

The WSWS speaks to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg's son

An interview with Robert Meeropol

Fred Mazelis
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Robert Meeropol and his brother Michael are the sons of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed by the US government in June 1953 on trumped-up charges of atomic espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union. Robert, the younger of the Rosenberg sons, was six years old when his parents were put to death.

The Rosenberg sons were adopted and raised by Abel and Anne Meeropol. For their entire adult lives they have campaigned to expose the importance of the Rosenberg case. In the 1970s, they successfully sued the FBI and CIA to force the release of 300,000 previously secret documents dealing with their parents.

Robert, after having earned anthropology and law degrees and practicing as a lawyer, founded the Rosenberg Fund for Children (www.rfc.org) in 1990. The Rosenberg Fund for Children, as its web site explains, "provides for the educational and emotional needs" of children whose parents have faced harassment, injury, prison or other attacks because of their political activities. The RFC is commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Rosenbergs' execution with a program entitled "Carry It Forward: Celebrating the Children of Resistance," at New York City's Town Hall on Sunday, June 16 at 7 PM (www.rfc.org/cifevent).

Fred Mazelis of the WSWS spoke this week with Robert Meeropol.

Fred Mazelis: Why do the names of your parents still evoke the Cold War and the anti-communist hysteria of that period? What makes June 19, 1953 an important date in the history of the 20th century?

Robert Meeropol: One of the central tenets of Cold War ideology in the US was that there was an international Communist conspiracy out to destroy our way of life, and therefore civil liberties and human rights had to take a back seat to national security. My parents' case was proof of this equation, because they were Communists who provided the Soviet Union, according to the government, with the means

to destroy us, in the form of the atom bomb.

But it wasn't as simple as that. Not everyone accepted the official story. There were also millions of people who were horrified at the execution of a young couple with two small children. There were children who thought that this could happen to their parents, and a lot of these children are still alive.

FM: Why do you think the death penalty was handed down and carried out? What is your opinion of your father's statement: "This death sentence is not surprising. It had to be. There had to be a Rosenberg case, because there had to be an intensification of the hysteria in America to make the Korean War acceptable to the American people. There had to be hysteria and a fear sent through America in order to get increased war budgets."

RM: In the broadest sense this is true. Certainly there had to be a Rosenberg case. At the same time, there were more narrow reasons behind the death penalty itself. It was used in an attempt to coerce cooperation. The ultimatum was, "talk or die." My mother was held hostage. The government said to Julius, "You talk, admit your guilt, or she will die too."

So if you follow that to its logical conclusion, you can see that, in fact, they didn't want to carry out the death penalty, at least not at first. They fully intended to reward my parents by commuting the death sentence if they cooperated, but when they didn't cooperate, they had to show them who was boss by killing them. Behind it all was the Cold War hysteria and the political aim of whipping up support for war and repression. My parents refused to capitulate. They sacrificed their lives rather than contribute to the anti-communist hysteria.

FM: Can you tell us about your parents and their generation, including the impact of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union, and how they were radicalized as part of a broader movement of masses of working people?

RM: Their political education started much closer to home. They looked out their windows on New York's Lower East

Side and saw poverty and oppression. They saw families being thrown out of their homes because they couldn't pay their rent, and they saw squads of Communist Party young people move people back in, working at night and whenever they had to in order to help people defend themselves and their families.

They also saw the Soviet Union, which held itself up as the defender of the working class. They saw an international movement of working people trying to create a new society. These two sides played off each other, the convergence of the two really made the difference. The promise of the Soviet Union found an echo here.

FM: What about the role of Irving R. Kaufman, who presided at the trial, and Roy Cohn, who played a major role as part of the prosecution team? Do you see them as part of an effort by the authorities to immunize themselves against charges of anti-Semitism?

RM: The job of Kaufman and Cohn was to demonstrate that there was no anti-Semitism involved in the case, because they were Jews and were presiding over the trial and seeking a death sentence for their fellow Jews. In fact, the role of Kaufman and Cohn reflected anti-Semitism and the case was used to encourage anti-Semitism while denying it.

This was only five years after the end of World War II. American Jews were in many cases seeking to demonstrate their patriotism. The presence of Kaufman and Cohn indirectly showed that it was necessary for the Jewish population to prove its patriotism and its loyalty. The idea of the patriotic as opposed to the treasonous Jew assumes there is something suspect about the Jews in the first place.

FM: Do you have anything to say about the role of Ronald Radosh and others who have continued to campaign to affirm the supposed guilt of the Rosenbergs?

RM: These people are essentially apologists for the US government. To them it is much more dangerous that a few individuals like Julius Rosenberg tried to help the Soviet Union because they thought it would help the cause of peace, than that the most powerful entity on earth executed two people for something they didn't do. Those are just such topsy-turvy priorities that it is laughable.

FM: Could you explain the work of the Rosenberg Fund for Children?

RM: On a personal level I set out to help children who I see as kindred spirits, children who suffered because of attacks on their parents in response to their parents' activism.

In the 20-odd years of its existence, the RFC has made grants totaling nearly \$5 million to hundreds of children. I did some research on this and the trend in recent years shows the need for this work. In Barack Obama's first year in office there were some 600 political arrests. In the second

year this was up to 900, in the third it hit 1,300, and then, with Occupy Wall Street and other protests, there were over 8,000 political arrests in the final year of Obama's first term.

Many of those arrested have children. They are not famous, these are not big names, and their children have educational and emotional needs. The kinds of activities supported by our grants include camp, art and music lessons, school tuition, day care, therapy and the costs of travel to visit incarcerated parents.

I am now on the verge of retiring. I am not going to leave this work, but I see the need to pass on responsibility. If it is going to take years and even generations to transform our society then we on the left must work to transmit our values across generations. I see my daughter Jenn's coming assumption of leadership responsibility at the Rosenberg Fund for Children as a manifestation of that.

FM: What is the legacy of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg? Is it pertinent to the issues raised in relation to Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden? The charge of treason and of revealing "secrets" to alleged enemies is comparable to the campaign against the Rosenbergs. Today these attacks on civil liberties are part of a "global war on terror," an open-ended conflict used to fuel superpatriotism and comparable to the anti-communist hysteria of the 1950s.

RM: The legacy of my parents is their resistance. They were confronted by the US government and told that they must lie or die, that they had to admit to being involved in atomic espionage when that was not the case. My father was involved along with a number of other young men in trying to help the Soviet Union, but he had nothing to do with the atomic bomb and he was not going to lie about it.

Today, in the cases of Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden, and not only in these cases, these are young resisters, young people saying we are not going to put up with this government or any government having such awesome power to spy on the population. They will not renounce their beliefs—at least they haven't so far, and I don't think they will.

As we confront the corporate elite and the authorities, we need more people like this. The only thing I would add is that unfortunately while we have courageous individuals, what we lack is an organized mass political force to confront the corporate enemy. That's what is missing, at least so far.



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