

Intelligence in Recent Public Literature

The Brother

By Sam Roberts. New York: Random House, 2001. 543 pages.

Reviewed by John Ehrman

The fiftieth anniversary of the executions of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg are almost upon us and appear set to pass with a quietude that would have been unimaginable little more than a decade ago. The case itself was a high drama, featuring charges of atomic espionage, unshakable claims of innocence and persecution, and last-minute Supreme Court hearings. Like the trial of Alger Hiss, which had made headlines only a few months earlier, the Rosenberg case took on a long and controversial life, generating decades of passionate arguments. Both cases were put to rest only in the 1990s when evidence emerged from the archives to settle the question of guilt or innocence. But even though the facts are now known, the Rosenberg controversy has much to teach us, particularly about the intersection of espionage, politics, and our views of the recent past.

In *The Brother*, Sam Roberts, a veteran *New York Times* reporter and editor, provides the first new account of the case to incorporate all of the information that has come to light in recent years. In addition, Roberts tracked down and interviewed David Greenglass, a pivotal witness and the brother of executed Ethel Rosenberg, adding considerable detail to what we know of the personalities involved. The resulting book is a notable addition to the literature on the case, and one that is best understood in the context of the often-impassioned arguments over five decades.

A Complex Case

The Rosenberg case, as presented publicly in the early 1950s, was complicated. On 24 January 1950, Klaus Fuchs, a German-born physicist who had fled the Nazis and been assigned to the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos, New Mexico, during World War II, confessed to British investigators that he had been a spy for the Soviets. He told his interrogators—who soon included FBI agents—of meeting a courier, whom he knew as Raymond, in New York, Boston, and New Mexico, and providing him with information on the atomic bomb. In February, the FBI began hunting for Raymond and in May identified him as Harry Gold, a chemist living in Philadelphia whom the Bureau already had questioned in 1947 as part of a separate espionage investigation.

Gold soon confessed to being Raymond and also told of a June 1945 meeting in Albuquerque with an unidentified soldier, to whom he had given \$500 in return for a sketch and several pages of written information. The FBI then began working to identify the soldier. On the morning of 15 June, after being shown an FBI photograph, Gold identified the soldier as David Greenglass, a draftee who had been assigned to Los Alamos as a machinist.¹

¹ This chronology of the case is drawn from Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, *The Rosenberg File*, second edition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

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The FBI interviewed Greenglass in New York a few hours later. When told of Gold's admission, Greenglass confessed immediately. He said that when his wife, Ruth, had visited him in Albuquerque in November 1944, she had conveyed an invitation from his brother-in-law, an engineer named Julius Rosenberg, to commit espionage. The FBI interviewed Rosenberg on 16 June but did not arrest him. Instead, the Bureau placed him under surveillance while waiting for Greenglass to make a deal and provide more details. On 17 July, confident that it could make a case, the FBI arrested Rosenberg on a charge of conspiracy to commit espionage. Then on 11 August, using Greenglass's information, the FBI arrested Julius's wife—David Greenglass's sister—Ethel, also on the charge of conspiracy to commit espionage. Ethel and Julius both insisted that they were innocent.

The FBI continued to pursue leads. Greenglass had told the Bureau that Julius had mentioned that one of his classmates at the City College of New York (CCNY), Joel Barr, also was spying for the Soviets. The FBI began searching for Barr, an engineer who had worked on sensitive defense contracts during World War II, and learned that he was in Paris. By the time agents arrived at his apartment, however, he had disappeared without a trace. On 9 August, Barr's best friend, Alfred Sarant—who also was an engineer working on defense projects and a CCNY classmate of Julius's—crossed the border into Mexico, never to be seen again. The FBI by now was looking into all of Julius's college friends and one of them supplied an additional name—Morton Sobell, another engineer and a former employee of the Navy's Bureau of Ordnance. As it turned out, Sobell already had gone to Mexico, where he was trying to book passage to Europe for himself and his family. On 16 August, Sobell was seized by Mexican police and driven to the US border, where he was handed over to the FBI and charged with conspiring with the Rosenbergs.

