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The Rosenberg Case: We Are All Your Children

In 1945, the United States exploded atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan. North American scientists estimated that it would take the Soviet Union, our ally at that time, about four to five years to develop atomic weapons. Politicians and the public estimated that it would take much longer.

In September 1949, President Truman announced the explosion of a Soviet bomb. By that time, the Cold War had begun and by June 1950 it got hot again with the outbreak of the Korean War. Joe McCarthy was witch-hunting Communists—spy hysteria and the search for scapegoats was on.

Julius Rosenberg was arrested in July 1950 and charged with conspiracy to commit espionage. Morton Sobell was kidnapped by U.S. agents in Mexico, brought to the United States, and charged similarly. Ethel Rosenberg, Julius's wife, was arrested in August, and also charged.

The Rosenbergs had been "fingered" by David Greenglass, Ethel's brother. It was called the Spy Story of the Century. The FBI claimed to have cracked an international spy ring that was passing atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. Links were alleged with Klaus Fuchs, a British scientist who had worked on the development of the atomic bomb in Britain and the United States, and who was a self-confessed Russian spy, and also with Harry Gold, who turned himself in and said he was Fuch's American courier.

Ethel Rosenberg, thirty-four, and Julius, thirty-two, were the children of poor Jewish immigrants, who had grown up and still lived on the Lower East Side of New York. They were ardent trade unionists and leftist political activists, probably members of the Communist Party. They had two small sons, Michael, seven, and Robby, three; Morton Sobell came from a similar background.

It was difficult to get lawyers; most were afraid to touch the case. And once Emmanuel Bloch was hired, it was difficult for him to get support. Legal tactics for such a case had not been well developed.

The trial began March 8, 1951. It was eight months

after the arrest, ample time for all three defendants to have been convicted in the press.

The judge was Irving Kaufman (a Jew), then one of the youngest federal judges on the bench. All Jews and liberals were systematically excluded from the jury, which was not sequestered during the trial.

The trial was filled with inconsistencies, flimsy evidence, irregularities, and illegal activities on the part of the government.

The only evidence against Sobell was presented by his former friend Max Elitcher who, with uncorroborated testimony, tied him to the conspiracy, but not to the passing of atomic secrets.

The crucial testimony against the Rosenbergs came from David and Ruth Greenglass. Central to that were sketches allegedly given to Julius by David. The drawings entered as evidence were not the originals; they were done by David from memory before the trial.

There are three critical issues around this supposedly valuable information from Greenglass. (1) Greenglass was a high school graduate with a low-level job at the Los Alamos atomic bomb project—a machinist—hardly qualified to understand the complicated physics involved in atomic research. (2) Most respected scientists have testified that there was no atomic secret; the Soviet Union was developing its own atom bomb. (3) Greenglass's sketches were elementary and useless. In any event, the "secret" of an atomic bomb cannot be described in several sketches.

David and Ruth Greenglass's testimony was to some extent corroborated by Harry Gold, but Gold never claimed to have known the Rosenbergs. Gold was also an admitted perjurer.

One of the main irregularities of the trial, if that is even an accurate word, was Kaufman's partiality to the prosecution. It has since come out in documents released in the Freedom of Information suit filed by the Rosenberg sons, Michael and Robby Meeropol, that Kaufman was involved in ex parte (one-sided) conversations with the prosecution throughout the trial, coaching them on how to best present their case, and in turn being briefed by them. Kaufman has

continued to maintain contact with the FBI on this case up to the present day.

The jury was out for one day and returned convictions for all three. Seven days later, Kaufman imposed the death penalty on the Rosenbergs, stating, "... I believe your conduct in putting into the hands of the Russians the A-bomb years before our best scientists predicted Russia would perfect the bomb has already caused, in my opinion, the communist aggression in Korea, with the resultant casualties exceeding fifty thousand and who knows but that millions more of innocent people may pay the price of your treason. Indeed, by your betrayal you undoubtedly have altered the course of history to the disadvantage of our country. . . I feel I must pass such sentence upon the principals in this diabolical conspiracy to destroy a God-fearing nation . . ." The death sentence was supposed to have persuasive value, particularly for Ethel. Morton Sobell was given thirty years, and Kaufman gratuitously recommended no parole.

