Rosenberg Confessed to Informer, Memo Says

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Julius Rosenberg, who was executed in 1953, confessed his part in a Soviet espionage apparatus to an FBI informant in 1951, according to newly released Justice Department documents.

Rosenberg and his wife, Ethel, both went to their deaths publicly proclaiming their innocence of conspiring to pass atomic secrets to the Russians, however, and the government's hope of cracking an "espionage operation of much greater scope" died with them.

The informant was identified in documents of the Justice Department's internal security division as Jerome Eugene Tartakow, who was serving time in the Federal House of Detention in New York City at the same time Rosenberg was confined there. Tartakow has come to be know as Rosenberg's "pen pal."

Tartakow, whose present whereabouts is not known, was reportedly in prison because of violation of the law against interstate transportation of stolen vehicles — an offense under the jurisdiction of the FBI.

TARTAKOW was described in two lengthy memos written by department officials in 1956 as "a confidential informant of unknown reliability . . . who voluntarily furnished information concerning conversations he had with Rosenberg."

It is not clear from the documents — made public, ironically, in response to a lawsuit by the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in an effort to prove the innocence of their parents — whether Tartakow was deliberately planted in the prison by the FBI to gather information from Rosenberg or whether he happened to be in prison and volunteered material to the bureau.

Even in 1956, five years after Rosenberg reportedly talked to Tartakow, one of the memos said: "While certain of the information furnished by Tartakow has been corroborated to some extent, the majority of it has not."

However, department attorneys apparently took the revelations provided by Tartakow seriously enough that they were still studying, in 1956, the possibility of prosecuting other suspected members of the alleged Soviet spy system.

But the department decided that they could not be brought to court because the information allegedly received by Tartakow from Rosenberg would be hearsay and thus not admissible in court, and other witnesses to testify from first-hand knowledge could not be found.

ON NOV. 5, 1956, Thomas K. Hall, chief of the department's subversive activities section, wrote a 22-page memo to his boss, Asst. Atty. Gen. William F. Tompkins, in which he gave this outline of the information provided by Tartakow:

"According to Tartakow, Rosenberg stated there were two (espionage) units operating in the New York area, one unit being headed by Rosenberg and the other unit by two other men. Rosenberg said one of these men was in Europe at the time of Rosenberg's arrest and the other fled one week after his arrest.

"Tartakow advised that Rosenberg confided to him that he made two trips to Ithaca, N.Y., to see Alfred Sarant, a member of his organization, and to make 'pickups.'

"Rosenberg also told Tartakow of a young couple in a Midwest city to whom he gave money to operate a business as a front and that during his recent operations this man acted as a go-between for the transmission of microfilm to Rosenberg for further transmission.

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"ROSENBERG informed Tartakow in 1951 that 'last year on a holiday weekend' (the FBI later concluded the date was most likely July 4, 1948) he had spent 17 hours in the Rosenberg apartment in the company of William Perl and two other men photographing material which had been taken from Columbia University by Perl. Rosenberg further advised Tartakow that Perl gave him plans on 'nuclear fission to propel airplanes;' that Perl was a brilliant man in the field of aerodynamics; and that some of the material Perl gave him was 'terrific.'"

Much of Hall's memo was devoted to the case the government hoped to make against Perl, a brilliant young scientist — once described by his lawyer as "a sort of young Einstein" — who had been convicted of perjury in 1953 for denying he knew Rosenberg and Rosenberg's codefendant, Morton Sobell.

The most damaging information reported by Tartakow to the FBI concerned the holiday weekend allegedly spent photographing documents. Perl, Rosenberg was reported to have said, removed secret files from a laboratory at Columbia University, where he was a protege of Dr. Theodore Von Karman, described as "one of the very top scientists in the aerodynamics field."

HALL'S MEMO says the bureau found that Perl did sign a receipt for 24 documents at Columbia on July 3, 1948. But agents examined the documents and found that they did not appear to have been taken apart and that no fingerprints of the suspects could be found.

The department decided not to pursue an espionage case against Perl or to attempt to obtain his testimony against others by granting him immunity from prosecution.

Another newly released document is a memo dated Dec. 18, 1952, telling of the hopes the department had that the Rosenbergs would talk to save their lives.

And if that happened, the memo said, "it is very probable that the information obtained would enable the Criminal Division to

prosecute several other espionage cases now pending."

The Criminal Division documents were made available to Michael and Robert Meeropol, the sons of the Rosenbergs, under a court order issued in response to their suit under the Freedom of Information Act, and mailed to them last week.

A large batch of FBI documents in the case is soon to be made public. They are expected to reveal much more about the investigation of one of the most celebrated espionage cases in U.S. history.