Ethel and Julius had led apparently unremarkable lives until their arrests. Ethel was the older of the two, born in 1915 to a poor Jewish family on New York's Lower East Side. In her teens she had become active in labor and left-wing causes. Julius, born in 1918, became politically active at CCNY, where he was involved in the campus branch of the Young Communist League. They married in the summer of 1939, shortly after Julius graduated. In 1940, he was hired by the US Army Signal Corps. During this period, Ethel and Julius were members of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), but they dropped out of the Party in 1943. Suspicions of his Party membership caused Julius some problems at the Signal Corps, but it was not until 1945—when the government confirmed his Party affiliation—that he was fired. After the war, Julius opened a small machine shop in Manhattan. David Greenglass joined the business after his discharge from the army in 1946, but the venture failed a few years later. By then, Ethel and Julius had two sons, Michael and Robert, born in 1943 and 1947, respectively.²

The Trial

The trial of the Rosenbergs and Sobell began on 6 March 1951 in the New York federal courthouse, with Judge Irving R. Kaufman presiding. The first witness, Max Elitcher—yet another CCNY friend of Julius's—described an incident in which he claimed Sobell had

² The Rosenberg's CPUSA memberships were not publicly confirmed until the 1970s. See Radosh and Milton, pp. 48-56, 71-73 and Robert and Michael Meeropol, *We Are Your Sons* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), p. 352.

delivered a roll of film containing photographed documents to Rosenberg in 1948. Next, Greenglass described how Julius had recruited him and how he had delivered handwritten notes about the Manhattan Project to Julius while in New York on leave in January 1945. Greenglass further testified that he had given notes and sketches of the atomic bomb's high explosive lens to Julius the following September. David and Ruth Greenglass both testified that Ethel had typed David's notes. The next witness, Harry Gold, described how his Soviet controller had sent him to Albuquerque to meet Greenglass, with instructions to identify himself with the phrase "I come from Julius." Elizabeth Bentley, a former spy for the Soviets, testified that she had been with her Soviet controller when he had received calls from a man identifying himself as "Julius." Another witness described Sobell's preparations for his flight to Mexico. Finally, in a surprise, last-minute move, the prosecution put on the stand a photographer who said that the Rosenbergs had posed for passport photos in mid-June 1950.

When it was the defense's turn, Julius Rosenberg took the stand and denied any disloyalty to the United States or espionage activity. Julius made a poor witness, however; he said David Greenglass had tried to blackmail him and then refused to say whether he had ever been a Communist, leading jurors to wonder what he could be afraid of or hiding. Ethel, too, testified in her own defense, denied all of the charges, and refused to say if she had been a Communist. Sobell remained silent, apparently hoping that the government's failure to link him explicitly with atomic espionage would save him.

The jury accepted the government's case, however, and on 29 March returned guilty verdicts on all three defendants. On 5 April, Kaufman sentenced Sobell to thirty years and the Rosenbergs to death. The next day, David Greenglass was sentenced to fifteen years. (The previous December, Gold had been given thirty years.)

The Rosenbergs' attorney, Emanuel (Manny) Bloch, immediately appealed the verdicts and the sentences. The appeals continued for two years; Bloch approached the Supreme Court twice, but the Court refused to review the case. Simultaneously, pro-Rosenberg groups formed in the United States and Europe, proclaiming the couple's innocence and demanding clemency. In a final desperate drama, Bloch and other attorneys gained a stay of execution from Justice William O. Douglas on 17 June 1953 to give them time to prepare new arguments. On 19 June, however, the full Court voided the stay and President Eisenhower refused to grant clemency. That evening, with the timing advanced so that the executions would take place before the start of the Jewish Sabbath, Ethel and Julius were executed in the electric chair at New York's Sing Sing prison, the only Americans ever put to death in peacetime for espionage.³

Political Dynamics

Even before their deaths, the Rosenbergs had become iconic figures for the American Left. Progressives—those who were willing to work with Communists in support of extensive social and economic reform at home while opposing confrontation with the Soviet Union abroad—had seen their political influence collapse since the mid-1940s. Like the Rosenbergs, they viewed themselves as victims of Cold War hysteria and

³ David Greenglass was released from prison in November 1960, Harry Gold in May 1966, and Sobell in January 1969.