The Rosenbergs maintained their innocence until their death two years later on June 19, 1953. During those two years, they were kept isolated in the Death House in Sing Sing. Although new evidence was uncovered between 1951 and 1953, all their appeals were turned down. The case was never reviewed by a higher court. A worldwide movement of notables and masses of people for clemency developed.

On the day before the execution, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas ordered a stay of execution, which would have meant life until the Supreme Court's fall session in October, 1953. The Chief Justice, Fred M. Vinson, called the Court into extraordinary session on June 19, 1953, and vacated the stay. Eisenhower refused to issue an executive order of clemency. Judge Kaufman pushed the hour of execution up from 11 p.m. to 8 p.m. so as not to desecrate the Jewish Sabbath.

After the Rosenberg execution, the defense movement turned its attention to Morton Sobell, who had begun to serve his thirty-year sentence at Alcatraz, the harshest of all federal penitentiaries. All his appeals were turned down, and he was not released from prison until 1969, eighteen years and five months after his arrest.

Michael and Robby Rosenberg, after many legal hassles, were legally adopted by Anne and Abe Meeropol, supporters of their parents. They assumed the name Meeropol; their identity and the trauma of their childhood were carefully concealed for the next twenty years.

In 1965, Walter and Miriam Schneir published Invitation to an Inquest, which disclosed new evidence. In 1973, Louis Nizer published The Implosion Conspiracy, which proclaimed the guilt of the Rosenbergs and used their death-house letters without the permission of Robby and Michael. It was at this point that the sons decided to make public their identity and sue Nizer for invasion of privacy. That suit is alive to this day.

In June of 1974, the first public tribute to the Rosenbergs in twenty years was held at Carnegie Hall in New York. Several months before that, the National Committee to Reopen the Rosenberg Case (NCRRC) got rolling.

In February of 1975, the Meeropols made a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) for the government files in their parents' case; in July they filed an FOIA suit against the government.

Only the tip of the FOIA iceberg has been released thus far, but even so it reveals more illegal and underhanded maneuvers than were known before.

June of 1978 will mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the execution, and the NCRRC and local committees around the country, are planning to mark that date with demonstrations and other political activities.

I remember very clearly sitting with my friend Susan in my family's 1952 black Plymouth on Avenue S and East 12th Street in Flatbush, trying to figure out what we could do to save the Rosenbergs. We were nine and ten. In some sense, I have been looking for answers since.

Michael and Robby Meeropol may be the only two blood children that Ethel and Julius Rosenberg bore, but there are thousands of us now in our thirties who spiritually are the children of the Rosenbergs, and the sisters and brothers of Michael and Robby. The Rosenberg execution was an apocalyptic event which created a collective consciousness and became the symbol of an entire historical period. In the days of the fifties, when people with progressive ideas hid their books (even Modern Library editions of *Das Kapital*), changed their names, went underground, and were imprisoned for having communist thoughts, the Rosenbergs became the archetypal victims of post-World War II American repression. Adults were afraid of what would happen to them if they agitated too much, and children were afraid they would lose their parents, as Michael and Robby had.

This collective consciousness did not fade; it was central in shaping people's perceptions of the world, and affected both personal and political decisions. Over the years, recalling our individual memories of the execution was a form of bonding for many of us of the New Left, particularly if we came out of Old Left backgrounds.

One friend, whose mother was an organizer for the Socialist Workers Party, told me how she would come home from school every day in 1953 before her mother got home from work, pull a chair over to the refrigerator in order to be able to turn on the radio that sat on top of it, and listen to the news as the day of the execution grew closer. Another friend told me of hearing about the Rosenberg execution while his father, one of the eleven Communist Party leaders convicted under the Smith Act in 1949, was underground; another told of overhearing his father say to his mother, as they were working through some marital difficulties, "I don't want our family to suffer the same pain as the Rosenbergs." Another friend, only five at the time, has an early memory of a meeting in her parent's house to plan childcare while the adults attended a Rosenberg demonstration in Washington, D.C.

