

Life After Death

The Sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg:

On June 19, 1953, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were electrocuted in the Death House at Sing Sing for having committed what the FBI still calls “the Crime of the Century.” They had stolen the secret of the atom bomb, it was said, and given it to the Russians, thereby making possible the Korean War. To the end they maintained their innocence and refused to implicate others; their silence cost them their lives.

The Rosenbergs were survived by two sons. Shortly after their parents’ execution, Michael and Robert Rosenberg disappeared from the public eye and were forgotten. For 20 years they lived in anonymity and silence, until recently, when they decided to surface quietly in order to defend their parents’ innocence. Today they are grown men, fathers of families, teachers at a small New England college. They are known by the patronym of Meeropol.

At first glance, the Death House at Sing Sing seems far removed, both psychologically and politically, from Springfield, Mass., which Michael and Robby Meeropol have made their home. But the shades of the distant prison house are felt in this old, decaying New England industrial town. June 1953 does not seem so very long ago, nor is their childhood a distant, alien world.

Michael Meeropol is 30 years old now. He remembers a lot. He has a friendly smile, a warm sense of humor, teaches economics at Western New England College, and is working on his PhD dissertation. Annie, his wife, is a teacher as well. They share housework and both take care of their two children: shy, blond-haired Veronica Ethel, who looks like Annie; and strong, outgoing Gregory Julian, an adopted black child. Michael works hard, but manages to spend much time with his family, and occasionally plays the guitar, though not as often as he would like.

Robby is 26, and his memories of the execution are not as clear as Michael’s. He is dark, deliberate and, in his own

view, clandestine. He is more reserved than Michael; his emotions are deeper beneath the surface. Robby Meeropol originally came to Springfield from the Midwest in hopes of doing working-class organizing, but he now teaches anthropology at Western New England College, which has not yet registered any shock at having two sons of the Rosenbergs on its faculty. His wife, Elli, is active in the local women’s movement, and they have a daughter named Jenny. The family lives in a commune with three other adults. It is a large house, with a vegetable garden in the backyard during the summer. In the living room, there are lots of books and records, and in the second-floor bedroom hangs an original sketch of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, signed by the artist, Pablo Picasso. The figures look confident and dignified; the drawing is a reminder that the Rosenbergs have had friends throughout the world, including Picasso, Albert Einstein, the children of Sacco and Vanzetti, and millions of lesser-known people.

When their parents were executed in 1953, Michael Rosenberg was ten years old and Robby was six, and they became fugitives at an early age. They learned while still young to protect each other, to hide their identities, to deny the probing questions of adults who knew the truth. In 1953—after three years in limbo—they went to live with Ann and Abel Meeropol, older radicals and professional theater people who went by the stage name of Allen.

The Meeropols made it their business to shield the boys from publicity and notoriety. And so they grew up in the semi-underground, schizophrenic world of the red-diaper babies in the 1950s, got involved in the Movement in the 1960s, and became family men, radicals and teachers in the 1970s. In that time they never publicly acknowledged themselves as the children of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg—a secret known only by their families, close friends and few others.

During the last two years, they looked on with mixed feelings as their lives were fictionalized in a novel called *The Book of Daniel*. Then Doubleday celebrated the 20th anni-

Jonah Raskin is author of The Mythology of Imperialism (Delta paperback).

by Jonah Raskin

versary of the execution by publishing Louis Nizer's *The Implosion Conspiracy*. Michael and Robby watched it climb and settle comfortably into the best-seller lists, and as Nizer's myths, distortions and misinterpretations went unchallenged, they grew pessimistic. It was, they felt, like watching their parents being tried and executed again. "Throughout last year," says Michael, "with people reading the distortions in Nizer's book, I felt that the other side was winning . . . Nizer makes my parents to be '60s political stylists. He misuses the letters, says they were the equivalent of Jerry Rubin tearing off his robes and stomping on them on the Dick Cavett Show. He says that they postured in the letters, that they loved the publicity. But I think that is a misunderstanding of their life and values. . . ."

