# Julius Rosenberg Spied, Russian Says

## *KGB Handler Acknowledges Espionage in Controversial Case*

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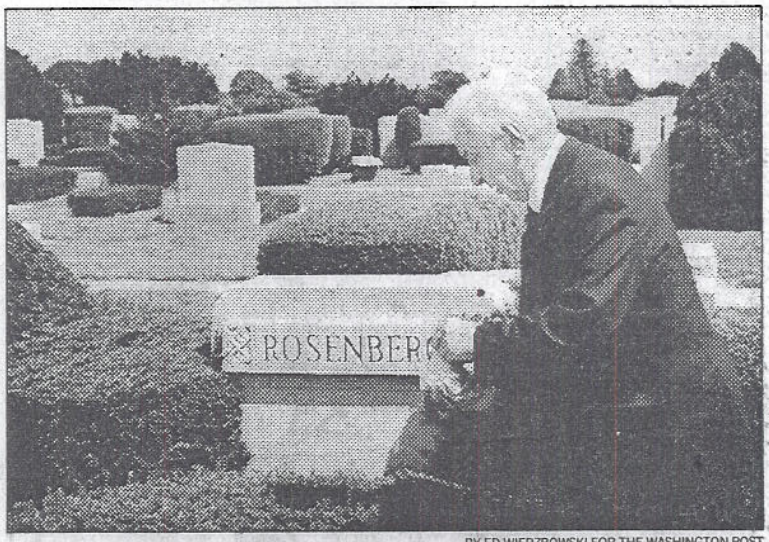
By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK—Half a century has passed since Alexander Feklisov held his last clandestine meeting with Julius Rosenberg, but the retired Soviet spy describes the occasion as if it were yesterday.

It was a hot, humid evening in August 1946. Feklisov, then a young intelligence officer attached to the Soviet Consulate in New York, had just been recalled to Moscow. The FBI was closing in on the networks of Soviet agents set up by the Kremlin during World War II from the ranks of committed American Communists. A telegram had arrived from the KGB's Moscow Center to temporarily close down the New York operation.

They met at a Hungarian restaurant on Manhattan's Upper West Side and then, as night fell, went for a walk along Riverside Drive. They watched the pleasure boats steaming up the Hudson River, lights twinkling from their portholes. Feklisov remembers sitting on a bench with Rosenberg and giving his American friend final "instructions" on how to resume contact with his Soviet handlers. He handed over $1,000 to cover possible emergencies.

At the end of the meeting, the two men stood and embraced before going their separate ways. Feklisov went on to have a distinguished career in foreign intelligence, including a posting to Washington as KGB resident in the early 1960s. Rosenberg and his wife, Ethel, were executed in 1953 after a sensational treason trial at which they were accused of giving Soviet Russia the secret of the atom bomb.




BY ED WIERZBOWSKI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**Retired KGB spy controller Alexander Feklisov visits Long Island graves of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed in 1953 for wartime espionage.**

Flash forward 50 years. Feklisov returns to New York in late August to help clarify one of the most divisive and enduring controversies in modern American history. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg went to their deaths insisting that they were the victims of a government conspiracy. Up until now, Moscow has steadfastly denied their guilt and has refused to make public any of the intelligence files dealing with the case. For generations of left-wing Americans, the innocence of the Rosenbergs was an article of political faith.

Aged 82 and frail, Feklisov sat on a bench on Riverside Drive, near where he said his final good-

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ROSENBERG, From A1

bye to Rosenberg. He said the time has come to publicly reveal what he knows about the Rosenberg affair, despite what he described as the objections of Russian intelligence chiefs. A lifelong Communist, Feklisov wants the world to know that Julius Rosenberg was a "hero" who helped the Soviet Union in its hour of need in World War II and was later abandoned by his Soviet spy masters.

"My morality does not allow me to keep silent," said Feklisov, saying he is the only Soviet intelligence officer still alive with intimate personal knowledge of the Rosenberg case. "Julius was a great sympathizer of the Soviet Union. There were others who also believed in communism, but were unwilling to fight. Julius was a true revolutionary, who was willing to sacrifice himself for his beliefs."