McCarthyism and saw the government's case as a tissue of lies intended to silence dissenters.

A majority of liberals, however, accepted the Rosenbergs' guilt. Their "crime was a monstrous one," declared the *New Republic*, which was the leading platform for the so-called Cold War liberals, who took a gradualist approach to domestic reform and were sternly anti-communist. These liberals also believed that the movement to spare the Rosenbergs was a Moscow-directed propaganda campaign. The Cold War liberals, it is important to note, dominated American politics during this period and were the major force behind the marginalization of the Progressives. Proving Ethel and Julius's innocence thus became vitally important to leftists, who believed it would discredit their centrist opponents and thereby help restore their political support.⁴

Leftists quickly began to construct their own version of the Rosenberg case. In their telling, the federal government was bewildered and panicked when Moscow tested its first atomic bomb in September 1949. Federal officials—especially FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover—assumed that the Russians had been able to build the bomb only because spies had stolen its "secrets." To solve the crime, the argument went, the FBI began by targeting Gold, whom it knew to be psychologically unstable. His confession and cooperation came surprisingly fast, but were bogus—Gold, a chronic liar, picked up on hints from his FBI interrogators and then constructed his story to please the Bureau. This eventually gave the Bureau the "evidence" it needed to question Greenglass who, scared and not thinking clearly, named Julius in an effort to save himself. Julius Rosenberg, however, was made of sterner stuff and would not falsely confess or implicate others.

Faced with his resistance, claimed the Left, the FBI tried to force Julius to confess by charging Ethel. In preparation for the trial, the Bureau supposedly helped Gold and Greenglass refine their stories, ensured that their tales matched, and forged physical evidence to back them up. The FBI's goal, to the very end, was to extract confessions and more names, but "The Rosenbergs and Sobell, pressured by a vast state apparatus to tell a story they knew to be untrue, stood firm," wrote Walter and Miriam Schneir, whose 1965 book, *Invitation to an Inquest*, provided the most complete explanation of the pro-Rosenberg case. "In a period of expediency and cynicism, they refused to cooperate, refused to save themselves at the expense of others . . . the final triumph was theirs."⁵

The Rosenberg camp also belittled the crime. Even if espionage had taken place at Los Alamos, they argued, it had not mattered. Building an atomic bomb was a matter of physics; therefore, no "secret" existed to be stolen. The Soviets eventually would have—or, possibly, had—built the bomb on their own. Moreover, they said, Greenglass was a man of limited education, intelligence, and access. "Certainly nothing in [his] three crudely drawn sketches—or in his meager explanations of them—permits one to conclude, *per se*, that he had revealed matters of earth-shaking importance," said the Schneirs.⁶

⁴ "The Rosenberg Case," *New Republic*, January 19, 1953, p. 7; Robert Glynn, "L'Affaire Rosenberg in France," *Political Science Quarterly* 70 (December 1955): pp. 498-521. See also David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, "The Intellectuals and the Discontented Classes," *Partisan Review*, Winter 1955, pp. 64-65.

⁵ Walter and Miriam Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1965), p. 426. For one of the earliest versions of the Left's explanation of how the FBI framed the Rosenbergs, see John Wexley, *The Judgment of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg* (New York, NY: Cameron & Kahn, 1955).

⁶ Schneir and Schneir, p. 265.

Controversy Without End

The argument about the Rosenbergs' guilt would continue for more than 40 years, a bitter and vituperative fight about responsibility for the Cold War and McCarthyism that was carried on in magazines, competing books, and the arts. Progressives pressed their case but could not clinch it, complaining, as did one reviewer in the reliably pro-Rosenberg *The Nation*, that the truth remained locked away in the "closely guarded secret files of the FBI, under the pretense that the very security of the nation depends upon the preservation of such secrecy."⁷ Those who believed the Rosenbergs to be guilty conceded that some aspects of the case remained murky but argued that the government's basic story had withstood all challenges. The *New York Review of Books*, for example, said that the Schneirs' case lacked balance and failed to consider any evidence that suggested Ethel and Julius could have been guilty. "To cast considerable doubt on the veracity of Harry Gold and David Greenglass," the *Review* noted, "is not to say that the Rosenbergs and Sobell were unfairly convicted or that they were innocent."⁸

