

# The Demonization of Ethel Rosenberg

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## Introduction

On Saturday June 20th, 1953, my father announced, without warning or explanation, that I was not to read the newspapers on that day. The *Toronto Globe and Mail*, the *Toronto Telegram*, and the *Toronto Star* for that Saturday, summarily disappeared from the house. As a 12-year-old avid reader and student, I had a vague idea that this unexplained but draconian prohibition had something to do with death. I remember hunting through later editions of the newspapers, my father's sanctions having made me actually now anxiously curious.

The material he sought to shield me from was the account of the death in the electric chair, of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, an execution that took place in Sing Sing, a prison in the town of Ossining along the bucolic Hudson River. After a number of years of trials, appeals, protests, and passionate argument about spying, the Cold War, and the death penalty, and a final last ditch attempt to stay the execution, the Rosenbergs were executed early on a Friday evening (8p.m.), designed in a stunningly insensitive but surely not unconscious move in relation to the Sabbath (which would begin at 11p.m.). This occurred as the state pursued the death of this couple relentlessly and despite a massive international movement arguing for clemency and basic justice.

Now after half a century and a life both of activism, of protest, of feminism, and of psychoanalysis, I can see that this trial and execution was a sequence of events, unfolding with inexorable horror, that marked the generation of the Rosenbergs' peers but also my generation, the cohort of their children, Robert and Michael, who were 6 and 10 respectively at the time of their parents' deaths. The arrest, trial, and execution of the Rosenbergs is the dark center of the postwar Cold War and McCarthyism

hysteria that swept America. Black lists, jobs and pensions lost, careers destroyed: these casualties are simply the most visible. The toll on the physical health, mental health, and on the psychic and political resilience of the wide spectrum of progressive persons who would have felt at risk is probably incalculable, certainly very far reaching.

The Cold War historian Ellen Schrecker (1999) describes the tactic of intimidation and hostile surveillance that dogged thousands of progressive and left wing Americans after the Second World War. At the heart of that activity was the execution for espionage of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Although others were suspected or even known to have passed information, no other arrests resulted in the death penalty or in execution. These deaths were the horrifying specter that caught the heart and mind of anyone on the left in that period, probably anyone even mildly progressive. This seems to have been, as many have argued, the government's intention.

At the time, these events were highly traumatic, marking the consciousness of progressive persons worldwide. In this chapter I want to pursue the idea that these events cast a long dark shadow, operating at both conscious and unconscious levels. I believe that for my generation, the 1950s, including these events and these executions, are much more determinative than we had imagined. I include in this generational roll call people engaged in anti war activism, civil rights work, second wave feminism, gay liberation, coming into political consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s, with the eruption of anti war protest and identity politics.

Even as the politics of the 1960s, cultural and more traditionally political, were seen as a break for freedom, as explosive change and cultural transformation, I think this tragic and difficult postwar and Cold War past followed us, haunted us, entered mind and heart, led us, and accompanied us. *Nachtraglichkeit* is the filter through which to see the impact of these events. Looking back at the context of the Cold War and postwar repressive environment and looking forward to the 1960s and the activism of civil rights, anti war work and feminism and gay liberation, the linked worlds of Old and New Left, I see the persistence, the reverberations, and the pervasive reach of this trial and these deaths. It might be better to think of the notion of caesura (Bion, 1962; Civitarese, 2008) to describe and frame the experience of continuity and discontinuity between the decades of the postwar and the years around and after 1968.

I am tracking intergenerational transmission of trauma at a social and cultural level, a pervasive climate of anxiety and surveillance and control that entered individual consciousnesses at deep and often unconscious levels. I think this period begins shortly after the end of the Second World War and continues into the 1960s. The degree to which these executions reached and entered the consciousness of many North American citizens, regardless of their political sensibilities, says something about the deep reach of the state, the capacity of the government to upend normalcy, family, decency, democracy, and the rule of law in the service of state power. This lesson was deep and sure and, given the anxiety-filled quality of life in the 1950s, particularly its anxious conformity, one sees how well this lesson worked.

There was one overwhelming message to progressives, to immigrants, to Jews, and to women, emergent from the relentless pursuit and murder of this couple, in particular, the wife in this couple, Ethel Rosenberg. It was a brutal and clear warning to shut down any political activism, to give up radicalism, progressive politics and, most crucially, the Communist Party. I think my personal story and the persistence of memory of these events is not at all unique, however it is personal. I am increasingly sure that the underground, less obvious anxieties of the postwar Cold War period are, to an important degree, bedrock for my cohort's consciousness as a feminist, and bedrock to progressive political activism generally.