And what of Ethel and Julius's contemporaries, our parents' generation? The Rosenberg-Sobell case was a struggle and a pain that both generations shared. A seventy-seven-year-old woman in Atlanta, born a sharecropper, collected signatures on petitions for the Rosenbergs in Atlanta after dark, because it was an illegal activity. She talked to me of sitting in front of the television with friends the night of the execution, wiped out; she cried even now as she recalled that evening. A fifty-five-year-old woman in Los Angeles, who had been a Communist Party organizer in the fifties, talked of what it was like to organize in those days—with police on her neck every minute, every move a risk. We shared an urgent need to remember those days, to pass on our experiences, and to somehow integrate it into our present existence.

The fifties nostalgia would have us remember that period as Elvis Presley and bobby sox; although we took all that in, our memories focus on different names and issues.

The Rosenberg execution was the first solid political lesson that many of us learned. And we got several messages from it: (1) You can get killed for being a "commie," and that extended to having any progressive or out of the ordinary ideas. (2) It seemed worse if you were Jewish. (3) You *can* fight back.

People can and do organize mass movements, even if those movements fall short of their goal. And when people are persecuted, they can maintain their principles. The Rosenberg case gave us a healthy respect both for the power of the state to repress, destroy, and deny people's movements, and for the power of the people to demand justice.

My connection to the Rosenberg-Sobell case is rooted in my family. I was born in 1942 to progressive middle-class Jewish parents. I have come to characterize myself as a "pink diaper baby." "Red diapers" were what children of the Communist Party parents were born with. My parents were not C.P. members, but did belong to the American Labor Party and the Teachers' Union in the forties/fifties which had heavy Communist leadership and participation. And they did defense work for the Rosenbergs.

I have been very tied to a Jewish cultural identity, but not to Jewish religion as such. My grandparents' native tongues (mama loshen) were Russian and Yiddish; my parents were native-born, but spoke and read Yiddish. Several of my relatives planted trees for me in Israel at my birth, and I always imagined that there were trees somewhere in Israel that had my name on them. We celebrated Passover and Chanukah with large energetic family gatherings in which special holiday food figured prominently. I was a dropout from a Yiddish school (folkshul) at an early age. My brother was bar mitzvah; I did not pursue the female equivalent of bat mitzvah.

Out of my secular Jewish upbringing, I learned to believe that education was important and that social injustice was intolerable. I supported the Brooklyn Dodgers in large part because they hired the first Black player, Jackie Robinson, and because they were the perennial underdogs, until they won their first incredible World Series victory. I was always told that I could do anything I wanted, although it was clearly my task in life to be a mother and wife at some point.

The fifties were not easy days to grow up in. My earliest memories include sitting in front of the television set with my family during Easter Week and watching the Army-McCarthy hearings, learning of family friends who were losing their jobs because of anti-Communist hysteria, being shlepped around with my mother from meeting to meeting, where, as president of the PTA, she was fighting for everything from getting a traffic light on the school corner to the repeal of the anti-Communist Feinberg Law. I remember the preparations that were made for surviving an atomic attack—the dog tags we wore around our necks

(that even I in the fifth grade could bend with ease) and the air raid drills in which we either crouched fetus-like under our desks or stood facing away from the windows in the hallway. I remember lying in bed at night in the dark listening to the adults talking about the atomic bomb and being overwhelmed with some cosmic, bottomless fear of destruction. I remember going to school the morning after the Rosenberg execution, the blaring headlines in the *Daily News*, and being shocked beyond response when Anthony, the little boy next to me, said, "I'm glad they got it." The Rosenbergs were like family; he was talking about me.