Their life and values: for the first time in 20 years, Robby and Michael Meeropol publicly identified themselves as Robby and Michael Rosenberg and brought suit against Louis Nizer—for violating the copyright laws in his use of their parents' *Death House Letters* and for misusing the copyrighted material "... to deceive . . . and to impress the public with the authenticity . . . of false, fictitious, and distorted writings." They took Nizer to court, they say, to correct "this grievous wrong."

[MEMORIES]

When Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested in 1950, the family lived in Knickerbocker Village, a housing project on the Lower East Side. "It was a big, beautiful, brick apartment building," says Michael, "with a playground; the K and K luncheonette inside so you didn't have to go out on the street. It was nice. We didn't have a TV, we never had a car, but we had a cheap phonograph, records, and a radio of sorts. But remember, my father owned a machine shop. Of course, he was paying off his debts. He was, if you'll pardon the expression, *petit bourgeois*. . . ."

Michael's memories of the period are sharper than Robby's. "I have a weird kind of memory that fixes things in my mind, I can remember details." But both have become archeologists into their Korean War past, probing layer after layer of an historical record buried deep in their subconscious. Something or someone often jars their memory: "I know that my father was a hell of an intellectual," says Michael. "According to Morty Sobell he was more like a Talmudic scholar than an activist, always thinking, reading, studying, discussing things. That's what others have said about him, but he came across to me as someone who liked to play baseball. He played baseball with me in the house. If I hit the ball into my kid brother's crib it was a double; if I hit it out the window it was an out. It seems to me that Julius was always at home, or taking me somewhere. It's hard to imagine he was working. We used to go for rides on the Third Avenue El, to South Ferry, and then on the Staten Island Ferry, and to the Bronx Zoo. Occasionally I went to his machine shop on Houston Street. I can remember playing with magnets." They were avid baseball fans, and supported the perennial underdog, the Bums, the Brooklyn Dodgers—mainly because of Jackie Robinson.

Some accounts portray Julius Rosenberg as a committed ideologue who put much effort into indoctrinating his

eldest son. Michael disagrees: "I think I was too young to be indoctrinated . . . The closest I came to indoctrination was playing a 'Bridge' game. I was a bridge. All the war convoys would go over me and when the fascists went over the bridge I raised up and my father said, 'Great, you killed the fascists, shake hands.' I remember the smile on his face. I remember that he taught me that fascists were enemies."

Michael remembers Ethel Rosenberg as "short, dark, and . . . hairy, though not her face. She was artistically oriented, loved to sing, and I think she played the guitar. She had a great voice. Also, she spoiled me rotten, doting on me. Can you believe it, they were poor people on the Lower East Side, and they bought a piano for our tiny apartment and set me to work taking lessons. I remember playing 'From the Wigwag' in that apartment."

Then, in 1950, the Rosenberg family was torn apart. "In August," recalls Michael, "my mother was arrested. I've read and I've been told that I screamed on the phone but I don't remember it. That night a woman who was hired for the day stayed with us, and the next day she took us to Ethel's mother, who just took care of us. She wanted to get rid of us immediately. She held on to us in September and October, and we missed a lot of school, and then she dumped us at the Hebrew Children's Home in the Bronx. I hated it. Most of the hired people around us were young black women. A young high school kid was our counselor. The black women were paid miserably, and they used to take out their aggression on us. They would beat us up if we were at all sassy, and since we were pretty troubled, we were often sassy. My problem was that I was a finicky eater. I refused to eat, but Robby picked it up and started to eat, and I would say, 'No, Robby, don't.' After that they separated us, and he learned to eat. He wasn't as set in his ways as I was.