Two other concepts might be helpful here. Apprey (2015) writes about the unique presence of errands in the unconscious experience of individuals who carry out tasks for which they were often unaware they were marked and bidden. Apprey, I think, is bringing together *nachtraglichkeit* and *interpellation* to describe an errand targeted in the future but also, however it appears to be found, it has already been undertaken.

Abraham and Torok (1994) call these 'encrypted identifications'. While these kinds of processes are primarily thought of as transmissions within families, it seems useful to imagine these errands as often social and collective in their effect, even while remaining often unconscious in their transmission. Andrea Ritter (2011) has written about the understanding of intergenerational transmission of trauma in Hungarian psychoanalysis since Ferenczi and notes that there, it was important to notice the effect of collective trauma in which individual traumatic transmissions were embedded. She cites the work of Veres who looked at the

impact on very early archaic attachments, on the deep both paranoid and compensatory need to keep children safe, often at the expense of their individuation, when there was ongoing collective trauma. Each setting will have its own level of collective trauma, of course, and North American life has not been stained with the fascist and then totalitarian regimes that lasted half a century in Europe and in Russia. The Cold War period (and the postwar adjustment and reorganization) has its own character. In particular, I would say, this overriding frightening world of state control penetrated the consciousness of many political movements across many kinds of projects (anti war, racism, identity politics, women's rights, etc.). We might see the ongoing presence of collective trauma in contemporary crises around race and around the safety of women.

From the world of political science, Guralnik, Guralnik & Simeon (2010), and others have brought into psychoanalysis Althusser's concept of interpellation. The execution of the Rosenbergs and the demonization of Ethel Rosenberg are forms of interpellative claim, an address from the state to citizen subjects that instructs, dictates, and in that process makes a subject. The subjects thus constituted, may resist, but will also transform the warning into a command, sensing, accepting, and also refusing and ignoring the dangers both predicted and already taken place.

### **The Rosenbergs' Trial**

The arrests and prosecution followed a usual course. A grand jury was called and in the aftermath of the testimony of about 40 persons, including Ethel, both Ethel and Julius were indicted on charges of espionage. The trial began on March 6th, 1951. Ethel's brother and his wife (David and Ruth Greenglass) gave testimony implicating Julius primarily and thus both the Greenglasses were immune from prosecution. They had a new baby.

Political appeals and strong pleas for mercy were mounted. The newsreels often pictured the young Rosenberg children going to and from Sing Sing. One photo clip from the period shows them arriving at prison wearing Dodger caps. Perhaps these were conscious strategies linked to the appeals for humanity, and for clemency, by rendering the Rosenberg family human and American while the state built a picture of vicious, alien, Communist (and Jewish) criminals.

The trial and the political period in which it was set was dominated by figures like J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy and by a junior figure

who became a violently conservative and repressive figure in American political life, Roy Cohen. The hatred of civil rights and gay rights and left progressive thought was virulent in certain parts of the larger culture but exemplified and embodied in these men. That we now know that Cohen and Hoover were also closeted gay men only adds to the sense of alienation and confusion. Some of this alienation is captured in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, which in presenting the tragic heart of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, brings together the 1950s and the 1980s, the Cold War, and the social and medical tragedies of AIDS in a scene when the specter of Ethel Rosenberg arrives at the deathbed of Roy Cohen, dying of AIDS. A ghost, a visitation, a hallucination: this is *nachtraglichkeit* in action, the re-remembering and reconstituting of continuous traumatic effects even where we remember only isolated and fragmentary slices of history.

Amidst these intense political debates and battles of image and word, the Rosenbergs themselves remained silent. It was generally believed that Ethel was on trial, convicted, and under a death sentence in the hopes that the couple or at least she would break and name names. Neither one gave names. The many abuses and misuses of evidence in the trial and the passionate determination of the state and the government to convict and prosecute the Rosenbergs occupied historians and political theorists for decades. Much of the evolution of thinking about the Rosenbergs appeared in the wake of the Rosenberg children, named Meeropol for their adoptive parents, who emerged from obscurity to speak on their parents' behalf and to write a book *We Are Your Sons* (1986).