Anthony was Italian Catholic and I was Jewish. His glee and the horror it evoked in me were symptomatic of the sociological composition of our neighborhood, and spoke to the larger community as well. Anti-semitism, as well as anti-Communism, played a large part in determining public opinion in the Rosenberg-Sobell case. Flatbush, near Kings Highway, was primarily lower-middle to middle-class Jewish families. I thought almost the whole world was Jewish, and was not really disabused of that idea until high school. There was a predominantly Italian Catholic neighborhood, which from my vantage point was "on the other side" of Coney Island Avenue. Before Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah became official school holidays in New York, the public schools were virtually empty on those days.

I understand now that there was a class as well as a religious and cultural breakdown. The Jews were mobilely striving upward, a process in which education played an important part. The honor classes were heavily dominated by Jewish kids. I always did well in school, but secretly craved to be a "hood," wear sling-back shoes, tight black straight skirts, and be tough. I had a heavy crush on Audrey, who always wore cowboy boots, lived across the trolley car tracks that ran down Coney Island Avenue, and had a pug nose which I tried to reproduce on myself, much as one of the sisters in *Little Women*, by pinching my nose in. I had an Italian boyfriend whose claim to fame was that his brother was in a Korean POW camp, it being the time of the Korean War. My parents were not too thrilled with that romance.

I remember that my father would never let us put our electric (!) menorah in the living room window, afraid that some of the *goyim* would throw a rock through it. I was upset by that, because I wanted to share in the electric bulb glitter of the holiday season. I think that my father's cautiousness was overdone,

but I also recognize that he came from a generation that was much closer to the pogroms of their parents, and the ovens of the thirties and forties, than I was or am.

I try to understand all of this as I grow older. I talk to my Italian friends. I think about Sacco and Vanzetti on the fiftieth anniversary of their execution. And I understand that not only is there oppression visited upon the minorities by the dominant ruling class, but that there is also mistrust between the minorities. It is a racist and classist society in which all of us buy that ideology in some way or another.

That ideology also divides the ethnic minority against itself. The Jewish community was bitterly split over the Rosenberg-Sobell case. The prosecutors were Jewish; the judge was Jewish; the defendants were Jewish. We were eating each other up.

It took a while for defense work to get into gear, but once it did, the radical Jewish community lined up behind the Rosenbergs and Sobell. In the atmosphere of anti-Communist hysteria that marked the fifties of Joe McCarthy, the "good" Jews (read: most of the "Jewish establishment") sought to get points by dissociating themselves from the "bad" Jews. They saw this case as the ultimate *shonda* (disgrace) to the Jewish community.

The government was not unaware of this split. In a memorandum never implemented, it was suggested that the Rosenbergs be offered commutation of the death sentence in exchange for a public statement condemning Soviet anti-semitism.

It seems that this intra-group antagonism is a familiar dynamic for many minority groups. Black on black crime is another indication that it is easier to harm your own than the real powers who make your life miserable. I am reminded of a similar split in the Jewish community in which I was involved in 1968—the twelve-week-long teacher strike in New York City. The United Federation of Teachers, overwhelmingly Jewish, called the strike. I, and other young Jewish (and of course many non-Jewish, mostly Third World) teachers, did not honor the strike and continued working because we felt its motivation was a racist attempt to destroy Third World community control of certain schools. The established Jewish community was vehemently in favor of the strike. They saw the community control issue as a threat to the existence of the union, and to the position of economic stability which teachers (largely Jewish) had achieved. As the strike went on, they also reacted to criticisms of the Jewish community which had anti-semitic content.

In my family, where both my parents and I were teachers, we made a predictable split. I was living at home with my mother at the time, while my father was in the hospital recovering from a heart attack. Since the strike was an off-again-on-again thing, my mother and I would awaken in the morning to the early news to find out whether the strike was on, in which case I would go to work and she would go to the hospital, or if it was off, in which case we would reverse those activities. It was the first time that I crossed a picket line, violating a principle I learned from my parents which stems from a Jewish identity with union activity and social justice.

