

# Secrets

# and spies



Robert, on the left, and Michael Meeropol. Right: their parents, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, after their arrest for espionage in New York in 1950



Sixty-eight years ago today, Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed by the US government for being Soviet spies.

Their sons have spent decades trying to clear their mother's name. Are they close to a breakthrough?

Hadley Freeman meets them

Portrait by Webb Chappell



**“IT WAS A QUEER, SULTRY SUMMER,** the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs...” So goes the opening sentence of Sylvia Plath’s 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*, referring to the Jewish American couple, Julius and **Ethel Rosenberg**, who were convicted of conspiracy to commit espionage and sent to the electric chair exactly 68 years ago today. Their execution casts a morbid shadow over Plath’s book, just as it did over the United States, and it is seen by many as the nadir of America’s engagement with the cold war. The Rosenbergs are still the only Americans ever put to death in peacetime for espionage, and Ethel is the only American woman killed by the US government for a crime other than murder.

During their trial, Ethel in particular was vilified for prioritising communism over her children, and the prosecution insisted she had been the dominant half of the couple, purely because she was three years older. “She was the mastermind of this whole conspiracy,” assistant prosecutor Roy Cohn told the judge. But questions about whether she was guilty at all have been growing louder in recent years, and a new biography presents her in a different light. “Ethel was killed for being a wife. She was guilty of supporting her husband,” Anne Sebba, author of *Ethel Rosenberg: A Cold War Tragedy*, tells me. And for that, the 37-year-old mother of two young children had five massive jolts of electricity pumped through her body. Her death was so brutal that eyewitnesses reported that smoke rose out of her head.

The killing of the Rosenbergs was so shocking at the time and is so resonant of a specific period in American history that it has become part of popular culture. In Tony Kushner’s play *Angels In America*, Ethel haunts Cohn. In Woody Allen’s *Crimes And Misdemeanours*, Clifford (played by Allen) says sarcastically that he loves another character “like a brother – David Greenglass”, referencing Ethel’s brother, who testified against her and Julius to save himself and his wife. The most moving cultural response to the Rosenbergs’ deaths was EL Doctorow’s 1971 novel, *The Book Of Daniel*, which imagines the painful life afterwards of the Rosenbergs’ oldest child, whom he renames Daniel. In reality, the older Rosenberg child is called Michael, and his younger brother is Robert.

It is a bitter, rainy spring day when I interview the Rosenbergs’ sons. Only three and seven when their parents were arrested, six and 10 when they were killed, they are now grandfathers with grey beards and known as Michael and Robert Meeropol, having long ago taken the surname of the couple who adopted them after the US government orphaned them. When their parents were arrested, Michael, always a challenging child (“That’s putting it kindly,” he says), acted out even more, whereas Robert withdrew into himself. This dynamic still holds true: “Robert is more reserved and I tend to fly off the handle,” says Michael, 78, a retired economics professor, whose eyes spark with fire when he recalls old battles. Patient, methodical Robert, 74, a former lawyer, considers every word carefully. We are all talking by video chat, and when I ask where Robert is, he replies that he’s at home in Massachusetts, in a town “90 miles west of Boston and 150 miles north-east of New York City. To be more specific...” Michael is in his home in New York state, in a town he describes as “just south of Pete Seeger’s home”, referring to the folksinger and leftwing hero.

The differences between the brothers are obvious, but so is their closeness: Michael calls Robert “Chando”, a childhood nickname, and since Michael’s wife, Ann, died two years ago, his younger brother has called him every day.

“Rob and I are unusual siblings in so many ways. We have dealt with so many struggles, so we are very enmeshed,” says Michael. I ask how it would have been if he had gone through it all on his own. He recoils, poleaxed by the thought. “I think it would have been very, very hard,” he says eventually. Perhaps just as importantly, they have been there for one another as adults, as more evidence about their parents’ case has trickled out, and they’ve had to keep reframing

## ‘Ethel was killed for being a wife. She was guilty of supporting her husband’



**In handcuffs and bound for separate cells, the Rosenbergs share a final kiss in a prison van outside court after their arrest in New York in 1950**

their own past. “Throughout the 70s and 80s, we believed our parents were just communists who were framed. Do you want to add anything, Chando?” says Michael. “Yes, I would add: you can frame guilty people,” says Robert.