To go back to that June Saturday in 1953, I of course hunted down a newspaper and read with great agitation a terrible account. Julius was executed first as it was said that he was weak and fragile emotionally and Ethel was stronger in temperament and more emotionally robust. I will return to this idea later.

I do remain puzzled as to what had alarmed my father. What was this? We were in Canada, a thousand miles from Sing Sing. My father was not at all political in any way I might discern. He was a veteran, marked by his time in the war, and yet, also, full of charm, easy going, more normally a newspaper reader of box scores and baseball stats. I think my father was expressing what must have been a pervasive feeling of horror, some deep, visceral fear triggered by the reports in press, radio, and movie news of the circumstances surrounding the execution of Ethel Rosenberg, a botched job that led to a gruesome and horrible death.

I think my father was reacting to the grotesque details of that execution, details that were, at the time, widely distributed. The decision to make these lurid and ghastly details public would have remained in the hands of the state, which had just discharged the execution. That decision surely was part of the politically motivated project of terrorization. As a result of repeated administration of electricity, and because she was too small for the equipment she was attached to, her death was slow and laborious and a grisly mess of smoke and burnt flesh. Ethel Rosenberg was almost literally burned at the stake.

### **Ethel Rosenberg**

About Ethel's constructed place in this story, there is increasingly less and less confusion. At the time of the trial, some observers took her silence for disdain and wickedness; her husband's was seen as more enigmatic. Not initially arrested, she was by the time of the trial and certainly in the aftermath increasingly and bizarrely seen as the lynchpin, the wicked witch of Communism.

In retrospect, one sees how so many details of the prosecution and the trial were calculated and very often invented. A key element that figured in the trial was a jello box, which the prosecution claimed had been used as a signifier and identification mark for communications and meetings by the spies. There was no such box ever found so Roy Cohn held up a model jello box by way of illustration, but clearly also a way to insert a fabricated piece of evidence. It was a box of red jello. Think of this jello box as an element in a dream. This simple kitchen product, this simple American product, is used to pervert and attack America. I would read the deep agenda here as the project to identify and accuse and criminalize the immigrant, Jewish (jello was decidedly not kosher), Communist (red jello), and female (the domestic worker). Slowly, inexorably the woman comes to personify betrayal.

In looking more closely at how Ethel was positioned both in the legal discourse and in the public space, I see that Ethel is taken up as a projective object in many ways. Martyr, demonic woman secretly in control, mother, saint. Half a century of exposure to political analysis and opposition and decades of psychoanalysis have barely given me tools to think about the long shadow of that event in 1953 my father had wished to shield me from.

One crucial question underlies this chapter. What does it mean that Ethel Rosenberg is transformed from a very minimal figure on the sidelines of the espionage ring, to the center of the conspiracy? What cultural trope is at work here? Just prior to the execution, Eisenhower wrote to his son: “she is the vicious one.” When trying to explain his refusal of clemency, Eisenhower spoke privately to his son. “She is strong minded, the apparent leader. It is the woman who is the strong and recalcitrant figure, the man who is the weak one.”

Yet, it was widely known by all – both the members of her family and the state agencies that pursued her – that her involvement was slender, minimal. The FBI note on her is “in delicate health, not involved in the ‘work’” = code word for espionage.

Retrospectively we see how doomed she was. In 2008, the transcript of the grand jury testimony was released following a lawsuit brought by a number of historians who wanted to understand better the evidence that undergirded the prosecutions. Scrutinizing the testimony of 36 of the 46 people called to the grand jury, as many had suspected, testimony about Ethel’s involvement to the grand jury was fragmentary and on its own would not have led to an indictment.

The crucial testimony is that of Ruth Greenglass (Ethel’s sister-in-law, a party member and someone with a code name in the Soviet documents on US spying, which the US had already decoded). In Greenglass’ *grand jury* testimony, Ethel is a shadowy figure on the edge as the two couples feel the FBI closing in and wonder, hopelessly, where they might flee to. In the trial, both Greenglasses name Ethel as the typist of the notes the conspirators were drafting. Ruth Greenglass was in fact a typist. After his release from jail her husband David Greenglass, who had testified at the trial that Ethel was the typist, acknowledged that he had changed his testimony to protect his wife at the expense of his sister and apparently under guidance from the prosecution.