In interviews with The Washington Post and the Bethesda-based cable TV network Discovery Channel,

*"Julius was a great sympathizer of the Soviet Union.... Julius was a true revolutionary, who was willing to sacrifice himself for his beliefs."*

— Alexander Feklisov

Feklisov said he held a series of at least 50 meetings in New York with Rosenberg from 1943 to 1946. He credited Rosenberg with helping to organize an important industrial espionage ring for Moscow and handing over top secret information on military electronics. At the same time, however, he insisted that Ethel Rosenberg never had any direct contact with Soviet intelligence, but conceded that she was probably "aware" of her husband's activities.

Feklisov, who is known in the United States for his role as a behind-the-scenes intermediary between the KGB and the White House during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, said that Julius Rosenberg only played a peripheral role in Soviet atomic espionage. According to Feklisov, Rosenberg was "not directly involved" in stealing nuclear secrets from the United States.

He described as absurd the claim of sentencing judge Irving R. Kaufman that the Rosenbergs had "altered the course of human history" through their treachery by putting the atomic bomb into the hands of the Soviets.

Feklisov's assertions about the nature of the espionage role played by Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are consistent with recently released top secret American intercepts of Soviet intelligence cables between New York and Moscow from the early 1940s. The so-called Venona intercepts include repeated references to Julius Rosenberg's industrial espionage but suggest only peripheral involvement in atomic spying.

The intercepts show that the Soviets had at least three key agents in the U.S. atomic energy program, known as the Manhattan project, who had no connection to the Rosenbergs. The most important was a nuclear scientist, Klaus Fuchs, who was convicted of espionage and sentenced to 14 years imprisonment by a British court in 1949.

Feklisov said the decision to tell his side of the Rosenberg story is the result of years of personal agonizing and arguments with his superiors in the foreign intelligence arm of the KGB. In 1993, he began cooperating with a researcher at the U.S.A. Institute in Moscow, Svetlana Chervonnaya, and an independent American filmmaker, Ed Wierzbowski, who have investigated other Cold War spy cases. Last August, Wierzbowski's company, Global American Television, arranged for Feklisov to visit the United States to work on a documentary film about the Rosenberg case which is scheduled to be aired on the Discovery Channel next Sunday.

## Symbols in Political Conflict

With the Cold War over and the Soviet Union consigned to history, it is easy to forget the extraordinary emotions aroused by the case that FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover dubbed "the crime of the century." Executed by electric chair in Sing Sing at sundown on June 19, 1953, the Rosenbergs rapidly became a potent political symbol. To the left, they were martyrs of the

McCarthyite "hysteria" then sweeping America. To the right, they were leaders of a Communist fifth column that had betrayed America from within.

The controversy over the government's handling of the case was heightened by the severity of the punishment. The double death sentence for husband and wife was unprecedented, at least in a federal court, and meant that two young children had to grow up as orphans. It provoked a storm of protest all around the world, with France condemning the United States for "barbarism" and Pope Pius XII issuing a personal appeal for clemency.

"There was a kind of droll aspect to McCarthyism initially, but after the Rosenberg case everything got serious," recalled Walter Schneir, a left-wing historian who has devoted much of his life to demonstrating the Rosenbergs' innocence. "There was a time when everybody could tell you exactly what they were doing when they heard about the execution of the Rosenbergs. It was one of the moments like the assassination of President Kennedy."

Along with the revelations contained in the Venona intercepts, which were released to the public in July 1995, Feklisov's reminiscences could resolve much of the remaining controversy surrounding the Rosenberg affair. While historians will continue to argue about certain details, there is now broad agreement between the rival camps on central facts of the case.

"The debate is closed. It's all over," said Ronald Radosh, co-author of a 1983 book, "The Rosenberg File: A Search for the Truth," which maintained that the Rosenbergs were guilty of espionage. "There is no longer any debate among serious people that Julius Rosenberg was a spy for the Soviet Union. [At the same time] it is clear that the Rosenbergs did not give the Soviets the 'secret' of the bomb, and they should not have been executed."

A long-running literary feud between Radosh and Schneir over the details of the Rosenberg case seems unlikely to end any time soon. Both men served as consultants for the Discovery Channel and plan to publish competing assessments of Feklisov's revelations in this week's editions of their respective ideological house organs, the New Republic and the Nation. But the fact remains that the differences between the two historians are now largely academic.

"I accept that Julius Rosenberg was involved in espionage," said Schneir, contradicting one of the central points of his 1968 book, "Invitation to an Inquest," which he wrote with his wife, Miriam.