This split within the Jewish community is a very complicated issue, and I certainly need to understand it better. Several graduate students are doing research on the response of the Jewish community to the Rosenberg-Sobell persecution, and I look forward to reading their papers. It is important for my understanding of my Jewish roots.

The secular Jewish commitment to social justice led me, along with others of my generation, into the movements for social change of the sixties and seventies. I am aware now, as I was not then, that we were able to build contemporary movements for social justice in part because Ethel and Julius Rosenberg took a stand of non-collaboration, and slowed down the tide of state repression with their lives. The integrity of the Rosenbergs and Morton Sobell, as well as that of hundreds of thousands of people who demonstrated for them at a time when it was incredibly risky to do so, began to create the environment in which the multiple struggles of the sixties could blossom.

I was on my first picket line in front of Woolworth's during my sophomore year in college, supporting the sit-ins in North Carolina. I participated in the rent strike movement in Harlem, did civil rights/voter registration work in West Tennessee for three summers, organized against the war in Viet Nam, became a feminist and then a lesbian-feminist and continued my political work in the women's community/movement.

Much of my past and my present, of which the Rosenberg-Sobell case is core, came together when I was brought to trial in January 1977 on federal charges of passport fraud and conspiracy to commit passport fraud—seven-year-old charges stemming from my anti-Viet Nam war activities with Weatherman-SDS in 1970.

I found myself feeling very vulnerable after my

conviction, and in the six-week period between conviction and sentencing, I searched for strength in a number of ways. One was to reach out for my roots which extend in different directions. I had for some time been exploring my Jewishness. Living in Atlanta, Georgia since 1970, I had experienced for the first time what it was like to be in an environment in which Jews were considered weird and alien, and in which we were certainly a minority. That made me identify as a Jew more strongly than before, and my felony conviction put me in touch with my roots on the Jewish Left.

Upon returning to Atlanta after the trial, I found that Robby Meeropol was going to be speaking. I had been wanting to make contact with Michael and Robby ever since they publicly reclaimed their family identity. Michael and I had been graduate students at the University of Wisconsin in the sixties; someone had told me that he was one of the Rosenberg sons. Because Michael and Robby were not yet open about their identity, I didn't talk to Michael about it then, although I felt an immediate kinship. When I told that to Robby in Atlanta, he said that in the course of speaking around the country, they have been told similar stories by many people. I looked at Robby and saw Ethel Rosenberg's face, the face I had seen only in photographs; there is a phenomenal family resemblance.

It really did happen! and this is really me and him talking twenty-four years later! It is almost more than I can take in at the moment, although there is also something very natural about it. Talking to Robby and hearing him speak taps my history, taps the history of repression and struggle in this country, taps into a collective strength, helping me in my moment of struggle with the U.S. government.

By the time I am about to enter the federal court for sentencing, I have moved from weakness to strength, from fear to anger. I am preparing a strong statement of beliefs for the time I am permitted to speak before sentencing is pronounced. I talk about my childhood in the fifties and I invoke the memory of the Rosenbergs. I talk about how the execution left an indelible mark on me which I carry to this day and intend to keep with me forever. I feel very powerful at that moment. I have spoken their name out loud—in a court of law. It has left that secret individual place where I have kept it and shared it from time to time with trusted and understanding friends, and said it Out Loud! And it strikes a responsive chord in the friends and supporters who have come

to the courtroom to hear the sentencing, for they too have kept that name close to them. It is part of our collective history. I do not know how the Judge receives it.

Saying secrets out loud, first to yourself, then to friends, then to the world, is an act of empowerment. I understand how it must have been for Michael and Robby. It empowers not only the individual, but others—connected—outward in ripples from the center.

I connect Michael and Robby's public reclamation of their family name with a metaphor with which I am becoming familiar lately, that of "coming out." Michael and Robby have been "closet" Rosenbergs for so long, just as many of my sisters and brothers were closet male homosexuals and lesbians. And coming out is a powerful and painful process—at the same moment.