It would not be until ten years after the publication of *Invitation to an Inquest* that the impasse would start to break. The atmosphere of the mid-1970s was far different than that of a quarter-century before: in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, distrust of the government and secrecy were widespread, and both elite and popular opinion were unlikely to accept official versions of Cold War events without question. The Rosenbergs' sons, under their adoptive name of Meeropol, came forward and filed a Freedom of Information suit demanding the release of the government's files on their parents' case. They won, and, in December 1975, the FBI released the first of what would total some 200,000 pages of Bureau, CIA, and other agencies' records.

The media rushed to publish the first sensational nuggets, some of which appeared to strengthen the pro-Rosenberg case. The first disclosure to make headlines was that David Greenglass had changed his story. When first questioned by the FBI, he stated that he had no espionage contacts with Julius. Then David said that he had given atomic bomb secrets to Julius but that Ethel had not been present and, finally, he testified in court that Ethel had been present and had typed up his information.⁹ The next revelation was less favorable to the Rosenbergs, however. An inmate at the Federal House of Detention had befriended Julius and then became an informant for the FBI. It was this informant who told the Bureau that the Rosenbergs had posed for passport photos and thereby enabled the prosecution to find the photographer and place him on the stand.¹⁰ Another surprise from the files was that J. Edgar Hoover had opposed executing Ethel. Clearly, observed historian Allen Weinstein, students of the case would have to put aside their assumptions and spend years carefully sifting the files and reevaluating old evidence to clarify the story "for those who are open to persuasion by the weight of evidence."¹¹

⁷ Fred Cook, "I Come From Julius," *The Nation*, 15 November 1965, p. 363.

⁸ Herbert Packer, "The Strange Trial of the Rosenbergs," *New York Review of Books*, 3 February 1966, pp. 6-7. See also Cushing Strout, "Reconsidering the Rosenbergs: History, Novel, Film," *Reviews in American History* 12 (September 1984) pp. 309-21.

⁹ "Key Rosenberg Witness Altered Story," *The Washington Post*, 6 December 1975, p. 1.

¹⁰ "Rosenberg Files Show FBI Pressed Hard to Expand Spy Trial," *New York Times*, 8 December 1975, p. 36.

¹¹ Allen Weinstein, "The Hiss and Rosenberg Files," *The New Republic*, 14 February 1976, p. 17.

The Showdown

The showdown between the competing versions came in 1983, thirty years after the Rosenbergs had been executed. The Schneirs fired the first shot that summer, publishing a new edition of *Invitation to an Inquest* with a 50-page update based on the government's files. While complaining mightily that the files were fragmentary, poorly organized, and difficult to use, the Schneirs contended that the documents supported their arguments. They reviewed the changes in David Greenglass's story—and his wife's, too—to support their claims of FBI manipulation, and dismissed the informant's reports as either uncorroborated assertions or stories first fed to him by the FBI. They also claimed that no evidence in the files implicated Barr or Sarant as accomplices. Barr, for example, might have been "one of many Americans who were expatriates in the fifties because of political or racial persecution," the Schneirs suggested.¹²

The Schneirs' work soon came under attack from Ronald Radosh, an historian, and his partner, Joyce Milton, a professional writer. Radosh had long believed in the Rosenbergs' innocence, but had changed his mind after beginning to examine the case and the government's files. Reviewing the new edition of *Inquest* in the *New York Review of Books*, Radosh and Milton charged that the Schneirs had carefully omitted any evidence in the government files or those of the Rosenberg defense team that would have cast doubt on their version of events. Radosh and Milton also noted that the Schneirs had declined to interview any surviving figures from the case—"it is risky to rely on unsupported recollections," the Schneirs had written in the update of *Invitation*. This, said Radosh and Milton, was merely an excuse for not undertaking a full review of the case and facing unpleasant facts.¹³