The Rosenberg children, Michael and Robert Meeropol, who have repeatedly maintained that their parents are innocent of espionage, declined an invitation to meet with Feklisov last September during his two-week visit in the United States. Michael Meeropol told The Post that the family will reserve judgment about Feklisov's assertions until after the screening of the television documentary.

## Golden Age of KGB

Alexander Semyonovich Feklisov arrived in the United States in early 1941 under the pseudonym Alexander Fomin. It took him 1½ months to reach New York, traveling via Siberia, Japan, and San Francisco. Officially, he was assigned to the Soviet Consulate in New York, but this was merely a cover for his espionage work.

The period after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 was a golden era for Soviet foreign intelligence. Up until the western allies opened up a second front in France in June 1944, Russia was left to bear the brunt of defending the world from Nazi aggression. There was no shortage of idealistic young Communists both in America and Western Europe who were ready to assist the world's first Socialist country in any way they could.

"It was not very difficult to find people to help us," recalled Feklisov, whose specialty was techno-scientific espionage. "I had the impression that if we put an advertisement in the paper with a request for secret information, thousands of people would have replied. That was the situation in those days."

A prime source of recruits for Soviet intelligence was the Young Communist League, to which tens of thousands of college students belonged. According to Morton Sobell, a college friend of Rosenberg, half the members of his engineering class at City College of New York in the late 1930s were Communists. The Rosenberg spy ring would be made up almost entirely of Communists from City College.

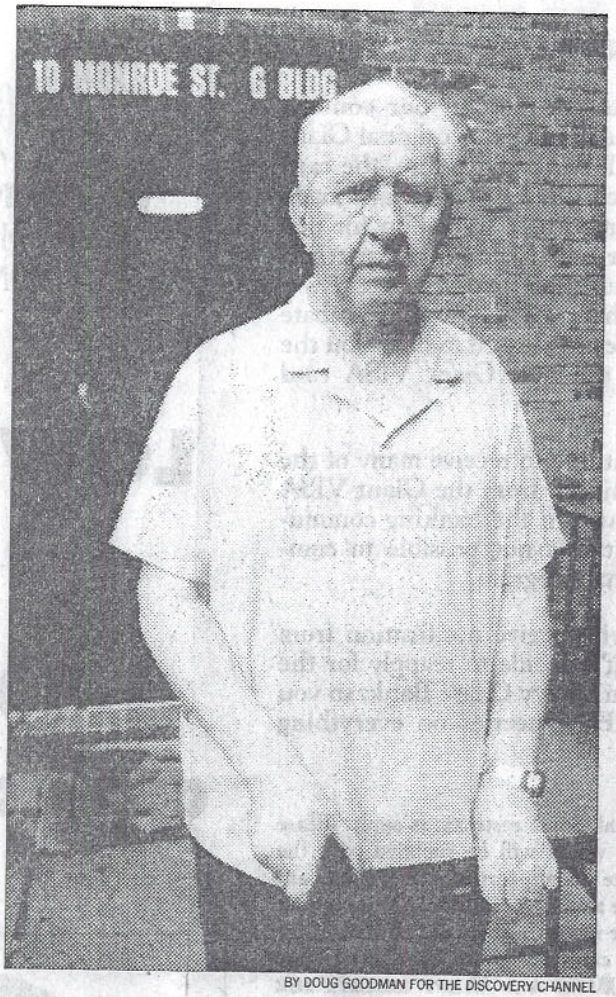
"Remember, this was a time when there was 30 percent unemployment and people were getting thrown onto

Ethel and Julius Rosenberg are returned to jail March 29, 1951, after being convicted of spying for the Soviet Union.

FILE PHOTO

**Flanked by federal marshals, Ethel Rosenberg arrives at Sing Sing prison in Ossining, N.Y., to await the outcome of appeals of espionage conspiracy conviction.**

FILE PHOTO




BY DOUG GOODMAN FOR THE DISCOVERY CHANNEL

**A visit to Knickerbocker Village in New York last year rekindles Alexander Feklisov's memories of meetings between the KGB spy controller and Julius Rosenberg during World War II.**

the street every day," said Sobell, who served 18 years in prison after being convicted in 1951 on conspiracy charges.

"People like me were attracted to communism because it seemed to offer a rational explanation for what was wrong with society. Capitalism wasn't rational," said Sobell, who continues to deny any involvement in espionage.