The brothers’ struggles began on 17 July 1950 when their father, Julius, was arrested in the family’s home on New York’s Lower East Side on suspicion of espionage. Michael had been listening to *The Lone Ranger* on the radio, an episode in which the Lone Ranger was framed, and now the show seemed to be happening in front of him. The previous month, Ethel’s younger brother, David Greenglass, had been arrested for the same crime. Equally significantly, the Korean war had just begun, which was seen by the US as a fight to stop communism destroying the American way of life. Senator Joseph McCarthy was warning Americans about “homegrown commies”. By the time Julius was arrested, America was in a red panic. A month later, Ethel was seized by the FBI and charged. She called Michael at home and told him that she, like his father, had been arrested.

“So you can’t come home?” he asked.

“No,” she replied.

The seven-year-old screamed.

Julius and **Ethel Rosenberg**, like David Greenglass and his wife, Ruth, were communists. Like a lot of Jews, they became interested in the movement in the 1930s when it seemed like a means to fight against fascism. Unlike many others, they stuck with it after the Soviet Union and Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop non-aggression pact, ostensibly, if not officially, allying the countries. “It’s easy today to criticise them, but these were people who grew up in poverty during the Depression and saw the rise of fascism. They thought they were making the world a better place,” says Sebba. As a historian, Sebba has built up a reputation for writing in particular about women, such as Wallis Simpson. “I do like writing about a woman who has been misunderstood,” she says, and few, according to her, have been more misunderstood than **Ethel Rosenberg**.

The Rosenbergs are almost invariably discussed as a duo, but as her sons have slowly realised, and as Sebba shows in her book, their stories were very different. While Julius had a close relationship with his mother, Sophie, Ethel and her mother, Tessie, had a difficult one. Tessie favoured David, the baby of the family, and for Ethel, communism was a means of educating herself and separating herself from her mother. »

David briefly worked as a machinist at an atomic power laboratory called Los Alamos Laboratory. He was arrested when he was identified as part of a chain that passed on secrets about the technology to the Soviets. David quickly admitted his guilt, and his lawyer advised him that the best thing he could do for himself, and to give his wife immunity, would be to turn in someone else. Then the Rosenbergs were arrested. The FBI believed that Julius was a kingpin who recruited Americans to spy against their own country, and that he had used David to pass on secrets of the atomic bomb to the Russians. The initial allegations against Ethel were that she “had a discussion with Julius Rosenberg and others in November 1944”, and “had a discussion with Julius Rosenberg, David Greenglass and others in January 1945” - in other words, that she talked to her husband and brother. It was feeble stuff, as the FBI knew, yet Myles Lane, the chief assistant attorney for the Southern District of New York, told the press: “If the crime with which she, Ethel, is charged had not occurred perhaps we would not have the present situation in Korea.”

Initially, David testified that his sister had not been involved in any espionage. However, his wife, Ruth, said that Ethel had typed up the information David had given Julius to pass on to the Soviets. David quickly changed his story the week before the trial to corroborate his wife’s version, probably under pressure from Roy Cohn, the ambitious chief assistant prosecutor. This was the key evidence against Ethel, and the chief prosecutor, Irving Saypol, conjured up an image for the jury of Ethel at the typewriter, pounding the keys, striking “blow by blow, against her own country in the interest of the Soviets”. But even with that, Myles Lane, who had publicly laid the blame for the Korean war at Ethel’s feet, admitted privately in a closed-door meeting of the Congressional Joint Committee on Atomic Energy: “The case is not strong against Mrs Rosenberg. But for the purpose of acting as a deterrent, I think it is very important that she be convicted, too, and given a stiff sentence.” FBI director J Edgar Hoover agreed, writing “proceeding against the wife will serve as a lever” to make her husband talk.

At the trial, under Cohn’s questioning, David testified that in September 1945 he gave Julius a sketch and description of the atomic bomb, and that Ethel was deeply involved in the discussions between them. Because he had given names, David was sentenced to 15 years in prison, and ended up serving nine. Ruth was free to stay home and look after their children. The Rosenbergs, who insisted they were innocent, were found guilty. Judge Irving Kaufman carefully considered their sentence. Hoover, aware of the tenuousness of the case against Ethel, and how it would look if America executed a young mother, urged against the death sentence for her, but Cohn argued for it and won.

Michael and Robert never saw the Greenglasses again after the trial, and all Michael remembers of them is: “David looked like a nondescript schlub and Ruth was a cold fish. But is that true, or just a nephew who wants to expose the people who lied about my parents?” he asks. They constantly question their own memories of the past. Robert says that when he thinks of his family before his parents were arrested he has, “this feeling of a golden age, of a wonderful loving family before it was ripped apart. But is that just fantasy?”

