

## The Rosenberg sons 25 years later

**WE ARE YOUR SONS: The Legacy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.** By Robert and Michael Meeropol. Houghton Mifflin; \$10.00.

Reviewed by Peggy Dennis

Probably as an effort to offset the damaged image of our 37th President Tricky Dick, a nostalgia cult is being fostered around the image of our 33rd President who is being depicted with humor as being "good ole, straight-talkin', give-'em-hell" Harry. We are expected to forget exactly to whom President Truman (1945-1953) was giving all that hell. Hiroshima. Nagasaki. Gun diplomacy in Greece, Indo-China, Dollar diplomacy in war-torn Europe. Cold War diplomacy in East Europe. And here at home, loyalty purges of federal and state employees. Imprisonment of Communists. Deportation of alleged fellow-travellers. Congressional committee investigations which hounded thousands out of jobs and professions. And the icing on the poison-cake — the indictment, conviction and death sentence to Ethel and Julius Rosenberg for alleged conspiracy to commit espionage. Their actual legal murder was carried out six months into the Eisenhower Administration. So the Rosenberg case was truly a bipartisan action.

However, if today the Truman ghost is being prettied-up for history, those of Ethel and Julius rise to explode that myth. Ultimate symbols of all victims of the Truman-McCarthyism nightmare, the Rosenbergs remain unfinished business. Now, 25 years later, Michael and Robert Meeropol (nee Rosenberg) are giving the country and the Liberal-Left movements another chance.

Their book *We Are Your Sons* is the personal aspect of their legal efforts to force open the State's files on their parents' case. Theirs is a documentary which weaves together the separate but parallel threads of what happened to the Rosenberg family since that fateful arrest in 1950.

In Part I *The Long Nightmare* (1950-1954) 31-year-old Michael relates the bare facts of the case. He offers the letters of Ethel and Julius to speak for themselves from inside the prison. He describes what was happening, meanwhile, to six-year old Mike and three-year-old Robbie on the Outside.

At first one is somewhat puzzled at the laconic, impersonal style in which Michael writes. However, the impact of the interplay between what happens to parents and children soon engenders its own emotionalism. It needs no author's embellishments and Michael is wise to offer none. Although deathhouse letters of the Rosenbergs have been published before, they take on new dimension within this unique setting. Their love for their children, for each other, for life itself (but not purchasable at the price the State demanded), their references to their innocence couched in an understanding of the politics of their case — all these ricochet dramatically and painfully against the low-key, factual account of the lives of their bewildered, shunt-about, small sons, orphaned pawns in a political tidal wave.

Part II *A New Life* (1954-1974) written by 28-year-old Robert encompasses the growing up years. On its surface, theirs were not too different than that of other white, vaguely radical-oriented youngsters who



The Rosenbergs leaving the courthouse

progressed in the 1950's from Pete Seeger hootnannies to desegregate-now picket lines at Woolworth stores to the first great March on Washington to identification with the first revolution in their time — Cuba.

Within these 1950's flutterings, which were to become the inner core of the 1960's New Left, there were two main categories. There were those young people whose once radical-activist parents fled McCarthyism by so effectively burying their pasts into successful business and professional careers that their children grew up totally unaware of that heritage until their parents during the mid-1960's admitted their pasts. Then there were the sons and daughters who lived the 1950's in the glaring spotlight of the political victimization of their parents, learning to cope in a hostile world.

Michael and Robert lived in both these worlds. Loved by adoptive parents who protected them in deliberate anonymity, they lived in fear and conflict. Fear that new friends would discover their secret and reject them (as many did). Conflict between this anonymous security and the need to claim their birthright. Despite this dichotomy, or perhaps because of it, they traveled from that 1950's youthful radicalism to the 1960's New Left counter-culture (Robert) and activism (Michael).

In a brief epilogue the two brothers collaborate to state the reasons which propelled them to go public at this time. While their reactions to falsities in Louis Nizer's book on the Rosenberg case (*The Implosion Conspiracy*) may have been the trigger, it is clear the real impetus is the stage of emotional and political maturity they have achieved, combined with the promise that today's new climate may hold. Also, as they say, credit is due their adoptive parents and the legacy of courage left them by their natural parents.

The 50-page Appendix essay written by Michael is an overly-long, somewhat abstract analysis of American imperialism. Many may disagree with some of his views, but few can dispute his main intent — to

Formerly foreign affairs editor and feature writer for *The People's World*, Peggy Dennis is now a free-lance journalist and reviewer. Her most recent reviews appear in *The Nation* and *The Progressive*. Her husband Gene spent five years, 1950-1955, in prison, and Dennis herself was active in numerous defense committees for victims of McCarthyism.

show that U.S. capitalism at that moment in history needed a Rosenberg case in the same way that Hitler needed a Dimitroff (Reichstag fire) case. Ironically, George Dimitroff was acquitted by a fascist court, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were sent to their death by a bourgeois-democratic court. No one has yet written the book to explain the reasons for this contradiction in history.

Perhaps the most impressive part of that Appendix essay are Julius Rosenberg's letters to his attorney. In these are revealed an astuteness of Marxist analysis which unfortunately, for whatever reasons of confused trial strategy, was not allowed to show through in the shadow-boxing called trial procedures.

As the sons of Ethel and Julius and because they are of the now radical generation, the young Meeropols succeed as few others could in transplanting the whole 1950's experience into today's context. If the Rosenberg case is the painful unfinished business of that past, Michael and Robert now confront the Old and New Left movements with a revived responsibility and a new legacy.

## Social disservice

**WARD OF THE STATE: An Account of Possible Occurrences.** By John Jacob Margins; \$2.00.

Reviewed by Madeleine Sloane

*Ward of the State* is a fictitious account of the corruption and negligence that permeate Chicago's juvenile justice system, focusing on the impact on one of its victims.

The person whose investigation results in several criminal indictments is John Harris, counselor and advocate for CAP, a social service agency which purports to keep juveniles out of the juvenile court system. One of CAP's clients, 17-year-old Victor Phillips, works with Harris in his investigations. They uncover too much about administrative aide Ron Barrett and CAP's handling of Victor's case is abruptly terminated at Barrett's instigation. Victor's case is then mistakenly transferred to the Department of Corrections. When he learns that he has to be jailed for psychological testing as a matter of convenience to the department, he splits.

The book is not a narrative, but a collection of documents, letters, departmental memos, excerpts from Harris' journal, and interviews from which the reader is to piece the story together. It effectively portrays the bureaucracy of which children are helpless victims, and how the system's mistakes can bury a child when he/she fights for rights the system does not recognize. Bad reactions (which may be perfectly justified) are translated into "bad" child. He/she is labelled "hostile" and "uncooperative," and is set up for a life of crime. Unfortunately, this is not only a possible occurrence. It happens.

*Ward of the State* makes its point well. The book will stymie anyone who is unfamiliar with the structure of the social services system. Two readings of these documents is necessary in order to get a coherent picture. And the general reader is apt to be confused.

So are the children.

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