The damage however was clearly done. Transformed between the grand jury testimonies of the Greenglasses to a whole new level of involvement in the actual trial, Ethel Rosenberg begins on the edge, liminal, and in the end is toppled over the precipice into the inferno. Certainly informed about what was going on, she is never even named in the decoded spy manuals which the US already knew of (called the Venona documents). Interestingly, some commentators noted that jurors found Ethel Rosenberg’s silence a sign of disdain and criminality, not dissociated shock. From the onset of her crisis, she is already not the right kind of woman.

## **Intergenerational Transmission: In the Culture and in the Family**

This chapter and several talks I have given in the last five years were composed explicitly in reaction to the moving documentary *Heir to an Execution*, made by Ivy Meeropol, the granddaughter of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg and the daughter of Michael Meeropol, their older son. The intergenerational transmission of trauma, the wound of history that I am writing about here is a collective and social trauma as well as a wound with multigenerational elements in the Rosenberg family. I am going to focus on intergenerational trauma that is cultural and social as well as familial.

The execution of the Rosenbergs was a tragedy within a family, as Ivy's film *Heir to an Execution*, shows, but the trial and execution of the Rosenbergs and the period of repression and fear that surrounded those events shaped a postwar generation, silenced political and progressive thought, creating what Bion would call – K, the collapse of thought.

The film, the granddaughter, we the audience, we ask the question that is perhaps not fair and certainly not answerable. Technically, we ask this question of both the Rosenbergs, but upon deeper excavation I think we mostly direct it to Ethel. Was it worth it? What is worth dying for? Why did you leave your children? There are many different positions as speaker and as addressee and many assumptions (perhaps some of them naïve) about agency and about gender that run through these questions.

It is striking that both in the hands of the state and in our queries several generations later, Ethel's femininity and her maternity are the site of criticism and sanction. It is not just the state that demonizes Ethel Rosenberg, but indeed for almost everyone she carries the stigma of the rebellious woman (whatever her character actually was), a woman who could fail her children.

Were the Rosenbergs simply and fatally caught? Or is there any way to see their fate as chosen, as deliberate? In respect to Ethel Rosenberg's situation, we come quickly to the difficulty, some might say the impossibility, of female agency and the certainty of maternal responsibility, certainly in that historical period, and even now a continuing question.

The feminist sociologist, Gilda Zwerman, wrote a dissertation (1997) looking at 1970s-era women on the left, particularly far left and often violent focused groups (Weathermen, May 19th). What she found were

radical politics in relation to the state and political life and deeply conservative stances in relation to gender.

I have always thought that the split in women who did or did not enter far left movements had something to do with feminism, with the politics of self interest and not the politics of guilt. By many accounts, women in the Communist Party in the pre and postwar era had very difficult paths. Zwerman's sample of 1970s women radicals showed that these women often had longer sentences than men in similar circumstances, were more likely to lose children, paying, in short, a very steep price.

Zwerman was struck by the discrepancy between gender politics and other radical ideology, a contradiction that fatally compromised the Weathermen and other far left groups for many men and women. This is always a hard question to approach. It is easy to see the sexism, the hatred of women capitalized and used to inflame popular sentiment against the Rosenbergs with a focus on the evil of the woman. But there is also the sexism with which the Old Left and the New Left was riddled. Could one see Ethel Rosenberg in this light? In this way, we might see Ethel Rosenberg as a spectral figure in the conscience and consciousness of many generations of political and socially conscious women. She is a medium, a lightning rod for an intergenerational transmission of sexism (regardless of politics) in which a woman is dangerous if strong, failed if nonmaternal, and endangered by any belief in the conventions of gender (quietness, loyalty, or perhaps obedience).

I think of Ethel Rosenberg as an iconic object. Part of the iconography is her actual death, the attack on the body, the violence of this execution. Julius' image is much more abstracted. Enigma remains. Her impassive face and posture were apparently read by the jury as indication of a vicious character. Julius' managed expression was not read in this negative and sinister light. I see the impossibility of this woman's stance here. In thinking about the intergenerational transmissions of trauma within multiple cultures and subcultures one might see the pervasive contempt and hatred of women and the violence of the state's suppression of dissent as a kind of funeral dirge, music in a minor key that floats or rolls just under the surface of awareness.