Ethel has long been portrayed as a cold woman, one who, as Kaufman said in his sentencing, loved communism more than her children. In reality, as Sebba reveals in her book, she was a particularly devoted mother, with a progressive interest in child psychology. Before her arrest, she regularly saw a child therapist, Elizabeth Phillips, for help with Michael and to learn how to be a better mother. During her three years in prison, she faithfully kept up her subscription to Parents magazine. But when she was arrested, all the aspirations she had harboured for giving her boys the kind of happy childhood that had been denied to her imploded spectacularly. At first the boys lived with her mother, Tessie, who made no secret of her resentment of the situation.

BETTMANN ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

**‘We always had a good time on the prison visits: singing, talking, enjoying ourselves,’ says Michael. He even played hangman with his father, although he didn’t realise the irony until he was an adult**



**Michael, aged 10, left, and Robert, six, at a demonstration to try to save their parents just days before their execution in June 1953**

Things got even worse when they were put in a children’s home. Eventually, Julius’s mother, Sophie, took them in, but two little boys were too much for their frail grandmother to handle. None of their many aunts or uncles would take them, either because they sided with David and Ruth, or they were scared. So they were shipped around to various families. All Ethel could do was write letters to her lawyer, Manny Bloch, desperately laying out her parenting theories in the hope they would somehow be followed (“One cannot behave inconsistently with children...”) For the sake of the boys, she always maintained a happy front when they visited.

“We always had a good time on the prison visits: singing, talking, enjoying ourselves,” says Michael. He even used to play hangman with his father, although he didn’t realise the irony until he was an adult.

The US government said that if Julius gave them names of other spies, and he and Ethel admitted their guilt, their lives would be spared. The Rosenbergs issued a public statement: “By asking us to repudiate the truth of our innocence, the government admits its own doubts concerning our guilt... we will not be coerced, even under pain of death, to bear false witness.” On 16 June 1953, the children were brought to Sing Sing prison in New York State to say goodbye to their parents. Ethel kept up her usual brave appearance, but on this occasion Michael - who was 10 and understood what was happening - was upset by her outward calm. Afterwards, Ethel wrote a letter to her children: “Maybe you thought that I didn’t feel like crying when we were hugging and kissing goodbye huh... Darlings, that would have been so easy, far too easy on myself... because I love you more than I love myself and because I knew you needed that love far more than I needed the relief of crying.” On 19 June, Ethel and Julius wrote their last letter to their children: “We wish we might have had the tremendous joy and gratification of living our lives out with you... Always remember that we were innocent and could not wrong our conscience. We press you close and kiss you with all our strength. Lovingly, Daddy and Mommy.” Just after 8pm that day, the Rosenbergs were executed. They were buried on Long Island, in one of the few Jewish cemeteries that would accept their bodies.

With their extended family still unwilling to look after them (“People later said to me, ‘A Jewish family and no family members took in the kids?!’” says Michael wryly), the boys were eventually adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol, an older leftwing couple. They could finally grow up in anonymity among loving people who told them their parents had been brave and admirable. Abel Meeropol was a songwriter whose biggest hit was »

Strange Fruit, so the boys were raised on the royalties from the most famous song of the civil rights era. "I never thought about our aunts and uncles not taking us in, because living with Abel and Anne, it felt like we won the lottery," says Michael. But memories of their parents were always there. Robert developed a strong physical resemblance to Ethel. "It made me want to hug and kiss him all the time," says Michael.

The boys enjoyed a happy, academic, leftwing upbringing as Meeropols. They told almost no one their real surname, and Robert, who was a toddler when his parents were imprisoned, never considered reverting to it. It was more complicated for Michael, who could remember playing ball games with his father in their apartment ("If it went in Robby's playpen, it was a home run.") Eventually, he decided as an adult that reverting to Rosenberg would be "artificial". It soon didn't matter, because in 1973 the local media unmasked them, ignoring their pleas to retain their anonymity. They decided to put the exposure to good use by campaigning for their parents. They wrote a memoir, *We Are Your Sons*, and sued the FBI and CIA under the Freedom of Information Act, obtaining more than 300,000 once secret documents which they believed proved their parents' innocence. But the story had only started to unfold.

In 1995, the Venona papers were declassified. These were messages sent between Soviet intelligence agencies that had been intercepted and decrypted by US counterintelligence from 1943 to 1980. The Rosenbergs were named in them. Julius, it was now clear, had definitely been spying for the Soviets, so much so that he was given the codename "Antenna" and later "Liberal". David and Ruth Greenglass were also sufficiently productive as spies to be given codenames - "Calibre" and "Wasp". But there was little about Ethel. She didn't have a codename. She was, one cable noted, "a devoted person" - ie a communist - but, the cables also stressed, "[she] does not work", ie she was not a spy. But when describing the recruitment of Ruth, the cable said, "Liberal and his wife recommend her as an intelligent and clever girl."

