



Robert Meeropol was only six years old when his parents, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, were executed for espionage.

Now Meeropol is fighting to exonerate his mother while continuing to build his life's work — an organization that provides support for the children of targeted activists.

by BRIAN SHORT



We

all have moments in our lives when everything in the world seems to stop. The wind drops. The clouds slow their crawl across the sky. Something deep is happening inside of us, some unseen reshaping whose eventual consequences we can feel but not see. For Robert Meeropol (A.B. '69, M.A. '70, C.A. '72), one of those moments occurred during the fall of 1986. Meeropol had recently finished a yearlong clerkship, and he was preparing to start his new position as an attorney at a local law firm. He delayed the start of his job to be with his family, and he took one day — September 10 — to spend alone before his new career officially began.

Meeropol found a secluded field in the Green Mountains of Vermont and ate his sandwich among the asters and goldenrod. Sitting there, Meeropol had a deep feeling of being at peace with the world, but not with the job he was about to start. The moment is described two-thirds of the way through Meeropol's memoir *An Execution in the Family*. It is a rare moment of rest in a life of tragedy, tumult, movement, and action, a life whose story began at the dawn of the atomic age.



(TOP ROW, FROM LEFT) **Klaus Fuchs, Harry Gold, and David Greenglass** all confessed to spying for the Soviet Union. Fuchs named Gold, Gold named Greenglass, and Greenglass named his sister and brother-in-law, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, as spies.

(MIDDLE ROW) **During the four weeks or so between Julius's arrest and Ethel's,** Julius sent multiple letters home concerning the family's machinist business, including quotidian details like valve purchases and when to bill a company called Precision Milling & Depressing.

(BOTTOM ROW) **Protests and counter-protests of the time revealed an American public** motivated at turns by anxiety, anger, and atomic fears.

On July 16, 1945, the United States tested the first nuclear weapon in Trinity, New Mexico, and four years later the Soviet Union tested their own weapon, nicknamed Joe-1 by the Americans. The Soviet test opened the door to nuclear war and awakened fears of global destruction in people in every city, on every continent. Many Americans, including those in the highest levels of government, were demanding to know how the Reds had got the bomb.

In early 1950, a British physicist by the name of Klaus Fuchs was arrested on suspicion of espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union. Fuchs confessed, fingering an unassuming chemist named Harry Gold. Gold admitted his guilt in turn, directing the investigation to an information-gatherer associate of his, a soldier and native New Yorker who had been stationed in New Mexico. The soldier was identified as David Greenglass, who was arrested and who identified his wife, Ruth, and his brother-in-law Julius Rosenberg as part of the Soviet spy ring that he had participated in. Greenglass let the authorities know in no uncertain terms that if they arrested his wife that he would no longer cooperate. The FBI arrested Julius on July 17, 1950, and although she hadn't been mentioned in Greenglass's earliest testimony, Julius's wife, Ethel, was arrested less than a month later, on August 11, 1950.

The Rosenbergs refused to talk, insisting on their innocence repeatedly to the FBI and to their family. Largely on the basis of Greenglass's testimony, the Rosenbergs were found guilty of conspiracy to commit espionage in 1951. They were sentenced to death.

The execution took place two years later, commanding headlines around the world and leaving two children orphaned: Michael, 10 years old, and Robert, 6.

While their parents were still in jail, many of the boys' relatives refused to take them in, and Michael and Robert moved from place to place, hoping for a more permanent home. They stayed with their grandmother Tessie Greenglass briefly; then for a time in the Hebrew Children's Home in the Bronx; then with their other grandmother, Sophie Rosenberg; then with a friendly family, the Bachs, in New Jersey. None of these stays lasted very long, and the feelings of transience and worries about their parents produced tremendous anxiety in the boys.

Then, in 1954, the year after their parents' execution, the boys were welcomed into the home of Abel and Anne Meeropol, and three years later, they were officially adopted by the couple. The boys took on their adoptive parents' names, and Robert Rosenberg became Robert Meeropol.

The Meeropols provided the boys with a stable and loving home, and the two flourished there through the end of high school. Robert initially followed some New York friends to Earlham College, but he found both the college and Indiana to be poor fits.