Several weeks later, Radosh and Milton published their book on the case, *The Rosenberg File*. They not only used the government's files but, unlike the Schneirs, they interviewed more than 40 people connected with the case, some of whom gave them access to private papers. They became the first researchers to interview Ruth and David Greenglass. They crosschecked the various files and stories and in their book presented their findings carefully, always pointing out remaining gaps or ambiguities in the evidence and considering alternative explanations before rendering their judgments. Radosh and Milton concluded that the government had, in fact, been generally correct. In their telling, Julius and Ethel had been dedicated communists. Julius had been running a defense industrial espionage ring for the Soviets—which had included Barr, Sarant, Sobell, and others—when Greenglass was assigned to Los Alamos. Julius then took advantage of the unexpected opportunity to provide atomic secrets to the Soviets.¹⁴

Radosh and Milton also used the case files and interviews to clarify a number of issues in the case and remind each side of some points that neither wanted to remember.

- The case had not begun because of a panicked reaction to the Soviet acquisition of the atomic bomb, but, rather, because American codebreakers had found evidence of atomic espionage in decrypted Soviet cables.¹⁵

¹² Walter Schneir and Miriam Schneir, *Invitation to an Inquest*, reprint edition (New York, NY: Pantheon, 1983), pp. 450-64, 475-78

¹³ Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton, "Were the Rosenbergs Framed?" *New York Review of Books*, 31 July 1983, pp. 17, 20

¹⁴ Radosh and Milton, *The Rosenberg File*, pp. 53-58

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9

- For the most part, Greenglass had told the truth to the FBI. He made his claim that Ethel had typed his notes only ten days before the start of the trial, however, and Radosh and Milton were plainly skeptical of this aspect of his story. As for the value to Moscow of his information, Radosh and Milton concluded that it was less significant than the government had claimed, but still useful in that it corroborated material that Fuchs had supplied.¹⁶
- The FBI had, indeed, tried to use Ethel to extract a confession from Julius. Although Ethel had been aware of, and supported, Julius's activities, she had not been deeply involved in espionage and her role had not warranted a capital charge.¹⁷ They also pointed out how Manny Bloch's many mistakes worsened the Rosenbergs' situation and documented Judge Kaufman's bias and gross misconduct in the case.¹⁸
- The international campaign to spare the Rosenbergs, which in part claimed that they were victims of American anti-Semitism, had not taken off until Moscow cynically approved support of it in part to distract international attention from a show trial in Czechoslovakia in which prominent Jewish communists were being tried, and hanged, on trumped-up charges of Zionism.¹⁹

The publication of *The Rosenberg File* ignited a storm of controversy and returned the case to the headlines. Moderate and mainstream liberal reviewers praised Radosh and Milton's thorough research and judicious conclusions—they were “scrupulous in their research, persuasive in their deductions, and generally fair-minded in their exposition,” wrote journalist Murray Kempton in the *New York Review of Books*. Reviewers in *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Republic* made similar comments and, as the *Times's* daily reviewer, Michiko Kakutani concluded, agreed that “from now on, anyone interested in the case will at least have to grapple with the arguments” of *The Rosenberg File*.²⁰

These reviews did not go unchallenged, of course. Both *The New York Times Book Review* and the *New York Review of Books* printed long, angry letters from the Schneirs and the Meerpols. The Schneirs, in particular, accused Radosh and Milton of inventing evidence and distorting or misquoting interviews. Left-wing reviewers took other shots. In *The Nation*, Victor Navasky claimed that Radosh and Milton “maintain the dubious cold war assumptions of liberal anti-communism, especially in the way they link the American Communist Party to the Soviet espionage apparatus,” and repeated the charge that they had “cooked their interview data” to make their points. Another reviewer dismissed Radosh and Milton's work as a “smear” that “fits in neatly with the Reagan administration's call for new, wide-ranging powers for the FBI, CIA, and other intelligence agencies.” In his memoir *Commies* (2001), Radosh says that one historian tried to convince Vintage Books not to publish the paperback edition of *The Rosenberg File* by calling the editor-in-chief and labeling the book a fraud.²¹

Radosh and Milton came face-to-face with the Schneirs on 20 October 1983 in a debate in New York sponsored by *The Nation* and *The New Republic*. Some 1,500 people, most

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 162-69, 444-445.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 277-279, 428-430.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 348-350.