"At first, I hated that transcript, because it made Julius look guilty of something," says Robert. "But then I realised this was as close to a smoking gun we would ever get, because it said that Julius and Ethel didn't do the thing they were killed for. Ethel didn't work and Julius wasn't an atomic spy, he was a military-industrial spy," he says, meaning that although Julius passed on details of weapons, he wasn't passing on details about the atomic bomb.

Michael was more sceptical of the Venona papers and wondered if they were "CIA disinformation". But in 2008 he finally accepted them when Morton Sobell - who had been convicted for espionage along with the Rosenbergs and served 18 years in Alcatraz - gave an interview to the *New York Times*. He said that he and Julius had been spies together, and confirmed that Julius had not helped the Russians build the bomb. "What he gave them was junk," Sobell said of Julius, probably because he didn't know anything about the bomb. Of Ethel, Sobell said, "She knew what he was doing, but what was she guilty of? Of being Julius's wife." This corroborated what Aleksandr Feklisov, a retired KGB agent, said in 1997 when he admitted that he had been Julius's handler. Feklisov agreed that Julius had passed on military secrets but, "he didn't understand anything about the atomic bomb, and he couldn't help us". Ethel, he said, "had nothing to do with this, she was completely innocent. I think she knew [what her husband was doing], but for that you don't kill people."

Michael has made peace with the revelation that his father was a spy. "As Robby's daughter Jenny said to me, there is a positive to not thinking of our family as hapless victims. We want to be people who take charge of our lives," he says. But he and Robert repeatedly emphasise that their uncle David's claim that he gave Julius atomic information in September 1945 is extremely dubious. Recent research corroborates their argument: Soviet sources state that Julius stopped working for them in February 1945. "[The government]

COURTESY OF THE ROSENBERGS

**'We think that when our father got involved in helping the Soviets, our mother stayed out of it so that if he got arrested, she could take care of us'**



**The Rosenbergs' lawyer, Emanuel Bloch, with Robert and Michael outside Sing Sing prison in New York state in 1953, where they visited their parents**

took a small-fry spy and framed him to be an atomic spy," is Michael's take on his father. Ethel, however, was a very different story.

In 1996, David Greenglass gave an interview in which he finally admitted he lied about his sister: "I told them the story and left her out of it, right? But my wife put her in it. So what am I gonna do, call my wife a liar? My wife is my wife. I mean, I don't sleep with my sister, you know." He added, "I frankly think my wife did the typing, but I don't remember." It is possible that Ethel helped to recruit Ruth and David, but they needed little encouragement. Many Jews of their milieu were communists and the Greenglasses' letters show they were even more enthusiastic about communism than the Rosenbergs. Ruth died in 2008, David in 2014.

Robert launched the campaign for Ethel's exoneration in 2015 - not for a pardon, because that would suggest she had done something wrong, but a full exoneration. He is, he says, "more focused" on his mother than his father. "Perhaps my willingness to separate Ethel from Julius is a sign I don't feel the same way about my parents," he says.

I ask what he means.

"I wonder if there's a little voice in the back of my head that's saying, 'You know, Julius, you really shouldn't have done it, because you had kids,'" he says with some effort. I ask how he feels when he looks back at his father's letters from prison, in which he insisted he was innocent. "I think he was spinning: he wasn't an atomic spy, like they said, but he was a spy, so it wasn't the whole truth. And I think he thought if he confessed to anything they would kill him, so denying everything was the best option. But yes, I have some ambivalences."

Michael, who has clearer memories of his parents, sees his father's behaviour differently: "Should a man not have children if he goes off to war? In those days, that wasn't the thought process. For a Jew and a communist, this was about survival."

Ethel's innocence raises more questions than it settles. First, given that she was a true believer in communism, why *didn't* she join her husband, brother and sister-in-law in spying?

"Robby and I think that when our father got involved in helping the Soviets, our mother stayed out of it so that if he got arrested, she could take care of us," says Michael.

This sounds to me like a son hoping that their parents at least tried to protect their sons. But Julius and Ethel seemed to have little understanding of the danger they were putting the family in. After all, Greenglass was arrested »





Robert and Michael with their adoptive parents, Anne and Abel Meeropol. Abel was a songwriter whose biggest hit was the civil rights anthem *Strange Fruit*

a month before Julius, so they had plenty of time to flee the country, but didn't. Sebba's theory strikes me as more likely: "I think she just had other concerns: she was looking after her children and trying to be present for them. She gave up activism when her children were born. Her main identity was as a wife and a mother, and that's what mattered to her," she says.

