The Deceits Of the Rosenberg Case

Post 7/17/79

By Sol Stern and Ronald Radosh

DURING THE early morning hours of June 18, 1953, a car full of FBI agents slipped through the gates of Sing Sing prison in Ossining, N.Y. They moved their belongings to a makeshift command post that was only a short walk from the object of their vigil: the death house cells of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

The men were on a last-ditch mission. In this, its biggest espionage investigation, the FBI had been after something more than the conviction of the Rosenbergs for stealing atomic secrets during World War II. From the start the bureau had marked Julius Rosenberg as the key figure in a wider Soviet espionage network operating after the war. The FBI wanted the details of that network. They were there to offer Julius Rosenberg and his wife one last chance to save their lives in exchange for this information.

The mission was a failure. The evening of the day after the agents arrived, first Julius Rosenberg and then his wife were executed after refusing all invitations to save themselves by talking. A quarter of a century later the case still haunts us.

Many Americans believe the Rosenbergs' final *crie de coeur* that they were innocent victims of a Cold War political frameup. This view received its most dramatic boost with the emergence of the Rosenbergs' sons, Michael and Robert Meeropol, as leaders of a new campaign to reopen the case. Their Freedom of Information Act lawsuit has forced the FBI to release, so far, 200,000 pages of documents.

The FBI files contain startling revelations about the case, many of which would have been devasting to the government's prosecution of the Rosenbergs. But other documents in the FBI files — documents the new Rosenberg committee has not released — badly undermine the argument that both the Rosenbergs were framed.

We have obtained independently all those 200,000 pages of FBI files. We also interviewed several dozen witnesses, many of whom were willing to discuss their involvement in the case for the first time. This new evidence has led us to the inescapable conclusion that Julius Rosenberg was indeed at the hub of an espionage network that continued to operate until his arrest in 1950.

But not Ethel. One of the most shocking documents in the FBI files is a 13-page memorandum, dated June 17, 1953, listing the questions the FBI agents at the death house were to put to Julius Rosenberg if he and his wife broke. There is only one question in the entire memorandum concerning Ethel. It reads: "Was your wife cognizant of your activities?"

See ROSENBERGS, Page B5

Sol Stern, a former editor of Ramparts magazine, and Ronald Radosh, a professor of history at the City University of New York, are writing a book on the Rosenberg case. Their article is adapted from the New Republic.

ROSENBERGS, From Page B1

That question stands out today like a red flag. When it was composed by a top FBI official, Ethel Rosenberg was about to be executed as a "full-fledged partner" (trial judge's Irving Kaufman's words) in what J. Edgar Hoover called "the crime of the century." Could the government have let her die when it wasn't even sure she was aware of Julius' espionage activities?

Sadly, the answer is yes. The June 17 memorandum is only one of several FBI documents demonstrating that Ethel Rosenberg was included in the prosecution only as a "lever" against her husband; that she was ultimately convicted on tainted evidence obtained at the eleventh hour. The purpose was to pressure her husband into revealing the details of his post-war espionage network.

□ □

The road to execution for Julius and Ethel Rosenberg began in 1950 with the confession of physicist Klaus Fuchs that he had betrayed U.S. atomic bomb secrets to Russia. Fuchs' admissions led to chemist Harry Gold, Fuchs' courier. Gold implicated David Greenglass, who had been a machinist at the Los Alamos atomic bomb facility during the war. Greenglass in turn identified his brother-in-law, Julius Rosenberg, as a member of the spy ring.

Shortly after Rosenberg's arrest, J. Edgar Hoover dashed off a note to Attorney General J. Howard McGrath. "There is no question," he wrote, "but that if Julius Rosenberg would furnish the details of his ex-

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg

tensive espionage activities it would be possible to proceed against other individuals." Hoover said that "proceeding against his wife might serve as a lever in this matter."

The problem was that the government had no evidence against Ethel Rosenberg. In the Greenglass case, the threat of imprisoning his wife, Ruth, and thus of leaving their two children without a mother, was an effective way to keep David cooperative.

The FBI's only source of information on Ethel Rosenberg was the Greenglasses. Yet in all the interrogations of Ruth and David in July and August 1950 — when they were anxious to prove to the FBI that they were holding up their part of the bargain to keep Ruth from being indicted — there was hardly a reference to any overt act by Ethel.

Ruth Greenglass did tell her interrogators that Ethel was present when Julius Rosenberg asked Ruth to visit David in New Mexico during the war and ask him for information about the atomic development program. Ruth said that she remembered expressing reluctance, but that Ethel chimed in with remarks to the effect of "let David decide." In a trial, that testimony — uncorroborated and denied by the two other participants in the purported conversation — would have counted for little.