²⁰ Murray Kempton, “Dishonorably Discharged,” *New York Review of Books*, 27 October 1983, p. 41; and “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, 12 August 1983, p. C24.

of them loudly pro-Rosenberg, packed Town Hall. Political philosopher Robert Nozick's description of the proceedings is worth quoting at length.

I am struck by the rigidity of Walter Schneir's facial expression and his barely suppressed rage. I have never before seen anyone exude such absolute self-righteousness.

Schneir plays taped telephone conversations with [people Radosh and Milton said they had interviewed], who each deny speaking to Radosh and Stern [Radosh's early collaborator]. . . . Schneir looks triumphant playing his tapes, but his opponents reply with tapes of their own conversations with [the same individuals]. Moreover, they play a tape of a chatty conversation with Miriam Schneir—who, they report, previously had denied speaking to them! She sits stone-faced.

However honestly the Rosenbergs' defenders had believed in their case, the town hall debate revealed a new, brutal truth: With the release of the files, and Radosh and Milton's careful work, the defense could continue to make its case only by combining selective use of the evidence with smears and outright lies. The Left's project lay in ruins. Small wonder, Nozick concluded, that the crowd had booed Radosh and Milton: "The people present cannot face the possibility of wasted lives. The Rosenberg case . . . is their last cause."²²

The Resolution

Some seven years after the 1983 debate, the end of the Cold War brought a series of revelations and archival releases that confirmed Radosh and Milton's findings.

- First, in 1990, a new volume of former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev's memoirs was published, in which he said that he had "heard from both Stalin and Molotov that the Rosenbergs provided very significant help in accelerating the production of our atomic bomb."²³
- Second, the mystery surrounding Barr and Sarant was solved. A Harvard University researcher identified two prominent Soviet scientists as Barr and Sarant; the two men had, indeed, fled to the USSR and become important figures in Soviet defense electronics research. Sarant had died in 1979, but Barr, who had never been charged, returned to the United States in 1992, told his story on ABC's *Nightline*, and began collecting social security.²⁴

²¹ Walter Schneir and Miriam Schneir, "Invitation to an Inquest: An Exchange," *New York Review of Books*, 29 September 1983, p. 55; Victor Navasky, "Of 'Atom Spies' and Ambiguities," *The Nation*, 22 October 1983, pp. 376, 377; Gerald Markowitz, "How Not to Write History: A Critique of Radosh and Milton's *The Rosenberg File*," *Science & Society* 48 (Spring 1984), p. 89; and Ronald Radosh, *Commies* (San Francisco: Encounter, 2001), p. 168. For additional reviews, see Alan Dershowitz, "Spies and Scapegoats," *The New York Times Book Review*, 14 August 1983, p. 1; and Eric Breindel, "Rosenbergs Redux," *The New Republic*, 31 October 1983, pp. 30-34. For coverage of the controversy, see "The Rosenbergs, New Evidence, Old Passions," *New York Times*, 23 September 1983, p. B1; Robert Asahina, "Reviving the Rosenberg Affair," *The New Leader*, 3 October 1983, pp. 20-21; David Oshinsky, "The Rosenbergs Revisited," *The New Leader*, 17 October 1983, pp. 5-9; and "The Rosenberg Sons Strike Back," *Newsweek*, 3 October 1983, pp. 16-18.

²² Robert Nozick, "New York Diary," *The New Republic*, 14 November 1983, p. 42. For other accounts of the debate, see Andrew Kopkind, "Passion Play," *The Nation*, 5 November 1983, pp. 420-421; and "The Rosenberg Showdown," *The Washington Post*, 22 October 1983, p. C1.

²³ Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1990), p. 194.

²⁴ Radosh and Milton, pp. xi-xiii. Barr died in Moscow in August 1998.