Second wave 1970s feminism opens the portal on that pervasive low and high-grade violence. We are very accustomed to our naming and finding of sexism and repressive forces in the culture before the 1960s, but to read of the rhetoric of the radical 1960s groups (Echols, 1989;

Alpert, 1973, Sales, 1973) write powerful unsettling accounts of the internal and social and gender politics of the left in these eras is to find stunning evidence of the potent demeaning of women that dominated the practices of those groups. Yet another form of unconscious transmission despite the official and potent voices in women's liberation.

When I think of the genealogy of lost women in this history of the left, there are figures in the Old Left that I do not know but in the 1960s I think of Diana Oughton, a young woman, caught up in the Weathermen, a woman who is blown up when she and other Weathermen are building bombs in a townhouse in NYC. Similarly, another figure from that incident was later arrested for a politically motivated robbery in which policemen were killed. That woman, Kathy Boudin, and her partner, then served long and in the partner's case ongoing prison sentences. They undertake that action while also the parents of a 14-month-old child.

These narratives were repeated in European leftist movements in the 1960s (Baader Meinhof, Red Brigade) in very similar patterns. While there is some writing and some filmmaking on these experiences of women in the extreme and often violent forms of left wing politics, these ideas mostly stay under the collectively attuned radar. Can one not ask of all these figures what Ivy Meeropol wanted to ask: How could you leave your children? And recognize, even in our advanced era of feminist analysis, it is a question addressed more usually and centrally to the mother.

Perhaps inevitably, the horror and danger that this execution posed for progressive thought and action backfired. Even if only at an unconscious level, everyone, I feel, understood something of the danger of such power and so, perhaps inexorably, the seeds of transgression were sown as well as those of conformity and fear. At a personal, familial level, precisely because my father tried to shield me, I remember every detail and in a certain way, that moment at the age of 12 was the point at which, I see retrospectively, I experienced a first encounter with state-imposed terror. Sixteen years later, to me and many young people, opposition to the US actions in Vietnam made terrible sense, binding us in a genealogy. Ethel Rosenberg also sits in that genealogy.

I believe that we were a generation for whom the executions in 1953 would have been primarily part of unconscious transmissions delivered within families and within the larger culture. Left wing families would have felt this most acutely. Perhaps tragically, perhaps rightly, I think that, as a generation, we could not knit together the Old Left of the 1950s

and the anti war movements in the 1960s. These integrations across generations were activated but not without tension. Some aspects of the Rosenbergs' execution and perhaps some struggle in regard to the Communist Party and its often contradictory impact on individuals may be operative here. How well did families and children's interests fare in the zeal for political work is a controversial and painful subject. I think of Bion's concept of the caesura (Bion, 1962; Civitarese, 2008), the site of gaps and crossings, the place where experience is both continuous and discontinuous. The gap between the 1950s and the 1960s cultures is one such space.

For the generation coming into political consciousness in the 1960s, the Rosenbergs' actual and figurative children, the emergent political structures were infused and spoiled by the preceding generation's traumas and triumphs. We were living immersed in the tides of oppression and state terror that had been operating since the end of the Second World War and we felt the impossible divides between that fearful world and our own hypomanic one. Into this moment of caesura, the memory of those harrowing days intrudes.

### **Heir to an Execution**

Ivy Meeropol's documentary plays out these matters in a familial context. She makes a documentary to ask the questions that would have been perhaps unaskable by the Rosenbergs' children. Why did no family member (Julius had a number of siblings) step forward to care for the children? And later in the film, daringly, she asks why did Ethel not save herself for the sake of her children?

Why did Julius and Ethel not make that decision together? Did they make their decisions freely? Where were the rest of the families? She pursues these questions in dialogue with many of the Rosenbergs' allies and comrades from the 1950s and the prewar heyday of the Communist Party. She pursues it within her own family. It is however striking that the question about the fate of and damage to the children is asked most acutely in relation to Ethel.

Four moving scenes stand out for me, in an overall deeply heartfelt and brave film. There is an early scene in which two of the grandchildren, one a lawyer and one the filmmaker, stand in the empty courtroom in NYC where the trial took place and the lawyer grandchild confesses that

as a young person growing up she sometimes imagined that she would have been the lawyer at their trial saving them. Talk about an errand.

Later in the film, there is a scene shot in LA where Ivy meets up with a long-lost, never before met cousin, a grandson of one of Julius Rosenberg's sisters. They begin to talk and suddenly both of them are weeping. The LA cousin is confused. He feels ashamed and guilty, he says. He is carrying the agony and guilt of his mother who had declined to step in after the execution and take in the orphaned boys.

