

Taking the chair

by Andrew Rosenheim



Ethel Rosenberg: A Cold War Tragedy

ANNE SEBBA

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Julius and Ethel (pictured) Rosenberg have become enduring symbols of Soviet espionage in the West – and of the anti-Communist frenzy that gripped the United States in the early 1950s. Their executions were appalling and unprecedented (they were the first Americans to be executed for espionage during peacetime), and came after a trial that reflected badly on the fairness of America's judiciary. Ethel's guilt remains the object of often bitter contention, though that of Julius, once contested, is indisputable. The couple have come down in history as a package, but in this unusual biography Anne Sebba is determined to unpick Ethel's own story. Her focus is on the personal history of a woman who became an international icon, though there was little in Ethel's background to suggest her future fate.

Ethel grew up in poverty on Manhattan's Lower East Side, in a struggling and unhappy family. Her mother was never supportive, and favoured Ethel's younger brother David who, despite an early closeness to his sister, later provided fabricated testimony that sent her to the electric chair. A good student in school, Ethel became a proficient amateur actress and had a decided talent for singing – for a time she nursed ambitions of an operatic career. She found work in a succession of clerical jobs, and became highly politicised by playing a leading role in a strike at one of her employers.

Sebba's account of these formative years is well done, and she provides a nuanced and appealing profile of the woman soon to be viewed by her own government as an emissary from hell. Sebba's own sympathies are undisguised, and her account can sometimes appear more apologia than exposition – comparing Ethel favourably with an anti-Apartheid activist will be a stretch too far for all but the most Stalinist diehards. But the historical flavour of both pre- and post-war New York is very well conveyed and researched, as is our sense of Ethel before infamy overtook her. She was friendly, bright and, frankly, fairly unremarkable, despite Sebba's contention that she was “exceptional”. What did distinguish her was a determination, even wilfulness, which meant her interests tended to become all-consuming. It also made her especially obdurate when she was later arrested and charged.

Ethel's interest in politics was amplified when she met the Communist supporter Julius Rosenberg, with whom she fell quickly and lastingly in love. The two accepted the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939 without cavil, though they welcomed Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, which brought it into the conflict on the side of the Allies. It was then that Julius' espionage intensified, while Ethel's political activism seemed to recede as she concentrated on being a wife and mother. An interest in the psychology of parenting, unusual for the time, resulted in Ethel's undergoing analysis, and her eldest boy, aged six, was promptly carted off by her to a therapist as well.

Arrested in 1950, along with Julius, on charges of conspiracy, Ethel responded with a stoicism that masked her suffering. At first, her prospects seemed promising, for the evidence of involvement in a conspiracy was skimpy – until the prosecutors pressured her younger brother David to augment his original confession and implicate Ethel directly. Sebba's own position on Ethel's guilt is not always consistent. The overwhelming weight of evidence (including Russian archives released post-glasnost), however, makes it clear that Ethel was at least complicit, if not actively engaged, in Soviet espionage. Ultimately, for all Sebba's efforts, Ethel cannot be disentangled from Julius, since it is for their executions that we will continue to remember them.

This is an absorbing book, but Ethel Rosenberg remains remarkable for what happened to her, not for the woman she was.