredibly simplistic to look at what I'm complaining about and find it ironic," she said. "What I'm complaining about is a new version of that same type of misconduct: when a threat from the outside causes the government to curtail civil liberties. You can draw parallels to what happened to my grandparents.

"It's a different population being affected -- they're vulnerable," she added of the immigrants, contrasting the climate now and then. "In terms of the human toll, it's just as bad if not worse than under McCarthy. If anything, it's worse because of the secrecy with which this administration operates."

Ms. Meeropol, who just turned 30, grew up in western Massachusetts, where her father, a lawyer, runs the Rosenberg Fund for Children, which supports children whose parents have suffered because of their progressive politics. (Her older sister works for Campus Compact, which promotes community service.) She majored in anthropology at Wesleyan, and graduated from New York University's law school.

"I grew up reading my grandparents' letters, and they were emotionally affecting," she said. "Maybe it was as a teenager, thinking about what it means to be in prison, that I felt compelled to get involved in that struggle."

Ms. Meeropol was asked whether being a lawyer means she thinks the justice system works.

"I don't think the system works," she replied. "I don't think that being a lawyer, not a street radical, means I believe the system works. I'm kind of a nerd. I like to read, to write. This is the way I'm more comfortable participating."

She lives in Brooklyn. Her boyfriend is studying education policy at Teachers College. She met him at a progressive summer camp where the Meeropol name was iconic, so she never had to flaunt her political pedigree.

"I don't usually use it as a pickup line," she said.

Ms. Meeropol is a registered Democrat but a self-described radical, and her family background leads to questions one might not ordinarily pose to an ordinary lawyer.

For example, can she envision any circumstances under which she could justify passing secrets to a foreign power?

"Can I imagine any situation where I would feel the balance of power is so dangerous to humanity that it would be O.K. to do something like that?" she replied. "Sure."

Suppose one of her clients confided that he was a terrorist and had planted an atomic bomb?

"As an attorney, if you believe your client is giving you information that would lead to imminent death, you have an ethical obligation to report that," she said. "I would try to figure out a way to stop that bomb from going off."

How does she reconcile being a radical and an officer of the court?

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"Part of our mission at the center is to bring cases other people might be too timid to bring," Ms. Meeropol said. "I'm devoted to trying to make the **law** work."

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## Graphic

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Photo: Rachel Meeropol, a lawyer for the Center for Constitutional Rights, is representing Muslim immigrants suing the United States. (Photo by Ting-Li Wang/The New York **Times**)

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS (90%); CONSPIRACY (89%); ESPIONAGE (88%); SUITS & CLAIMS (78%); COLD WAR (78%); CORRECTIONS (77%); CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS (77%); CAPITAL PUNISHMENT (77%); LAWYERS (75%); BOMBS & EXPLOSIVE DEVICES (71%); SONG WRITING (70%); HISTORY (69%); EVIDENCE (68%)

**Organization:** CENTER FOR CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS (93%); Center for Constitutional Rights

**Industry:** LAWYERS (75%)

**Person:** Sam Roberts; Rachel Meeropol; Julius (1918-53) **Rosenberg**; Ethel (1915-53) **Rosenberg**

**Geographic:** NEW YORK, NY, USA (54%); NEW YORK, USA (78%); RUSSIAN FEDERATION (90%); UNITED STATES (79%); Russia; New York City

**Load-Date:** February 5, 2006