FBI Uncovered Key Rosenberg Witness on Informant's Tip

THE WASHINGTON POST

Thursday, Dec. 4, 1975 B17

By William Chapman
Washington Post Staff Writer

A key witness against Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in their 1951 espionage trial was uncovered by the government through a tip from an FBI informant who was Rosenberg's cellmate during the trial, according to government documents released yesterday.

The documents also show that the informant, Joseph Eugene Tartakow, was regarded by the FBI as a "confidence man" whose other information rarely could be verified.

They portray the informant as an intelligent, clever prisoner playing a cat-and-mouse game in which he tried to win an early parole by digging information out of Rosenberg both before and after Rosenberg was sentenced to death.

The material released yesterday is the first to show definitely that the FBI's jailhouse informant was useful to the government in prosecuting the Rosenbergs on charges of conspiring to steal atom bomb secrets for the Soviet Union. Tartakow never testified in the trial and his role was not known outside the government at the time.

The Rosenbergs were executed in 1953. The FBI documents were made public as a result of a freedom-of-information suit brought by their sons, Robert and Michael Meeropol.

The key witness produced by Tartakow's tip was a passport photographer named Ben Schneider, who testified that the Rosenbergs had had photos taken in his New York City shop in June, 1950. His testimony was brought out to show that the Rosenbergs had considered fleeing the country just after the FBI first questioned Rosenberg that month. It also was used to attack Rosenberg's credibility—he had denied on the witness stand having passport photos taken at Schneider's shop.

Authors who have written about the celebrated Rosebnberg trial have described Schneider's testimony as both "startling" and "devastating." Writers sympathetic to the Rosenbergs cite his statements as one of the few bits of corroborating evidence produced against them by the government.

Schneider was a surprise witness, whose name was not on the government's witness list submitted to Rosenberg lawyers before the trial began. The government said at the time it had not known of Schneider's existence when the trial started in March and the documents released yesterday show that it was on Tartakow's tip during the trial that the photographer was found in time to testify as the last of the government's 23 witnesses.

Tartakow obtained the information, according to the documents, because Rosenberg worried aloud in his cell that the photographer might be discovered and used in the trial against him.

A memo from FBI official A. H. Belmont, written in April, 1951, says that Tartakow "furnished us with information obtained from Rosenberg that Rosenberg was apprehensive lest the FBI learn of his obtaining passport photographs in June, 1950, for himself and family and use such information in the trial.

"This information was furnished (by Tartakow) during the trial and we were successful in locating a photographer who had made the passport photographs for Rosenberg and his family and the photographer furnished evidence at the trial."

Belmont's memorandum goes on to describe Tartakow as an intelligent "confidence man" whose other information on Rosenberg may in fact have come from newspapers he read or from other persons in prison.

Tartakow, Belmont wrote, "is definitely a confidence man . . . He is intelligent and has the confidence man's ability to capitalize on his knowledge of information which may be available to the press, prison sources, etc., to present a convincing story regarding the scope of his knowledge of Rosenberg's activities. It is not possible to state that any information which he has furnished to us is definitely false. On the other hand, undoubtably much of the information he furnished he obtained from sources other than Rosenberg . . . He has furnished us definite, original information; for example, the passport photograph information."

Belmont's memo and other material provide an intimate picture of how Tartakow tried to use the FBI to obtain a parole at the same time the FBI was using him to extract information from Rosenberg.

Tartakow desperately wanted the FBI to recommend him for parole, the FBI material shows. A teletype message from New York

agents to Washington says that on April 16, 1951, Tartakow was informed "that the bureau could take no active role whatsoever in recommending him for parole . . . (Tartakow) appeared very upset over receiving this news and stated that he does not stand 'a ghost of a chance for parole without bureau recommendation.'"

Other documents show that the U.S. prosecutor, Irving Saypol, recommended early release for Tartakow because of his cooperation. Tartakow was released about three months before his sentence was to expire, but it is not clear whether the release was due to Saypol's intervention or because of the "good time" Tartakow had built up during his days in the Federal House of Detention in New York.

One reason the FBI did not want Tartakow released was his potential usefulness in befriending Morton Sobell, another convicted atom spy who was to be moved into the House of Detention soon after Rosenberg was moved to the New York State prison at Sing Sing.

The FBI's Belmont wrote that Tartakow's value to the bureau "will carry over after Rosenberg's removal . . . through Tartakow's access to Sobell who will be incarcerated at the Federal House of Detention until removal from Atlanta.

"Parole for (Tartakow) at this time in this connection would thwart our principal objective in having Tartakow have access to Sobell and Rosenberg."

Tartakow also threatened to stop supplying the FBI with Rosenberg information unless the FBI agreed to meet certain conditions.

Tartakow "has told the bureau agents on at least three different occasions that if certain conditions were not met, he would cease to further cooperate," Belmont wrote.

"In each case he has relented and has continued to furnish us information, even though the conditions laid down by him were not met by the bureau."

Other documents released earlier have indicated that Tartakow obtained from Rosenberg a jailhouse confession of espionage activities and accounts of other espionage figures the government wanted to arrest.

Marshall Perlin, an attorney for the Rosenberg sons (who took the name of their adoptive parents), has dismissed these reports as a "fantasy" created by the government.