There is another striking moment when the two brothers, now men in middle age, go to visit the apartment on the Lower East Side from which first Julius and later Ethel were arrested. This would have been the last place where the family lived together and so the last site of memory of parents who could function as a place of safety. Michael is animated and talking fast. Robby moves through the spaces in a state of what I would term dissociation. One understands the hot spots from where trauma is initiated and the dissociative process that guarantees it will be transmitted under the radar of consciousness.

Late in the film there is an interchange that I want to consider in the context of intergenerational transmission of trauma. It is a moment in the film, which I realize, over the years of thinking and writing about the death of the Rosenbergs, I have never been able to integrate. Ivy Meeropol is interviewing a colleague and ally of the Rosenberg, Miriam Moskowitz, a woman under dangerous attack for her wartime and political activities. Moskowitz was indicted for giving aid to the Rosenbergs and served two years in prison. Ivy poses a question. It is *the* question. Why didn't Ethel save herself? She had children, Ivy Meeropol presses on. Moskowitz is agitated but firm. "It is an impossible question. It could not be. You cannot ask that question."

It seems clearer that the question, unaskable, is asked and asked again. We can wonder why this is asked only in relation to the mother. Unspeakable, unassimilable guilt and sadness is carried and buried in the question it is impossible to ask and equally impossible to ignore. The question and the painful affects such a question carries is part of the intergenerational legacy that is carried in progressive American (and international) circles. How do you carry the personal and the political? There is a long lineage and legacy of the impossibilities and necessities for women in political and social action and the meaning of political action for women still embedded in patriarchy.

## Encrypted Secrets, Mandated Errands

I have come to feel that that pronouncement: “It is an impossible question” marks a place where trauma remains locked in. I have thought about this increasingly as I have been researching the trajectory of other figures in that period and the challenges they faced. When Morton Sobell, a man convicted along with the Rosenbergs, but not sentenced to death, came out of prison, he toured to promote a book he was writing. The Meeropol sons were supporting his efforts and so we arranged that Sobell would come to my university in Toronto to speak. He was impressive and also so clearly marked and injured by years in prison. He wanted to take his moment of exposure and speak about prison reform. He did not re-open the matters that sent him to jail. He wanted, he said, to continue a progressive line of opposition to oppressive acts and now for him these involved men and women in prison. In Ivy Meeropol’s documentary, he is very old. Clearly suffering the aftereffects of a stroke, still he remains enigmatic about guilt or innocence. Only scant months before his death does he speak about his involvement in espionage. What is being avoided, buried, and also recalcitrantly rising into awareness?

I want to end with my current best thoughts on what the silences, late stage confessions, refusals, gaps, and absences carry. I suspect among many of the period of the trials and the 1950s at varying degree of closeness to the situation must be carrying overwhelming amounts of guilt. Survivor guilt in particular. I think this process can be tracked in thinking about the Rosenbergs’ choices, or their powerlessness. It has to be seen in the context of two other couples intimately implicated in their story. Ethel’s brother and sister in law become the fatal weak link in the network of spies, the ones finally the FBI can break. Many motives have been suggested here, most visibly that Ruth Greenglass had only recently given birth. When Ivy poses the question of his parents’ choice to Michael Meeropol in the film, he turns the question back to his daughter the filmmaker. What would that have been, how could they have acted differently? Would you want to be the Greenglasses? Unthinkable. Yes but we know that everything unthinkable is always also being thought.

There is another couple in this long saga, a more recently visible set of players in this tragic story. There was an atomic spy who remained at liberty, sheltered in England at Cambridge in the postwar era whose widow has recounted their lives within this time period. The man’s name

is Ted Hall. He was the youngest scientist at Los Alamos, recruited into the party by his Harvard roommate and involved in espionage and passing atomic secrets and key scientific data to the Russians on what he defined as moral grounds. Unlike David Greenglass who was a very low-level techie, he was a ranking scientist and would have had serious data to deliver. His argument was that there should be no secrets in science and that these secrets would lead to dangerous asymmetries in politics. He continued to manifest these views for the rest of his life.