As Feklisov tells the story, Rosenberg was originally recruited in the spring of 1942 by Semen Semenov, a KGB agent working out of the Soviet trade organization Amtorg. At this point, Rosenberg was working as a civilian inspector for the Signal Corps, which gave him access to developments in the field of radio electronics. Feklisov says the fact that both Rosenberg and Semenov were Jewish created an extra bond between them.

"They found common ground very easily," said Feklisov, who worked as Semenov's assistant, explaining that Rosenberg frequently talked about Hitler's persecution of the Jews. "He wanted to do everything he could to fight against Fascism."

Semenov returned to Moscow in 1943 after coming under tight surveillance by U.S. counterintelligence. Several of his agents, including Rosenberg, were assigned to Feklisov. There was a gap of a few months as the Soviets waited for FBI surveillance to ease off. Feklisov has vivid memories of his first meeting with Rosenberg in late 1943.

It was a Sunday, a day when FBI surveillance was usually less intensive. After checking to see that he was not being followed, Feklisov went to Knickerbocker Village in lower Manhattan where the Rosenbergs had an apartment. He called from downstairs over the intercom, describing himself as "a friend of Henry," Semenov's cover name. The two men met on the staircase outside the Rosenberg apartment and agreed to meet again in a couple of weeks at Childs' restaurant.

At first, obtaining information from field agents like Rosenberg was cumbersome and laborious, Feklisov recalled. Rosenberg would have to smuggle documents out of his workplace, meet with Feklisov, wait for the documents to be copied, and then replace the documents without anyone noticing that they were gone. This procedure required frequent meetings, with a high risk of detection.

From mid-1944 on, Feklisov organized a different system of collecting information. He distributed Leica cameras to his agents, and instructed them in how to photograph documents. Using this procedure, they were able to cut the agent-handler drop-off time to a few seconds. "It would happen almost instantaneously," Feklisov recalled of the "brush" contacts. "We would arrange to meet in a place like Madison Square Garden or a cinema, and brush up against each other very quickly." Longer meetings were reserved for strictly "instructional" sessions.

Feklisov credits Rosenberg with persuading some of his old friends from City College to work for the Soviets. Feklisov said neither he nor any other Soviet agent ever met Ethel Rosenberg, whose forceful personality

FILE PHOTO/ASSOCIATED PRESS

**The Rosenbergs embrace in a prison van after their arraignment.**

was depicted by U.S. prosecutors as playing an important role in motivating Julius's treachery.

## A 'Partisan' Complex?

According to Feklisov, the Rosenberg spy ring supplied the Kremlin with a stream of intelligence about breakthroughs in the American military electronics industry, including the development of radar systems. He said the most valuable device that the Soviets received from Rosenberg himself was a fully functioning proximity fuse, used to bring down enemy aircraft without hitting them directly.

The proximity fuse story is a good illustration of Rosenberg's taste for the melodramatic and his willingness to take great personal risks for his Socialist beliefs. Development of the fuse was a closely guarded military secret and its production tightly supervised. Feklisov recalls that Rosenberg painstakingly assembled a duplicate proximity fuse out of discarded spare parts and then smuggled the device out of the Emerson Radio Factory in Manhattan in December 1944.

"I have a Christmas present for the Red Army," Rosenberg boasted to Feklisov at their next meeting, at a Horn & Hardart automat.

Feklisov had called the meeting to give Rosenberg some Christmas presents from the KGB, including an alligator handbag for Ethel and a toy for their son Michael. He ended up having to lug a 20-pound box containing one of America's most secret military devices back to the Soviet Consulate. After they got over their initial surprise and pleasure, his bosses were furious at Rosenberg for taking an unnecessary risk. At their next meeting, Feklisov passed their observations on to Julius.

"I calculated the risks very carefully," Rosenberg replied, according to Feklisov. "What I was risking was only one-hundredth of what a Red Army soldier risks when he attacks a tank."

Feklisov said he believes that Rosenberg displayed a kind of "Partisan complex," in which he was constantly comparing his exploits to those of the Soviet guerrilla fighters behind Nazi lines in World War II. It was this mentality, said Feklisov, that accounts for the Rosenbergs' refusal to cooperate in any way with the FBI after Julius's arrest in June 1950. Had they told the FBI even a part of what they knew, the would probably have escaped the electric chair, many scholars believe.