So why didn't Julius save Ethel? The FBI was right: he had recruited spies, so he could easily have given names and probably saved her life, and very possibly his own, too.

"Dad's unwillingness to rat out his fellows wasn't about him wanting to be a soldier of Stalin," says Michael. "It was more personal. These were his friends! My father was not going to cooperate with the government, and that's why they arrested my mother. So now he's going to turn around and say, 'OK, I'm going to save my wife by ratting out my friends?' No! He had a naive belief that the American justice system was going to work because half the case against him was a pack of lies, so he thought he could deny everything and save them both." Almost until the end, Julius believed that they wouldn't go to the chair. The government and FBI hoped that, too. They never wanted to kill this young mother and father - they wanted names. After Ethel was killed, the then deputy attorney general William Rogers said, "She called our bluff."

Then there's the question that baffled officials at the time, and has become the defining mystery about her: why did Ethel choose to stay silent and die with Julius, over staying with her children? We know she was deeply in love with her husband, and her letters to him during their imprisonment are filled with her longing to "lift my willing lips to yours". But they are also full of her anxiety about the boys. Yet she said nothing.

"Ethel absolutely did not want to be separated from Julius, and her letters show that she thought she was the one who had done him wrong by introducing him to her ghastly family," says Sebba. "I believe that Ethel thought her life without Julius would have been valueless because her sons would never have respected her, because she would have had to make some kind of confession and name names."

If Ethel did think this, she might have been right.

"As a child, it might have been easier if Julius had cooperated" says Robert. "He'd have been in prison and Ethel would have been released to take care of us - that's the deal the government made with the Greenglasses. But as an adult I would much rather be the child of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg than the child of David and Ruth Greenglass."

Michael and Robert's campaign for their mother's exoneration was struck a major blow with the election of Donald Trump, whose original mentor was none other than Roy Cohn. Like many on the left, the Meeropols were shocked

by Trump's victory. "We just didn't believe people could be so conned [into voting for Trump], but of course they can: the Salem witch trials, the antisemitic blood libel, communists under the bed, all the crap people have believed through the ages," says Michael. It felt, Robert says, as if Cohn had won again, and they knew there was no point in asking Trump, of all presidents, to exonerate their mother. But the Meeropols got their revenge: in 2019, Michael's daughter, Ivy, made a documentary about Cohn, in which Michael features, called *Bully Coward Victim*, in which she made the connection between her grandparents' execution and Trump. "I'm a very revenge-oriented person, but it's never about beating people to a pulp. I like exposure," grins Michael.

The campaign to exonerate Ethel is starting again, and the Meeropols are "optimistic" that President Biden will look at it favourably. They know their argument defies the confines of bite-size headlines, and so is a difficult one to sell to the public: Julius was guilty, although the extent of his guilt was exaggerated in an attempt to scare him into naming names; Ethel was possibly complicit, but not culpable. "There's a very binary idea of the political world, in which people are guilty or innocent, right or wrong. But understanding nuance is essential to understanding how politics work and how society works," says Robert.

I ask why it matters so much to them what people understand. Their parents' lives were destroyed by this case; instead of spending so much of their lives reliving it, why not leave it in the past? "It's personal as well as political," says Robert, emphasising both words. "That the US government invented evidence to obtain a conviction and an execution is a threat to every person in this country, and to not expose that is to become complicit in it. The personal stuff is obvious, but the political stuff is equally powerful."

The biggest question about Ethel for me relates to her sons. After our initial interview, I end up speaking to them, together and separately, several times over the course of a month, mainly because I have so many questions, but also because they are so delightful to talk to: wildly intelligent, always interesting, completely admirable. How on earth did they triumph over such a traumatic childhood? Sebba tells me that she asked the same thing of Elizabeth Phillips, the child therapist Ethel used to consult, whom she interviewed before her death.

"She told me it was down to three things," Sebba says. "She said, 'One, they have an extraordinarily high level of intelligence. Second, they had amazing adoptive parents. But we now know how important those early years of life are, and Ethel must have given those two boys so much in those years that it lasted all their lives. Ethel must have been an extremely good mother.'" ■

**Ethel Rosenberg by Anne Sebba is published by Orion at £20. To order a copy for £17.40, go to [guardianbookshop.com](https://www.guardianbookshop.com). Delivery charges may apply**