Ann Arbor was more to his liking. There, Meeropol became an avid student of cultural anthropology. But it was as a student activist that he found friends and a community that he believed in. Both Meeropol's biological and adopted parents had been members of the Communist Party, and Meeropol found himself drawn to the leftist Students for a Democratic Society, with whom he participated in picket lines in support of striking service workers and joined sit-ins to increase the per-child winter clothing allowance for Washtenaw County. (The amount was raised from \$40 to \$50 a few days after a demonstration.)

Civil rights and anti-war causes were the most popular issues of the day, but Meeropol also encountered feminism and environmentalism in Ann Arbor, even attending the first Earth Day, in 1969.

"I read somewhere that 1968 was the worst year to be on campus at Michigan because of all of the turmoil," Meeropol says. "But you know, there was so much questioning going on. There was so much excitement. It seemed like the whole world was opening up."

But something changed. Meeropol participated in a protest following the conviction of the so-called "Chicago



Robert Meeropol (THIRD FROM RIGHT) **discussing the Rosenberg trial while in East Berlin in 1976. Morton Sobell** (FIFTH FROM LEFT), **the Rosenbergs' co-defendant, was also present. Sobell served 18 years in prison for espionage. He admitted his guilt in 2008.**

Seven,” who had organized the protests surrounding the 1968 Democratic National Convention that erupted into violence. After the conviction, over 5,000 students took to the streets of Ann Arbor, and what started as a peaceful march ended with a series of smashed storefronts and other property destruction. Soon after, Meeropol and his wife traveled to Europe for Meeropol’s anthropological field study, and they spoke together about the direction their politics were taking them.

The Rosenbergs insisted on their innocence repeatedly to the FBI and to their family. Largely on the basis of Ethel’s brother David Greenglass’s testimony, the Rosenbergs were found guilty of conspiracy to commit espionage in 1951. They were sentenced to death.

“We reminisced about how once we laughed and had fun with our politics,” Meeropol writes in *An Execution in the Family*. “Until recently we’d never taken ourselves too seriously and never lost sight of the absurd in the world. But in [our last year in Ann Arbor] we’d become deadly serious. Our recent actions had been motivated by responsive anger rather than the joy of creating a better world.”

Seeking that joy again, the couple left Michigan and moved to Springfield, Massachusetts, near where Meeropol’s brother, Michael, and his family lived, with the hope of starting a new chapter in their lives.

The Meeropol brothers had long believed their parents to be innocent of the espionage charges they had been convicted of and executed for, and much of that belief relied on questionable evidence now known by spy buffs all over the world. There was a seemingly innocuous Jell-O box that supposedly linked Harry Gold and David Greenglass — a strange choice, if it had been used — and a table that prosecutors claimed was given to the Rosenbergs by Russian agents to photograph classified papers but turns out to have been purchased by the Rosenbergs at Macy’s.

The trial largely hinged on the testimony of witnesses, especially that of Ethel’s brother, David Greenglass, which the Meeropol brothers found suspect. They fought both publicly and in the courts, succeeding in getting hundreds of thousands of pages of government documents regarding their parents released. But even more documents remained unreleased, and the brothers continued their fight for over 20 years to learn what really happened.

It was during this decades-long legal battle that Robert Meeropol found his calling. After getting a graduate degree in anthropology from U-M and then becoming a lawyer, Meeropol still felt distant from his work. That moment of peace in the Green Mountains was a harbinger for what was literally a middle-of-the-night



Sophie Rosenberg (SECOND FROM LEFT), Julius’s mother, and Anne and Abel Meeropol (third and fourth from left), then foster parents to Robert and Michael, exiting the New York Supreme Court. The Meeropols adopted the brothers in 1957. Abel Meeropol was a prolific songwriter, best known for “Strange Fruit,” sung most famously by Billie Holiday.

epiphany, when Meeropol realized what it was that he wanted to do with the rest of his life: He wanted to help children going through what he went through as a child, the disruption of one’s family.

“I like to say that it took until I was 43 years old to figure out what I wanted to do with my life,” Meeropol says with a chuckle. “My biggest regret for the Rosenberg Fund for Children is that I didn’t think of it sooner.”

Meeropol’s organization is dedicated to helping children whose parents have been targeted for political reasons. Meeropol’s initial goal in 1990 was for the organization to have a budget of \$100,000 a year. Through hard work, perseverance, and a sustained fund-raising effort, the fund now delivers over \$350,000 in grants each year to hundreds of children to help them pay for therapy, school, and classes in art, drama, and music. Working on behalf of children who experienced something like what Meeropol himself experienced has been, he says, his life’s work: a chance to pass on the good of what was given to him during that time, and a way to heal the terror, loneliness, and isolation that one feels when a parent is gone in a flash.