As he reflects on his relationship with Rosenberg, Feklisov looks back ruefully at a series of mistakes by Soviet intelligence that he believes led to his friend's arrest and execution. Most damaging of all, he said, was a decision in early 1944 to recruit Rosenberg's brother-in-law, David Greenglass, as a Soviet agent. At the time, Greenglass was working as a mechanic at Los Alamos, N.M., the headquarters of the American atomic bomb project.

According to Feklisov, Rosenberg had mentioned Greenglass as a "devoted Communist" and possible recruit. Feklisov passed his recommendation on to his superior, Leonid Kvasnikov, who was responsible for gathering intelligence on the atomic bomb. Although the Kremlin already had several sources at Los Alamos, including Fuchs, it was always in the market for extra tidbits of information about the bomb.

Feklisov insisted that the Soviets did not receive valuable information from Greenglass, who occupied a low-level position at Los Alamos and had only a rudimentary grasp of the work on the bomb. But the Greenglass connection proved fateful to the Rosenbergs. When the FBI began investigating an atomic spy ring in 1949, on the basis of intercepted Soviet cables, Greenglass readily confessed. He told the FBI that he had been recruited by Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

## Henry and Alex

Without access to the KGB files on the Rosenberg case, it is difficult to corroborate the details of Feklisov's story. While the FBI has been aware for some time that Feklisov worked for Soviet intelligence in New York during World War II, the precise nature of his activities during the war has remained a mystery to the federal government until now.

Partial confirmation of Feklisov's relationship with Rosenberg is contained in the FBI's own files. In prison, Julius Rosenberg shared a cell with an FBI informer named Jerome Tartakow who succeeded in gaining his confidence. According to FBI records, Ro-

**See ROSENBERG, A19, Col. 1**

# Feklisov Is First Russian to Confirm Espionage Role of Julius Rosenberg

ROSENBERG, From A18

senberg told Tartakow that he had meetings with two Russians, whom he named as Henry and Alex. With hindsight, it now seems likely that these two names refer to Semenov, whose code name was Henry, and Feklisov, who says he was known to Rosenberg by his real first name.

Feklisov is mentioned several times in the Venona intercepts under the code name CALISTRAT as one of several Soviet agents working under Kvasnikov's direction. The State Department was presumably aware of this background when it approved a visa for Feklisov to work as a counselor at the Soviet Embassy in Washington from 1962 to 1964. The position was a cover for his real job as head of Soviet intelligence in the United States.

During a 1989 seminar in Moscow on the Cuban missile crisis, Feklisov identified himself publicly as the notorious "Mr. X," who said he served as the back channel between the Kremlin and the White House. His American contact was ABC News diplomatic correspondent John Scali, who later served as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations.

Feklisov's account of Ethel Rosenberg's minimal involvement in her husband's work conforms with what is known from the Venona documents. The most damaging reference to Ethel in the intercepts comes in a Nov. 27, 1944, KGB message from New York to Moscow, which mentions "ETHEL, 29 years old, married five years . . . a FELLOWCOUNTRYMAN [code word for Communist Party member] since 1938." The message said she "knows about her husband's work," but was in "delicate health" and "does not work."

Schneir, the left-wing historian, says he was unable to catch Feklisov out in a significant error of fact when he interviewed him in September. He adds, however, that Feklisov's obvious familiarity with the literature of the case and the Venona documents make it impossible to reach a "definite conclusion" on the authenticity of his story.

"We could not endorse it, but we could not refute it. We had to admit defeat," Schneir said.

Chervonnaya, the Russian researcher, says that Feklisov told her key details about the Rosenberg story before publication of the Venona intercepts in July 1995. He mentioned various code names that were later confirmed by Venona. Schneir's literary rival, Radosh, is also impressed by the cumulative weight of Feklisov's testimony.

"He is the genuine article," Radosh said. "I do not think that someone could make up all those minute details."

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

*For the history of the U.S. project that broke encoded Soviet messages and caught the Rosenbergs, as well as a press release from the Rosenberg children who still attest to their parents' innocence, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site at www.washingtonpost.com*

FILE PHOTO

Parisians demonstrate for clemency for the Rosenbergs hours before the couple was executed on June 19, 1953.

# Components of the Julius Rosenberg Wartime

*According to retired KGB agent Alexander Feklisov, the Rosenberg spy ring consisted of the following people:*

## JOEL BARR

BARR

■ Studied electronic engineering at City College of New York with Rosenberg, graduating in 1938. He was a member of the Young Communist League. Feklisov says that Rosenberg recruited Barr as a Soviet intelligence agent toward the end of 1942, at a time when he was working for Western Electric in New York City. Feklisov says he met with Barr on numerous occasions, and received valuable information from him on infrared sights and missile electronics.