Because there was so little to hang on Ethel, the government pressed David Greenglass about his sister at an interrogation on Aug. 4, 1950. Here is the exchange between Assistant U.S. Attorney Myles Lane and David Greenglass:.

Lane: Was Ethel present in any of these occasion [when David gave Julius information]?

Greenglass: Never.

Lane: Did Ethel talk to you about it?

Greenglass: Never spoke to me and that's a fact. Aside from trying to protect my sister, believe me that's a fact.

Nevertheless, the FBI arrested Ethel Rosenberg one week later, charging her with the same crime as her husband — conspiracy to commit espionage during wartime.

On Feb. 8, 1951, an expanded and secret meeting of the Joint Congressional Committee on Atomic Energy discussed the Rosenberg prosecution.

Myles Lane told the committee that the Justice Department believed "the only thing that will break this man Rosenberg is the prospect of a death penalty or getting the chair, plus that if we can convict his wife too, and give her a sentence of 25 or 30 years, that combination may serve to make this fellow disgorge and give us the information on these other individuals." But Lane admitted that "the case is not too strong against Mrs. Rosenberg." In that room full of lawyers, no one seemed disturbed that the government wanted a 25- or 30-year jail sentence for an individual against whom the case was weak.

□ □

Then suddenly, just 10 days before the trial opened, the Greenglasses changed their story. The new version placed Ethel at the center of the espionage operation as her husband's dutiful typist.

What prompted this fortuitously timed revelation remains a mystery. The FBI files released so far merely indicate that Ruth Greenglass was reinterviewed on Feb. 23 and 24, 1951, and that she volunteered "additional information" on Ethel. Two days later David Greenglass was reinterviewed. According to the summary cable sent to J. Edgar Hoover, he "furnished in substance the same information as related by Ruth Greenglass."

The Greenglasses now claimed that David had handed over his handwritten notes and sketches of the atomic bomb right in the Rosenbergs' living room, in September 1945. According to the FBI cablegram, Ruth then reported that "Julius took the info into the bathroom and read it and when he came out he called Ethel and told her she had to type this info immediately. [Ruth]

said Ethel then sat down at the typewriter which she had placed on a bridge table in the living room and proceeded to type the info which David had given to Julius."

The FBI files contain only summaries of these crucial February 1951 sessions. James B. Kilsheimer, who attended those interrogations as an assistant U.S. attorney, is now in private law practice in New York. He said recently that the Greenglasses changed their testimony because at first "David had a reluctance to talk about his sister." Kilsheimer said the new story "wasn't sudden. It was a gradual breakdown. Each time I went to talk to him there would be some additional information."

But the FBI files do not show a series of conversations in which David Greenglass "gradually" disgorged more information about his sister. Moreover, the February story was not "additional" information: It was a flat-out contradiction of the story Greenglass previously had told interrogators.

Here is how Greenglass described the September 1945 transaction in his signed statement dated July 17, 1950:

"Almost as soon as I got to New York City Julius Rosenberg got in touch with me and I met him on the street somewhere in the city. At that time I furnished Julius Rosenberg with an unsealed envelope containing the information I had been able to gather concerning the atomic bomb, as well as a couple of sketches of the molds which make up the bomb."

In his revised version, Greenglass said that Ethel had to be called in to type the atomic bomb information because "David's handwriting was very difficult to understand." Ruth Greenglass testified to this at the trial. But the FBI files offer hundreds of pages of David's handwriting, all of which are completely legible, even in the poor quality copies supplied by the FBI.

□ □

In April 1979 the Greenglasses, looking remarkably well, met one of us for dinner. At that meeting it became clear that David was anxious to talk with us. He explained that despite many offers, he never sought to make money from his story. "I wish this case was finished . . . but I hate to go to my deathbed seeing the Rosenbergs depicted as innocent martyrs. They could have cleared themselves."

David related his offer to tell the FBI the whole story if they agreed that his wife Ruth would not be indicted, "and then I told them the whole story." After a brief pause, he added, "Of course I kept Ethel out and eventually told the truth and brought her in."

The Greenglasses agreed to a formal, tape-recorded interview. It was set for a Saturday in May at Rogge's office. The Greenglasses arrived on schedule, but Ruth said that after talking with their three children, they had decided not to be interviewed. David explained to Rogge: "John, I was outvoted by the three women in my family."

Seeking to reassure the Greenglasses, we started to read out loud some of the questions we had prepared. David began tossing out quick answers while his wife became increasingly nervous. We asked David directly why he only told the FBI about Ethel's role two weeks before the trial, and to explain the discrepancy between his two versions of how he had given the information to Julius.