- Third, Richard Rhodes, in his comprehensive history of the development of the hydrogen bomb, was able to show that, indeed, Greenglass's information had been of great value to the development of the Soviet atomic bomb.²⁵

The most important event, however, was the release in 1995 of the Venona cables—decrypted Soviet intelligence cables from the 1940s. The cables themselves clearly identified Fuchs, Gold, the Greenglasses, Barr, Sarant, and the Rosenbergs as Soviet agents; described the ring's activities, and confirmed Gold and the Greenglasses's stories.²⁶

Now, even the Schneirs gave up the cause. Venona "will be painful news for many people, as it is for us. But the duty of a writer is to tell the truth," they wrote with no apparent irony. Indeed, the case against the Rosenbergs became so widely accepted that when Alexander Feklisov, Julius's Soviet case officer, told his story in 1997, it barely made a ripple.²⁷

The Brother

Even after fifty years, it turns out that more can still be said about the Rosenbergs. In *The Brother*, Sam Roberts incorporates all of the new information and also contributes fresh insights on the personalities involved—Greenglass ultimately talked to Roberts for some fifty hours. This, combined with Roberts' skills as a writer, has resulted in a lively and engaging volume.

The book has its flaws, however. Outside of the interviews, Roberts relies on the vast secondary literature on the case, and *The Brother* cannot be said to break any other new ground. The book also is somewhat skewed—Roberts' reliance on Greenglass means that this is David's version of the case. Indeed, for readers seeking a thorough and objective view of the case, the updated edition of *The Rosenberg File* remains the best source.

Nonetheless, Roberts provides several valuable new details. Greenglass turns out to have been much more clever than often believed. He tells how he was able to obtain large quantities of information at Los Alamos, even though compartmentation and security procedures were in place to prevent just that. The scientists and mathematicians would talk openly about their work, says the long-derided Greenglass, and "I just listened." The scientists also were happy to answer his questions or allow him to attend their seminars—one even told him how much plutonium was needed for a critical mass.²⁸

Roberts' most sensational revelation is David's admission of what has long been suspected—that his wife, Ruth, testified falsely. Desperately trying to curry favor with the prosecutors, she lied about Ethel's typing and David backed her up, thereby supplying the prosecution with the testimony that sent Ethel to her death. "I frankly think my wife did the typing, but I don't remember," Greenglass told Roberts. But he has no regrets.

²⁵ Richard Rhodes, *Dark Sun* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 187-193

²⁶ Robert Louis Benson and Michael Warner, eds., *Venona* (Washington, DC: National Security Agency and Central Intelligence Agency, 1996)

²⁷ Walter Schneir and Miriam Schneir, "Cryptic Answers," *The Nation*, 14 August 1995, p. 152; "Julius Rosenberg Spied, Russian Says," *The Washington Post*, 16 March 1997, p. A1.

²⁸ Roberts, pp. 101-102

"My wife put her [Ethel] in [the story]. So what am I gonna do, call my wife a liar? My wife is more important to me than my sister. Or my mother or my father, okay? And she was the mother of my children." In the end, says David, it was neither his nor Ruth's fault that Ethel died. Ethel controlled her own fate and could have escaped death by confessing—"she was the mother of her children. She should have thought of them first."²⁹

Greenglass's admission, coming at the end of *The Brother*, is not surprising, for by then Roberts has already told his readers quite a bit about David and the Rosenbergs' personalities, quarrels, and family resentments. Ethel and Julius, in this telling, were true believers in communism, accepting its ideology without question and subordinating themselves to the cause so completely that they were willing to die and orphan their children. Julius was a con man who loved the thrill of spying and was able to charm people into following him, but he also had a cruel streak. "He would cajole you to do what he wanted, but he was the kind of guy that would say, 'Take him out and shoot him,'" said David. David emerges as both lazy and shrewd. Julius took him under his wing as a teenager and indoctrinated him with Marxism. David was willing to follow Julius without question, but "truly didn't believe in much" and did not bother to join the Communist Party. By the late 1940s, however, David had become disillusioned with communism and Julius, and recriminations over the failure of the machine shop only worsened their relationship. Once arrested, David showed a sharp instinct for self-preservation and threw Ethel and Julius to the wolves with little hesitation, and Ruth was only too happy to help. Others in the Greenglass family, says Roberts, were convinced that David and Ruth had been "ensnared in an insidious plot" by Ethel and Julius and that the "only way to extricate David and Ruth was to let Julius fend for himself." Indeed, they seem to have shared David's belief that Ethel and Julius could have saved their own lives but chose instead to die for their cause. "My mother put it very succinctly," says David. "To die for something as nebulous as that is stupidity."³⁰

Where Next?