After the war, Barr moved to France, but disappeared in June 1950, at a time when the FBI was closing in on other members of the Rosenberg spy ring. He reappeared in public 40 years later in St. Petersburg, Russia. Living under the pseudonym Joseph Berg, he had played a key role in constructing a radar-controlled antiaircraft system for the Soviet Union. Since 1991, he has been moving freely between the United States and Russia.

The FBI's files on the Rosenberg case contain numerous references to Barr, but he was never charged with any crime. He has repeatedly denied any involvement in Soviet espionage.

## ALFRED SARANT

SARANT

■ A classmate of Joel Barr at CCNY. Worked at the Signal Corps laboratory in Fort Monmouth, N.J. According to Feklisov, Sarant was recruited to work for Soviet intelligence by Barr in 1943. Feklisov says that Sarant worked as a subagent of Barr and did not have independent contacts with Soviet intelligence. The FBI claimed that Barr and Sarant photographed secret materials for the Soviets at an apartment they shared at 65 Morton Street in Greenwich Village.

Sarant disappeared from the United States in July 1950, shortly after being questioned by FBI agents about his connection with Rosenberg. He reappeared in the Soviet Union under the pseudonym Philip Staros, working with Barr on the development of the Soviet military electronics industry. He died in Moscow in 1979 of a heart attack.

## WILLIAM PERL

PERL

■ A classmate of Barr and Morton Sobell at CCNY. Specialized in aircraft engineering and became one of America's leading experts in jet propulsion and supersonic flight. He worked for the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, first in Washington and then in Cleveland. According to Feklisov, Perl was recruited for Soviet intelligence at Rosenberg's suggestion. Feklisov says that he traveled to Cleveland to meet with Perl in late 1944, and to arrange a courier system to receive his materials.

Questioned by FBI agents in August 1950, Perl denied knowing either Rosenberg or Sobell. He was convicted of perjury and sentenced to a five-year prison term in 1951, but repeatedly denied that he was involved in a Soviet espionage ring. According to American intercepts of Soviet intelligence traffic, Perl provided the Kremlin with important information on aeronautics, for which he received a $500 bonus in 1944. Now deceased.

## Industrial Espionage Ring

### MORTON SOBELL

SOBELL

■ A CCNY classmate of Perl and Barr. Worked at the General Electric laboratory at Schenectady, N.Y. According to Feklisov, Sobell was recruited in 1944 by Rosenberg. Feklisov says he met with Sobell frequently in in Manhattan in 1944 and 1945, and received important information from him on military radar systems and future radio engineering projects. Sobell, who now lives in San Francisco, denies ever meeting with Feklisov or any other Soviet citizen during World War II.

Sobell disappeared to Mexico in the summer of 1950, at a time when the FBI was investigating the Rosenberg spy ring. Kidnapped by Mexican agents and forcibly deported to the United States, he was a co-defendant with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. In 1951, he was sentenced to a 30-year prison term, of which he served 18 years. Released in 1980, he subsequently worked for a medical electronics firm, and wrote a book, "On Doing Time," about his prison experiences on Alcatraz island. He maintains his innocence.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF DISCOVERY CHANNEL

### DAVID GREENGLASS

GREENGLASS

■ The brother of Ethel Rosenberg, Greenglass worked as a mechanic on the U.S. atomic bomb project at Los Alamos, N.M. According to Feklisov, Julius Rosenberg mentioned that Greenglass was working on the bomb project in September 1944. In January 1945, Greenglass went to New York on leave. Feklisov says he arranged a meeting between Greenglass and the Soviet field officer in charge of atomic espionage, Anatoly Yatskov. Yatskov later told Feklisov that he had not received "any worthwhile information" from Greenglass.

Questioned by the FBI in June 1950, Greenglass confessed to Soviet espionage, and named Julius Rosenberg as his recruiter. He changed his testimony during the investigation to also implicate his sister, Ethel, saying she had typed espionage material. Under a plea bargain with federal prosecutors, he served a 15-year prison term for espionage. His wife Ruth was permitted to go free. Greenglass lives in upstate New York under an assumed name.

—Michael Dobbs