I am given a year's probation. Deciding to appeal the conviction after sentencing, I call Helen and Morton Sobell from Boston, and ask if I can come to talk with them on my way home to Atlanta; they agree. I try to absorb that Morton Sobell was one of the longest-held political prisoners in the United States and that his imprisonment was eclipsed by the horror of the death penalty.

My roots. The memory, emotionally frozen for these many years, becomes human. I meet the Sobells who had been names and symbols for me. I start to learn how to make that memory a part of my life, how to integrate it into my politics and my personal identity.

Although the penalty I have received pales in comparison to that which was imposed on the Rosenbergs, Morton Sobell, and other political prisoners then and now, I understand that it all stems from the system's need to repress political dissent and any serious attempts to change the status quo.

As I start public work on my appeal, I help organize a commemoration for the twenty-fourth anniversary of the Rosenberg execution in Atlanta. Several of us working on it grew up in the Jewish Left. We have all held the Rosenbergs dear. We have each, in our private way, marked the 19th of June anniversary. For the last several years, I have lit *yorzeit* (memorial) candles. But this year—why is it different?—we come together to create a public observance. We make some of our first contacts in the established Jewish community, a place where none of us has previously spent time or felt very comfortable. The Hillel rabbi helps us to reserve the Jewish Community

Center. About a hundred and thirty people come, many of them associated with the Center. Young and old Jews come to find out what this case is all about, or to renew their acquaintance with it—also non-Jews. We are very pleased with the turn-out; there is more interest in the Rosenberg-Sobell case than we dared hope. Our group decides to continue working on the case throughout the coming year.

I speak at a Rosenberg rally in New York City. We are picketing in front of the Federal Courthouse at Foley Square, where the trial was held and where Kaufman now sits as the Chief Judge of the Second Federal Circuit Court of Appeals. At that very moment, in that same courthouse, a Chicano activist from the Southwest is being stripped of his civil rights because he is refusing to testify before a grand jury. It brings to mind the brutal cross-examination of Ethel Rosenberg, in which the prosecutor sought to establish her guilt by impugning her taking the Fifth Amendment before the grand jury. Grand jury abuse still runs rampant. In recent years, it has been used to harass the gay community and the Hispanic movement. The legacy of the Rosenberg-Sobell case stretches into the present.

As I speak to the protesters, I feel I am reclaiming a piece of my childhood and of our collective history. Although I am thirty-five, it is in part the little girl who speaks, still crying out with a child's terror and incomprehension. I realize that while in 1953 I was the age of Robby and Michael, now a generation has passed and I am the age of Ethel and Julius at the time of the execution.

Still later I visit with Robby and Elli Meeropol in Springfield, Massachusetts. In an earlier phone conversation I had asked Robby if many people want to come and visit—he says no. Perhaps that is out of respect for his privacy. The impact of my recent conviction has created an urgency which pushes me beyond such considerations. Elli, with Beth Levine, has written an article on Ethel Rosenberg which appeared several years ago in a woman's newspaper called *off our backs*. This was important because in the last seven years I have identified myself primarily as a lesbian-feminist. Elli and Robby help me with some fundraising for my appeal. Who would have thought twenty-four years ago, when I was a little Jewish kid in Brooklyn, that in 1977 I would be a convicted felon, doing work on the Rosenberg case in Atlanta, Georgia, and the Rosenberg children would be helping me in my defense work!

I talk to my family about the Rosenberg execution.

My brother, four years older than I, remembers next to nothing. I am stunned, because for me it is one of the core memories of my childhood. It has left indelible memory prints on my brain and heart, hardened into scar tissue. We are different in so many other ways; why am I surprised? My mother remembers and is still sympathetic. She worked on the Rosenberg case in the fifties, but has removed herself almost totally from political activism. I have to give myself permission to nurture my memories and not require a family consensus to validate my perceptions. I think it is lucky that Robby and Michael share a common urgency and vision about vindicating their parents' honor.