Greenglass blanched and blurted out, "I can't answer that. I won't answer that." A few minutes later the Greenglasses got up and left the room.

□ □

It was the Greenglasses who had told their interrogators that Julius also appeared to be directing a spy network after the war. They claimed he boasted to them about placing his "boys" in key industrial and research facilities in upstate New York, and that his network maintained two apartments for photographing of documents, one in the Greenwich Village area.

The Greenglasses said that Rosenberg tried to get them to leave the country after the arrest of Fuchs and Gold, and claimed Julius was trying to get other members of his group out of the country. The FBI soon discovered that many of Julius Rosenberg's friends did indeed seem to be disappearing during June and July of 1950.

One of these trips is generally

known. Morton Sobell, a City College classmate and close friend of Julius, flew to Mexico a few days after Greenglass' arrest, taking his wife and children with him. The FBI kidnapped Sobell with the aid of the Mexican police and brought him back to stand trial.

The only name the Greenglasses gave the FBI to back up their post-war spy network claim was Joel Barr, another college classmate of Julius. Barr had been living abroad, mostly in Paris, since 1948. By the time the FBI obtained Barr's Paris address, he was gone. Barr left behind an aging and sick mother, three brothers and a sister. They have not heard from him since his disappearance.

The next Rosenberg friend to take off was a 32-year-old engineer named Alfred Sarant, then living in Ithaca, N.Y. On July 27, Sarant drove to New York City for a rendevouz with a woman named Carol Dayton. Dayton and her husband were next-door neighbors of Sarant and his wife. From New York City, Sarant and Dayton drove to Tucson, Ariz., where they obtained false Mexican tourist cards. On Aug. 9, the pair crossed the border and vanished. Sarant and Dayton each left behind two small children as well as their respective spouses.

These disappearances alone should make one hesitate before writing off the war spy ring as an FBI fantasy. But, among other things, while Rosenberg was at the federal house of detention awaiting trial, he struck up a friendship with Jerome Tartakow, who was serving a two-year sentence for interstate auto theft. In conversations with Tartakow over six months, Julius divulged details about his network during the period before his arrest. Tartakow, in turn, was reporting all of it to the FBI.

It's hard to believe Julius Rosenberg really talked about these things in jail. But over 300 pages of FBI memos on reports from Tartakow contain details which could have come only from Rosenberg and which are corroborated by independent sources.

One of the Tartakow memos, for example, concerns William Perl, an aeronautical engineer and friend of Rosenberg's. Rosenberg allegedly told Tartakow that during the July 4 weekend of 1949, Perl removed documents from a lab at Columbia University, and he and Rosenberg spent 17 hours photographing them before they were returned.

The FBI discovered that on July 3, 1948 — not 1949 — Perl did check out 800 pages of classified documents from the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, located at Columbia. The FBI also did tests to confirm that it was possible to photograph 800 pages of documents in 17 hours. Perl was never indicted. FBI papers say this was because the time lapse of three years made it impossible to identify fingerprints on the documents, all of which had been returned.

□ □

In sentencing Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to death, Judge Irving Kaufman said they had "altered the course of history" and had caused the "communist aggression in Korea with the resulting casualties exceeding 50,000." Here, too, the government knew things that no one in the courtroom was aware of. It had documents — now released — demonstrating that the material Greenglass gave to Rosenberg and that Rosenberg passed on to the Soviets was virtually worthless.

Back in May 1950, when the FBI had interviewed physicist Klaus Fuchs, Fuchs admitted having told the Russians just about everything he knew about the atomic bomb. Given Fuch's position at the highest scientific echelons of the Manhattan Project, that meant practically everything known in 1945 about the construction of the bomb and the implosion process as well.

One written report he delivered to Harry Gold, he told the FBI, contained a "description of the atomic bomb . . . a sketch of the bomb and its components with important dimensions indicated, and a written description of various technical aspects of the bomb." Fuchs handed over his sketches months before Greenglass' material was purportedly typed by Ethel Rosenberg in her living room.

Fuchs got 14 years, was eventually released and, until his recent retirement, headed East Germany's nuclear science program. David Greenglass, expecting 3 to 5 years as a reward for his cooperation, received 15 years and served 10. Ruth Greenglass, as agreed, was never indicted. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were electrocuted.

The morning of the executions, President Eisenhower repeated the myth of Ethel's full involvement and cited the alleged "millions of dead whose deaths may be attributable to what these spies have done." Even as the president issued that statement, the FBI stood by at the Sing Sing death house with its questionnaire, ready to ask Julius if his wife was "cognizant" of his activities. In a case full of deceits, this was the most cynical of all.

©1979, The New Republic, Inc.
Field Newspaper Syndicate