Despite long periods without further material, new evidence in the Rosenberg case was still coming. In 1995, the American government declassified messages pertaining to the Venona project, an American Cold War effort that intercepted messages sent between Soviet intelligence units, messages that contained highly valuable information about Soviet espionage missions against the United States. Julius Rosenberg is mentioned by name multiple times in Venona, including a string of aliases given to him by the Soviets like “Antenna,” “Liberal,” and “King.” Rosenberg’s connection to David Greenglass is listed clearly in Venona, as well. This and other evidence makes it mostly settled that Julius, at least, was a spy.

The information released in Venona indicates that the government officials prosecuting the Rosenbergs in 1950-51 likely knew that Julius Rosenberg was guilty, but did not share the classified proof. (Decades later, the government said this evidence could not be used at the trial because it would reveal the code-breaking effort.) Because of that, the trial contained some questionable evidence of the couple’s guilt, evidence that might not have been enough to convict the Rosenbergs in a completely fair trial.

There were further complications to come. In 2001, David Greenglass admitted that the testimony he gave at the trial was not accurate. His grand jury testimony, unsealed just last year, confirms that not only did Greenglass not recall his sister Ethel typing up essential notes about atomic plans — notes that Greenglass once claimed to have passed on to Soviet agents and that were the foundation of the U.S. government’s case against Ethel — but also that Greenglass’s initial testimony to the court

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didn’t mention Ethel’s involvement at all, bringing the culpability of the Rosenbergs as a pair deeper into question.

Other evidence uncovered in the 65 years since the trial points to the fact that Ethel was arrested at least partly to pressure Julius into naming his co-conspirators. There is a letter from then-director of the FBI J. Edgar Hoover suggesting the strategy of using Ethel’s arrest to motivate Julius’s cooperation. Myles Lane, an assistant U.S. attorney at the time, described the case against Ethel as “not too strong” but suggested that a conviction and strong sentence could be strategically useful with regard to Julius. William P. Rogers, who had been the acting deputy attorney general in the early ‘50s, says simply, “She called our bluff.”

Based on the unsealing of Greenglass’s grand jury testimony last summer, Robert Meeropol and his brother, Michael, wrote an op-ed calling for Ethel’s exoneration for the *New York Times*,



(OPPOSITE) **The Rosenberg boys awaiting news in 1953.**

(ABOVE) **Michael and Robert Meeropol—pictured here at a 2004 screening of Michael’s daughter Ivy’s documentary *Heir to an Execution*—have remained very close.**

working with an editor there, Meeropol says, “who wasn’t even born when my parents’ case was in the news.”

The piece immediately set off a series of articles and responses, including at least three follow-ups — most taking the opposite side in the argument — in the *Wall Street Journal*. Chief among the evidence cited by the Meeropol brothers’ opponents is the mention of “Liberal and his wife” in Venona regarding the recruitment of David Greenglass. And to those only casually familiar with the case — even those conflicted about the severity of Ethel’s sentence when compared to that of admitted spies like Morton Sobell (18 years in prison), David Greenglass (9 years), and Harry Gold (14 Years) — the Venona evidence is troubling.

But for the Meeropols, the injustice of the Rosenbergs’ trial and the asymmetry of the punishment Ethel received entirely warrant another look at Ethel’s part of the Rosenberg case.

“It is time for Ethel to receive exoneration,” Meeropol says. “Her conviction was unjust, and if you’re unjustly convicted, that means that you should be presumed innocent. That is the request that we have made to President Obama and his administration.”

Meanwhile, Meeropol still lives in New England, and he still spends time fundraising for the Rosenberg Fund for Children, although he has given over the day-to-day directing of the organization to his daughter, Jennifer. He spends a lot of time writing about the dangers of climate change, a cause which he attributes to his deep love of the natural world — in all honesty, he prefers the Berkshires and the White Mountains to the Greens — and to the fact that he was exposed to the early environmentalism movement at Michigan, a time period that Meeropol still remembers happily.

“A lot of very important things were coming alive then, and Michigan was one of the best places in the country to be,” Meeropol says. “That air of excitement, if you could have bottled it and released it now, it would energize people even to this day.” ■