Even though our knowledge of the Rosenberg case and its participants now seems complete, the wider question of motivation has yet to be fully explored. Ethel and Julius were ordinary figures—the New York Jewish community was fertile ground for radical politics until the late 1940s, and to be a socialist or a communist was nothing remarkable. But the war years were a turning point, as the United States defended freedom and crushed the Nazis. In the years that followed, Jews gained wider acceptance in American society, prospered, and abandoned radicalism in favor of Cold War liberalism. The Rosenbergs, however, stuck with the old faith. Probably nothing short of a full biographical treatment of Julius and his social milieu—one similar to Sam Tanenhaus's *Whittaker Chambers* (1997)—would explain why. Enough archival material is available to make such a project feasible and to give us a portrait of the Rosenbergs that, if not sympathetic, would at least not be filtered through the Greenglasses' lenses.³¹

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 295, 493, 494

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 178, 43, 45, 262, 479

³¹ On radicalism among American Jews of the Rosenbergs' generation, see Howard Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Vintage, 1993), pp. 432-36. For the political atmosphere at CCNY during the late 1930s, see Irving Kristol "Memoirs of a Trotskyist," *New York Times Magazine*, 23 January 1977, reprinted in Kristol, *Neoco conservatism* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1995), pp. 469-480

The Rosenbergs, of course, were not only Jews, but also communists. A fuller picture of their lives in context would shed light on the nature of the CPUSA, a topic that remains contentious among historians. Until the mid-1960s, the standard view of the CPUSA was that it was a servant of Moscow and its members were, at best, dupes of a foreign dictatorship. Since then, new generations of academic researchers, using a wealth of new materials and also applying social history techniques and influenced, in some cases, by their experiences in the New Left, have rewritten the CPUSA's story. In their view, the Party and its members were inheritors of the American radical tradition and shaped the Party to meet their goals, not Moscow's. The discovery in the mid-1990s of documentation of Soviet control of the Party and use of it for espionage has reinvigorated the orthodox view, however, and the two camps now carry on an angry, inconclusive feud. The Rosenbergs—who are among a handful of figures known to have been both Party activists and spies and about whom extensive documentation exists—offer an opportunity for a productive case study that could probably tell us much about the outlook and motivations of the tens of thousands of Americans who joined the CPUSA and stayed with it through the ideological twists of the 1930s and 1940s.³²

That much remains to be learned from the Rosenberg case does not belittle Roberts' contribution. More than anyone else, he has told us about the human beings in the story, and shown that they were not admirable people. Even if unintentionally, Roberts confirms the judgment of cultural critic Robert Warshow: "The Rosenbergs thought and felt whatever their political commitment required them to think and to feel," wrote Warshow in 1953. "They were people of no eloquence and little imagination."³³ If for no other reason than to understand the truth of this statement, *The Brother* is worth reading.

³² For summaries of the rival arguments and the conflict in interpretations about the CPUSA, see Kenneth Waltzer, "The New History of American Communism," *Reviews in American History* 11 (June 1983): 259-267; Theodore Draper, "American Communism Revisited," *New York Review of Books*, 9 May 1985, and "The Popular Front Revisited," *New York Review of Books*, 30 May 1985; Leo Ribuffo, "The Complexity of American Communism," in Ribuffo, *Right, Center, Left* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Maurice Isserman, "The New History of American Communism Revisited," *Reviews in American History* 20 (December 1992): 536-542; Michael Kazin, "The Agony and Romance of the American Left," *American Historical Review* 100 (December 1995): 1488-1512; and Jacob Weisberg, "Cold War Without End," *New York Times Magazine*, 28 November 1999.

³³ Robert Warshow, "The 'Idealism' of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg," in Warshow, *The Immediate Experience* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1952; reprint, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 47, 50-51.