Key Rosenberg Witness Altered Story

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DAVID GREENGLASS
. . .testified on espionage

David Greenglass, the key witness whose testimony sent Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to the electric chair 22 years ago, changed his story of their involvement in espionage several times before taking the stand against them, government records released this week show.

In one interview before the trial, Greenglass said that his sister, Ethel Rosenberg, was not present when he turned atomic bomb secrets over to her husband, Julius. He later was to testify that she not only was present but had typed up the information during a meeting in the Rosenbergs' living room.

At one point in an FBI interview, Greenglass said he had had no espionage contacts with Julius Rosenberg. Later, he testified about several meetings in which he said he passed along sketches and descriptions of the atom bomb's triggering device.

In his first encounter with the FBI, Greenglass identified his own wife, Ruth, as the one who recruited him for espionage. Later, in the same interview, he said that Julius Rosenberg had put Ruth up to the recruiting.

Transcripts of Greenglass' pretrial statements are included in the nearly 30,000 pages of documents made public this week by the FBI as a result of a Freedom of Information Act suit brought by the Rosenbergs' sons, Michael and Robert Meeropol.

The Rosenbergs were convicted March 29, 1951, for conspiring to transmit secrets of the atom bomb to Soviet agents. They were executed in New York's Sing Sing prison on June 19, 1953.

The key witness against

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JULIUS ROSENBERG

ETHEL ROSENBERG

. . .executed in 1953 for conspiring to transmit atom secrets

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them was Greenglass, who pleaded guilty to a conspiracy indictment and eventually received a 15-year sentence. Critics of the government's case have contended over the years in books and articles that Greenglass' story was fabricated to frame the Rosenbergs.

Greenglass had been an Army machinist at the Los Alamos, N.M., atomic bomb laboratory in 1944 and 1945 when, court testimony showed, he was recruited by the Rosenbergs to supply information for the Russians and subsequently supplied sketches and descriptions of the device used in detonating the bomb.

Prior to the trial, Greenglass was interviewed by an assistant U.S. attorney in New York about meetings in 1944 and 1945 at which he said he had passed information to Julius Rosenberg. A transcript of that interview shows this exchange:

Q. Was Ethel present in any of these occasions?

A. Never.

Q. Did Ethel talk to you about it?

A. Never spoke about it to me and that's a fact. Aside from trying to protect my sister, believe me that's a fact.

At the trial, Greenglass testified that at one meeting in the Rosenbergs' apartment he submitted secret information to Julius, who insisted that it be typed up. "Ethel did the typing . . ." Greenglass testified.

When first arrested on June 15, 1950, and questioned intermittently for nearly 12 hours, Greenglass at first appeared to say that it was his own wife, Ruth, who recruited him for espionage.

A memorandum written by a Washington FBI official, A.H. Belmont, while the questioning was under way in New York, reported this about Greenglass' initial response: "Greenglass admits that he worked on the atom bomb and that his wife, a Communist, recruited him to give information to 'our allies' (the Soviet Union)."

Later, during the same questioning, Greenglass told FBI agents that it was Julius Rosenberg who had asked Ruth to recruit him. The two FBI agents who questioned him wrote in a footnote that "Greenglass said he admitted this because he felt investigation would reveal the true facts."

Another FBI memo on the first interview states: "It should also be noted that at that time Greenglass claimed that he had no personal contact with (Julius) Rosenberg concerning espionage activities." Subsequently, the memo states, Greenglass implicated Rosenberg as the one who got his wife Ruth to recruit him.

In none of the early Greenglass interviews with the FBI does he indicate that his sister, Ethel, was involved. In a full statement on July 17, 1950, a month after his arrest, Greenglass implicated Julius Rosenberg in detail, but did not mention Ethel. But two days later in another statement to the FBI, Greenglass said that Ruth had told him that Ethel had also asked her to encourage Greenglass to supply secret information on the bomb.

Other FBI memos make it clear that Greenglass' lawyer, O. John Rogge, hoped that his client would be treated with leniency if he cooperated with the government. Rogge told the government that Greenglass was prepared to implicate Rosenberg.

A memo by FBI official D.M. Ladd quotes Rogge as saying that " . . . his client might be able to furnish some helpful information concerning another subject, namely his own brother-in-law."

Critics have charged that the government agreed before the trial to request leniency for Greenglass if he cooperated in accusing Rosenberg. Memos indicate, however, that both the FBI and the Justice Department turned down specific requests for lenient sentencing recommendations.

Ladd wrote in his memorandum that he told Rogge any deal on leniency would have to be made by the Justice Department, not by the FBI.

In another FBI memo, then Assistant Attorney General James M. McInerney is quoted as saying he never agreed that the government would recommend a three-year sentence for Greenglass in exchange for his cooperation. McInerney had, however, promised that his cooperation would be brought to the attention of proper authorities when Greenglass appeared for sentencing. Prosecutors recommended the 15-year sentence that was imposed.

McInerney also had agreed to recommend an early parole for Greenglass because of his testimony against his sister, Ethel, according to the FBI memo.