I think that if the Rosenbergs had lived, they would have gone through the same *tsuris* (travail) and joy with their children that all Jewish families experience. But they were not given that opportunity. In a sense their family unit has been frozen in time, in that summer of 1950. We remember them only in those few photos that have been published. Morton Sobell at least watched his son grow toward maturity over nineteen years during visits to the various federal prisons in which he was incarcerated.

On the whole, we are a terribly ahistorical people, and as long as that is true, we cannot apply the lessons of the past to our future. It is important that we remember. Even today, in 1977, the Viet Nam war is fading fast from people's memories. Many do not know of the Rosenberg-Sobell case, either because they are too young or because of the environment in which they grew up. It has taken twenty years for the cultural mass media in this country to begin to deal with those fifties of which I am a product: Lillian Hellman's appearance at the Academy Award presentation; the three-hour TV special on Joe McCarthy; Woody Allen's *The Front* (which I saw two times, and realized in dismay that many people in the audience did not even recognize the pictures of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg at the beginning of the movie). I have a sense of urgency about making the names Rosenberg and Sobell household words, as well as raising consciousness about their case. It is critical to our understanding of the present situation; and unless we take hold of our history, we cannot control our future.

Ethel Rosenberg wrote to her sons on the day of the execution:

Dearest Sweethearts, my most precious children,

Only this morning it looked like we might be together again after all. Now that this cannot be,

I want so much for you to know all that I have come to know. Unfortunately, I may write only a few simple words; the rest of your own lives must teach you, even as mine taught me.

At first, of course, you will grieve bitterly for us, but you will not grieve alone. That is our consolation and it must eventually be yours.

Eventually, too, you must come to believe that life is worth the living. Be comforted that even now, with the end of ours slowly approaching, that we know this with a conviction that defeats the executioner!

Your lives must teach you, too, that good cannot really flourish in the midst of evil; that freedom and all the things that go to make up a truly satisfying and worthwhile life, must sometimes be purchased very dearly. Be comforted, then, that we were serene and understood with the deepest kind of understanding, that civilization had not as yet progressed to the point where life did not have to be lost for the sake of life; and that we were comforted in the knowledge that others would carry on after us.

We wish we might have had the tremendous joy and gratification of living our lives with you. Your Daddy who is with me in the last momentous hours, sends his heart and all the love that is in it for his dearest boys. 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
Julie Ethel

P.S. to Manny: The Ten Commandments religious medal and chain—and my wedding ring—I wish you to present to our children as a token of our undying love.

Later in that same day, she wrote a last note to her lawyer:

Dearest person, you and _____* must see to my children—Tell him it was my last request of him . . .

All my heart I send to all who hold me dear—I am not alone—and I die with "honor and dignity"—knowing my husband and I must be vindicated by history. You will see to it that our names are

*The psychiatrist who had visited Ethel in prison.



Picasso from Michael & Robby Rosenberg
Picasso

kept bright and unsullied by lies—as you did while we lived so wholeheartedly, so unstintingly—you did everything that could be done—We are the first victims of American Fascism.

Love you, Ethel

I have a fantasy that in 1978 there will be massive protests to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Rosenberg execution, and that there will be participation by women and men of all ages. This is a link we can forge across generations. I think particularly of those of us who were kids in the fifties. We already have been a visible part of the history to which the Rosenbergs looked for vindication. My intention is that we will continue to be—in 1978 and beyond.

Note: Ethel Rosenberg's letters quoted with permission of Robby and Michael Meeropol.

For further information on the Rosenberg-Sobell case, refer to:

- We Are Your Sons*, by Robby and Michael Meeropol, Houghton Mifflin, 1975
- On Doing Time*, Morton Sobell, Scribners, 1974
- Invitation to an Inquest: A New Look at the Rosenberg-Sobell Case*, Walter and Miriam Schneir, Delta, 1965
- The Rosenberg Story*, Virginia Gardner, Masses and Mainstream, 1954
- The Testament of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg*, Cameron and Kahn, 1954
- The Judgment of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg*, John Wexley, Cameron and Kahn, 1954
- Death House Letters of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg*, Jero Publishing, 1953

or write to:

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