"When a new girl was hired, I was pointed out as a trouble maker. They told her how to deal with me: 'He likes bread. If he doesn't eat everything, we give him nothing.' I hated it, but I also started to play with the other kids. That lasted from November to June [1951]. Then they set up a home with my father's mother, and a registered nurse. When I got into her house, I was wild out of my mind, and my grandmother couldn't control me, and when the nurse tried to [control me], grandma interceded and finally drove the nurse away. We stayed there for the whole summer, went to day camp in the summer, went to school, had a bad year at school, a horrible, horrible year. The year at the shelter, we went to PS 30 in the Bronx and that was a good year. Kids liked me, I got along with the teacher. In PS 132 in Manhattan it was horrible. My aggression showed up in bad penmanship. My conduct was terrible. Grandma couldn't handle me by then."

Robby lacks Michael's clear recollections of this period, but he does remember Mrs. Rosenberg—Julius's mother—and the impact the trial had on her. "She seemed to be a rather typical Jewish grandmother, fairly ignorant . . . I think she was destroyed by the trial . . . she became senile, fell apart and died, when she was about 73. She was old enough for them to say that she died of old age, but it seemed to me that she was really too young. She always talked about her son being killed: she had a special place for Julius in her heart."

Michael says he was a wild child at his grandmother's, and he was just beginning to learn about the world and the way it viewed him as the son of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. At first, he recalls, he was "very open about who I was. I was young and naive. I told Phil, my first new friend on my grandmother's block, who I was. I went to his house and I also told his parents. They listened carefully when I told them that my parents were innocent. They were friendly, and nice, and it made me feel good. My friend Phil told me he had another friend named Lawrence who was a blabbermouth, that he talked too much, and that I shouldn't tell him. But my reaction was, 'Oh, that's great. I'll tell him, and he'll tell the whole neighborhood that my parents are innocent and we'll get friends to help.' We told Lawrence. One day when I was at his house watching TV, his mother asked, 'What's your name?' 'Michael Rosenberg,' I said. 'Are you Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's son?' she asked. 'That's right,' I said, 'and if you read *The National Guardian* you'll see that they are innocent.' She shouted, 'Don't talk to me about it.'

"Then they started to work on Lawrence. His older brother said, 'Look, Lawrence, are you a loyal American?' And the mother said to me, chasing me out of the house, 'It's time for you to go now.' She turned to Lawrence and said, 'I don't want you hanging around with your communist friend anymore.' And to me, 'Don't let me catch you hanging around Lawrence anymore.'

"I was an eight-year-old kid, so I just ran home crying. That was the beginning of knowing to keep my trap shut. It's funny that the first kid was sympathetic. It was good luck. If I had been lucky enough to meet a few friends then I might not have been so discouraged by Lawrence's family. I might not have shut up."

[THE TRIAL]

Meanwhile, Julius and Ethel were in prison, and Robby and Michael went to visit them often. "I remember flashes crystal clear," says Robby. "I can remember driving up to the prison, the Hawthorne Circle, which is no longer there. But I don't remember what the prison looked like. I remember my brother playing hangman with my father. I never did. I remember a couple of visits—quite subdued and the weird thing about them was how normal they were. It was like everything was so covered up, because to admit how freaky the whole situation was would have been unbearable. I don't remember a lot, and maybe I repressed it."

Michael, however, was old enough at the time to know what was happening and to try to figure it out. "I was told by others that they were charged and found guilty of being spies. My initial reaction at the time was that that was stupid. 'There is no such thing as stealing the secret of the atom bomb,' I thought. I think that was a normal reaction. If only Manny Bloch had brought out that point in court! What happened was that from 1949 on, scientists were drowned out by the politicians who kept saying that there was a secret, that the Russians had stolen it. Once when I went to visit my parents in jail I asked them point blank, 'Are you innocent?' Later on I found out that they weren't too happy about my having to ask them, as you can ima-

gine. 'Of course we are,' they said, and I was satisfied."

