Rosenberg Said to Confess to Informer

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Julius Rosenberg, who went to his death professing his innocence on spy charges, allegedly gave a detailed confession to a cellmate who turned out to be an FBI informer, according to Justice Department documents.

Rosenberg allegedly described in rich detail—names, dates, places—his record as a recruiter of spies. He allegedly talked of photographing stolen materials and of financing a business venture to be used for transmitting information. He reportedly told of secret journeys to upstate New York to pick up material from an accomplice.

The source for Rosenberg's alleged jailhouse confession has been hidden in government files for nearly a quarter of a century. His name—Jerome Eugene Tartakow—emerged inadvertently when the Justice Department was forced recently to release documents by a suit brought by the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg.

The Rosenbergs were executed in 1953 for conspiracy to commit espionage—arranging to steal atomic secrets. The case created an international uproar in the early '50s, and their friends and relatives insist to this day they were framed by the government.

Their sons, Robert and Michael Meeropol, brought the freedom-of-information suit hoping to obtain evidence of the frame-up. Instead, the most sensational information obtained so far has been the revelation of an informer to whom Rosenberg allegedly described the espionage acts that he denied on the witness stand.

Rosenberg was in the Federal House of Detention awaiting trial when he encountered Tartakow, a convicted car thief. In a series of meetings, which Tartakow reported to the FBI, Rosenberg allegedly told him of his espionage activities and named accomplices the government considered prosecuting later.

The revelations are contained in Justice Department memoranda that refer to FBI interviews of Tartakow. His name was supposed to have been kept secret, but someone forgot to delete it in two places prior to releasing the documents.

According to Tartakow, one document says, "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 (in 1951) and the other fled one week after his arrest."

Little is known of Tartakow, except that he had been sentenced in 1949 for interstate transportation of stolen vehicles. The files do not indicate why or when he became an FBI informer. It could not be learned whether he is still alive.

A native New Yorker, Tartakow was in his late 20s when he was in jail with Rosenberg. He had been arrested in September, 1949, and was serving a two-year term. He was released about three months before the term expired, having earned what the Justice Department calls "good time" for jobs performed while in custody.

Tartakow was not called to testify against the Rosenbergs. However, it is believed that he provided information that the FBI checked out for possible use in the Rosenbergs' conspiracy trial.

There are indications that the Justice Department had doubts about Tartakow's usefulness and reliability.

One document describes him as "a confidential informant of unknown reliability . . ." It added that "while certain of the information furnished by (Tartakow) has been corroborated to some extent, the majority has not."

A 1968 memorandum from Thomas K. Hall, then chief of the Justice Department's Subversive Activities Section, dealt with the possibility of using Tartakow before a grand jury to seek indictments of persons associated with the Rosenbergs.

Hall wrote: "The information furnished by (Tartakow), while supplying greater insight into the Rosenberg activities, is clearly hearsay. In this character, and standing alone, it does not constitute an appropriate basis for convening a grand jury."

Tartakow's information is characterized as "inherently incredible" by Marshall Perlin, attorney for the Meeropol brothers.

Had the government believed Tartakow's stories, Perlin argued, it could have put him on the stand to testify against [illegible].

The Meeropols, who took the name of their adoptive parents, and their attorneys have found anything helpful in the files released so far, they are not talking about it. Perlin said he has found "contradictions" and "conflicts of testimony that the government had knowledge of" at the time of the trial. But he declined to identify any of those contradictions last week.

With one exception, the Tartakow story so far appears only in Criminal Division memos referring to FBI interviews still concealed in the files.

The exception is one page of an FBI interview in which Tartakow reported that Rosenberg had "seriously considered" a plan to infiltrate the FBI.

"He (Rosenberg) stated to effect this successfully, it would be necessary to concentrate on young men while they were still in high school and had no connection with progressive attitudes," the FBI account quotes Tartakow as saying. "He said to do this it would take a long, long time and much planning."