There is interestingly a position within the American left that argues the role of the passing of information about the atomic bomb actually improved the chances of peace. Staughton Lynd:

I am a lifelong advocate of nonviolence. When I first read John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, I was horrified. But I believe the argument could be made that to whatever extent Fuchs, Gold, the Greenglasses, and one or both Rosenbergs hastened the development of a Soviet atomic bomb, it may have tended to preserve the peace of the world during the crises of the Cold War.

(Lynd, 2011)

Here is Ted Hall's obituary from *The Guardian* (December 19, 1999):

Theodore Hall was the American atomic scientist discovered by the United States authorities to have been a wartime Soviet spy – but who was never prosecuted. The information he gave Moscow was at least as sensitive as that which sent Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to the electric chair. The Americans decided not to charge Hall because of the security and legal difficulties. With the tacit consent of the British security authorities, Hall spent more than 30 years as a respected researcher at Cambridge University until he retired in 1984, aged 59.

Here is an excerpt of an interview with Joan Hall describing the evening of the Rosenberg's execution.

We watched from the sidelines in horror. . . . We had been invited to a gathering at the home of a colleague of Ted's in Westchester. We were driving up from Queens where we lived. The road took us parallel to the Hudson River past Ossining the town where Sing Sing

Prison is. It was eight o'clock [the time of the executions] as we drove by. The sun was setting. . . . I absentmindedly switched on the radio and believe it or not, they were broadcasting the last movement of Mahler's Ninth Symphony, a farewell symphony which is some of the most sad, heartbreaking music that exists. So we rode along listening to Mahler and watching the sun go down and feeling indescribable. We didn't say anything, not a word.

(Joan Hall, 2002 interview)

There are many ways to parse this material. It seems oddly dreamy and certainly quite dissociative. This couple, so clearly implicated in the activities for which the Rosenbergs are being executed, at that very moment, find themselves drifting down the Hudson River past Sing Sing. Uncanny would be the mildest term one might muster.

So, we can see the challenges and terrors of the 1950s period of repression and state crackdown. McCarthyism and the power of HUAC to control individual and collective destinies was very entrenched in the postwar period. I have been arguing that our history both as citizens and as analysts was shaped by the 1950s. That period, characterized by the collapse of freedom to think, the danger of activism, would take several decades to repair. In ways that psychoanalysts understand very well, it has been hard to even see what was missing.

### **A Thought Experiment**

In that context, let me close with a thought experiment. Three couples. All three active in progressive work, committed in varying degrees and ways to opposition to the state. Two couples are limited by funds and resources and unable to flee. One couple turns states evidence and their testimony is instrumental in the death sentence imposed and carried out on the Rosenbergs. One couple remains silent, stoic, and this stance costs them their lives. One couple, believing in the need to share scientific information, and not to make power so asymmetric by having secret weapons, remain 'at liberty,' are protected by the very state groups that might have persecuted them and live 'normally' as productive scientists and educators. They literally drive by the site of the Rosenbergs' execution, despite their moral stance about freedom of access to scientific data. All had young children at the time of the Rosenberg arrests.

Perhaps, even this account endows more agency than was actually ever really in play. Perhaps imagining choice is an illusion that somehow these decades of state surveillance and management have not dispelled for many of us. Were the Rosenbergs simply and fatally trapped? Is there a way to see their fate as choice? Regarding Ethel Rosenberg, I find myself always at the same conclusion: the impossibility of female agency and the certainty of maternal responsibility, in that historical period, on the left and on the right, and a bedeviling question to this day. It haunts Ivy Meeropol's film and her quest.

I ask the reader a different but related question than the one Ivy Meeropol posed and Miriam Moskowitz refused. What would you have done? Which path would you have trod? Would you be silent? Silent on principle or for reasons of self-preservation. Would you sacrifice others to preserve safety and family for your children? Or does the state remove these questions, make them ridiculous? Alternatively, is there a critique of the role of the Communist Party in certain kinds of doctrinal demands. Was this family sacrificed? Many people, growing up in the culture of the party, surmised deeply that children always came second. Or second at best. Gilda Zwerwin found the protection of family low on the priorities of women in extreme far left movements whom she interviewed. Is this conflict part of our traumatic intergenerational legacy whether it is generated out of the attacks by the state or by Stalinist practices on the left, or by a political vocation to fight oppression? Something like these moral and existential dilemmas led Levinas (2005) towards a concept of our responsibility to the other. How would that look in this context?

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