They were innocent, he believed, but they were in jail and the lawyers couldn't get them out. He decided that he himself would be a lawyer when he grew up. "I visited my father in the Death House and told him I'd become a lawyer and free him. There were a lot of fine lawyers around at the time—Vincent Hallinan, Charles Garry—but they didn't have anything to do with the case." It was a point that bothered him—the failure of the great radical lawyers and the Communist Party to rally early to the Rosenbergs' defense—and he devoted a lot of thought to it in the years that followed. "My understanding is that the CP reacted to them like the plague. They were concerned with *their* own cases, the Martinsville Seven, Willie McGee. Left-wing lawyers berated my parents' lawyer Manny Bloch for taking the Rosenberg case. 'How dare you,' they said, 'the Left has got to be clear of this case.' The CP was concerned with the Smith Act defendants and the party people who had gone underground. *The Daily Worker* gave it very little publicity. Go back and read the *Worker*; you'll see that while the Committee to Secure Justice for the Rosenbergs was struggling along, while the *National Guardian* was running its series about the trial, there was nothing, nothing, nothing. They gave no support; it's as simple as that. Later on, when it was too late, they joined the bandwagon."

He wonders today if a better legal representation would have freed his parents, and, in a way, he fears the answer. "The 'lawyer' problem is of crucial importance to me. I hope it's not true that a better lawyer could have saved Julius and Ethel. I love and revere the memory of Manny Bloch. But I look back at the trial now and see lots of mistakes. With perfect 20/20 hindsight I see many things which could have been done, and many of these things Bloch himself later admitted.

"I don't think Bloch was a bad lawyer, but he was a scared lawyer, and he was alone, I mean dreadfully alone. If the Communists treated him like a pariah, you can imagine how others handled him. He had no one but his old father, who was a business not a trial lawyer, and Gloria Agrin. It was a political necessity that they be convicted, but I think that a better fight could have been made, certainly. I must believe that the political necessity caused them to die, because otherwise I have to believe that the Committee, and Bloch, were responsible, and I can't believe that because the case is of such great historical importance. It would hurt too much to believe that our friends were to blame.

"Others will disagree with me. I'm very subjective about it. Morty Sobell flays both Blochs mercilessly, and also his own lawyers, who told him not to testify. Bloch was scared about the handling of the case. The CP lawyers in the Smith Act cases had been aggressive and combative, and they had just been convicted of contempt of court. Bloch's tactic was to be extremely courteous, and deferential, but he was so deferential that he ended up praising the judge for an impartial trial. He was convinced before the trial even started that they would be found guilty. He was hoping against hope that the judge wouldn't sentence them to death. He thought that his own courteousness and respect for the judge could save my parents from the electric chair."

From Mrs. Rosenberg's house, the boys went to New Jersey to live with friends of their parents. There they spent the summer in the country and stayed on for the next school year. "I had an excellent year there," says Michael. "I visited my parents regularly, and I was pretty happy. Robby and I had tremendous conflicts with the younger son of the people we were living with. The two people were older, and they were driven to distraction. Unfortunately that was the summer of the execution—an endless summer of playing ball."

The summer of '53: a summer of baseball, football, talking with friends; not a painful summer. "The execution was a small part of it. June came, we went to Washington, got back. We went to visit our parents, and I put on my little show—I started to wail as I was leaving, 'One more day to live, one more day to live' over and over again. I was kissing them goodbye and leaving. Then we got the one-day reprieve. I knew about Justice Douglas's stay of execution. We watched the baseball game on June 19 as the announcements came in. I still had hope, I thought that the mercy letter my mother had written would have an effect. That day was a bad day. I remember keeping it from Robby for a week, and then one day he was talking about when Mommie and Daddy are coming home, and I said, 'Sorry, Robby, Mommie and Daddy are dead; they're not going to come home.'"

Just like that: dead, gone, forever. "I used to mistreat him very badly," says Michael. "There were times in High School when we'd be talking at night, and Robby would say, meaning our adopted parents, 'Where's Mommie and Daddy?' and I'd say, 'Dead.'"

"I'm sure that Robby built up a protective wall because he really didn't understand. In my case, brutally challenging him was kind of useful. I didn't have friends who knew about it, and so I rarely talked about my parents. A lot of stuff was being submerged in me. I remember reading *Knock on Any Door* and the end of it there's a vivid description of the events leading up to an execution in the electric chair. That got me. I do not remember crying before then for emotional reasons. That was the first time. The fact that it was such an extreme gush was incredible. It leads me to believe I was submerging things, and forcibly reminding Robby who we were. It was my way of fighting that repression. Because Robby would never talk about those things. I wasn't very nice during those two weeks in early June, 1953. That's the only pain I remember. I was playing baseball when it happened. They took us out of the house to play catch, and when we came back it was over."

[FROM ROSENBERG TO MEEROPOL]

About six months later, Emanuel Bloch—their parents' lawyer—arranged a new home for them with Ann and Abel Meeropol. There had been problems living in New Jersey. Michael remembers that people kept asking him, "'Are you any relations to those two spies?' And I'd say no, telling myself, 'Well I haven't lied, because they aren't spies.'"

The boys were moved back to New York, and in

December 1953, Manny Bloch told them that they were to go to a Christmas Party and that a couple would pick them up there. The couple were the Meeropols: "We didn't know we were going to live with them until they told us. I think Manny thought it would be better that way. Manny died before the Meeropols were certified as our legal guardians, and so the bastards from the Welfare Department started to move. One night they threatened to break down the door. We went to court. They sent us to the Welfare Department, to Pleasantville, N.Y., and then our side got a writ of *habeus corpus*, and the judge sent us back to our grandmother's. He appointed a nice co-guardian." Finally, in September 1954, they moved in permanently with the Meeropols.

For both boys, it was a terribly important change in their lives. "I was a real wise guy," says Michael. "I was given a thorough examination by Dr. Frederick Wertham in 1954, and he thought I was very close to being psychotic. I needed extremely careful, firm loving care, in as normal a situation as possible. I couldn't stand still for a minute. I never looked at anyone when I talked to them. I was vicious in terms of responding to any adults who crossed me. I was a fresh kid. I drove adults to distraction. The Meeropols sat on me. They gave us steadiness, a family, a foundation." The Meeropols were loving and warm but they could not exorcise all of his fears. "Like all kids, I used to have nightmares. For years, even after I was married, I would wake up screaming. While my parents were in jail, I used to have monster dreams. I remember dreaming of running away from something. I would hear the sound, and feel the presence of the creature, but I wouldn't see it. It would be one of these things from above. The voice would say, 'We've got you now,' then someone would wake me from my sleep because I'd be screaming out loud."

And then there were the identity crises, the inevitable questions about his real parents, and his denials. "When I was in junior high school, the *Daily News* carried a series on the Death House and ran a picture of me. We tried to get the picture pulled, but it was printed, and several kids in school saw it, and thought they recognized me. But I denied that I was Michael Rosenberg. Little by little that began to grate on me. In junior high school I even volunteered the opinion in class that you weren't a good American unless you believed in God. That kind of stuff was just so bad. I loathed myself for acting that way."

"Then in Elisabeth Irwin High School the situation changed because radicalism was viewed as a good thing. I began to think of changing my name. I wanted to make amends, to pay back for all the bad things I did."

[A PRIVATE WORLD]

As for Robby, from 1949, when he was three, to 1956, when he was ten, he lived under Michael's care and protection. "We had a private world," he recalls, "but I don't think that we talked much. I was very conspiratorial." Where Michael was loud and insistent, Robby was low-keyed and easy-going. He was a true introvert and he hid his emotions. More than Michael, he felt persecuted and kept silent about his identity.

The boys were different, but they were close—perhaps

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Julius Rosenberg, 32, and his wife, Ethel, 35, are separated by wire screen in rear of prison van as they leave Federal Courthouse yesterday on way to jail.



Emanuel H. Bloch, attorney for condemned atom spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, escorts Michael, 10, left and Robert, 6, from Sing Sing prison in Ossining, N.Y.

