

The "Idealism" of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg

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The execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg has by no means ended the Communist propaganda campaign seeking their "vindication" — a campaign which, though not noticeably successful in this country, has had great effect in Europe where the facts of the case are of course less familiar to the mass of the population. One of the recent and more effective items of propaganda has been the publication of a selection of the letters written by the Rosenbergs while they were in prison. Robert Warshow tries to find in these letters some clue to the personalities of these two people who betrayed the free world in favor of the Communist tyranny, and who yet could go to their deaths secure in the conviction of their own rectitude. His article on Arthur Miller's play The Crucible, published in COMMENTARY for March of this year, may be seen as a companion piece to the present article.

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were not put to death for their opinions, but from their side, clearly, they died for their opinions nevertheless. And not only did they choose to give up their lives: each sacrificed the other, and both together sacrificed their two young children. Yet they must have loved the children; it is true that they permitted them to be exploited outrageously in the service of propaganda, but from their side, again, this would not have appeared to be exploitation. And obviously they loved each other; there is no hint of disharmony between them, and only a gross want of imagination could lead one to think they were not being spontaneous when, for instance, they stood holding hands to hear their sentence. It would be hard to overstate the immensity of their fortitude, which seems never to have come close to failure, or the weight of their suffering.

For the two years in the death cells they lived within about a hundred feet of each other but could be together only during brief weekly visits or when their lawyer came to confer with them (apparently, if they had been brothers instead of man and wife they might have had adjoining cells). They therefore had to communicate frequently in letters. A selection of their letters to each other, together with some letters to their lawyer, Emanuel Bloch, has been brought out by the "Jero Publishing Company." The selection goes up to the middle of March of this year, and the book itself went to press shortly before the Rosenbergs' execution, which took place on June 19. The volume includes also an outline of the chronology of the case and an appendix containing excerpts from the Rosenbergs' petition for clemency and statements from various people who either believed that the Rosenbergs were innocent or felt that their sentence was too severe. Proceeds from the sale of the book are supposed to go into a fund for the Rosenbergs' two children, Michael and Robert, who are ten years and six years old. In Europe these letters, like all the propaganda in the Rosenberg case, have been received with great excitement. Here, they appear to be making little impact, though there seems to be no inclination on the part of the Communists to let the propaganda campaign subside. (The weekend edition of the *Daily Worker* has been running a series of biographical articles about the Rosenbergs under the title "Two Immortals." Meetings and rallies continue to be held, and the National Committee to Secure Justice in the Rosenberg Case plans to distribute "throughout the world" the "Rosenberg Dedication Book," a slick-paper booklet offering an extremely skillful compendium of demagoguery.)

The children came to visit, and the father and mother, like any anxious and intelligent parents, discuss in their letters how best to "approach" the situation, how to give "the impression that we are not unduly upset" and thus evoke a "proper reaction." In advance of the first visit, Ethel considers that she will say something like this: "Of course, it's not easy to know about the death penalty and not worry about it sometimes, but let's look at it this

way. We know that a car could strike us and kill us, but that doesn't mean we spend every minute being fearful about cars. . . ." There is even a note of serene understanding about the "people who solved their own problems by lying about us," and she plans to assure the children that "it's all right to feel any way you like about those people, so long as your feelings don't give you pain and make you unhappy—" "Oh, yes," she adds in another letter, "if Michael neglects to question me as to the form of the death penalty, this job will fall to you. . . . Answer briefly that it is painless electrocution, which we believe will never come to pass, of course." After a second visit, Julius reports that Michael did indeed ask how the death penalty is carried out and whether there was an electric chair in the building; Julius answered straightforwardly. Michael said also, "Daddy, maybe I'll study to be a lawyer and help you in your case." "The fact is," Julius writes, "both children are disturbed."

Much of the correspondence deals with plans for the care of the children. "I fully understand and share your anguish," Julius writes, "but we are very well qualified to organize the proper program of rehabilitation for our children. . . . The entire home, play and materials situation needs a radical change. . . . Mind you, I'm not alarmed, as I feel the necessary conditions exist to do a good job. . . . I'm counting on your analytical mind and sense of detail to help carry the ball for us." As Christmas approaches, he consults the *National Guardian* for a list of suitable books for the boys.

Ethel is often more rhetorical: "I. . . experience such a stab of longing for my boy that I could howl like a she-animal who has had its young forcibly torn from her! How dared they, how dared they, the low, vile creatures, lay unclean hands upon our sacred family? And tell me, oh my sister Americans, how long shall any of your own husbands and children be safe if by your silence you permit this deed to go unchallenged!"

The fact that Julius Rosenberg can speak of a lack of toys as the "materials situation" does not in the least permit us to assume he did not suffer for his children just as much as anyone else would have suffered. Nor does the impudence of Ethel's appeal to her "sister Americans"—whose lives she had been willing to put in danger—diminish in any way the reality of the "stab of longing for my boy." On the whole, the Rosenbergs in dealing with their children sound the authentic tone of parental love in the educated and conscientious middle class, facing each "problem" boldly and without displaying undue emotion, though "of course" not denying the existence of emotion either ("Of course it's not easy to know about the death penalty and not worry about it sometimes. . . ."). This is how we all deal with our children, and surely we are right to do so. If it happens that you must "prepare" the children for their parents' death in the electric chair instead of for having their tonsils out, then doubtless something better is required. But what, for God's sake? Some unique inspiration, perhaps, and the truth. But we cannot blame the Rosenbergs for their failure to achieve an inspiration, and the commitment for which they died—and by which, we must assume, they somehow fulfilled themselves—was precisely that the truth was not to be spoken.

Not spoken, not whispered, not approached in the merest hint. These letters were undoubtedly written, or revised, for publication; in any case, they were subject to examination by prison officials. Under the circumstances, they could not have been truthful. But there is something uncanny nevertheless in the way this husband and wife felt compelled to write to each other, never evading the issue but, on the contrary, coming back to it continually in order to repeat continually what was not true. "We are innocent"—again and again Julius tells this to Ethel and Ethel tells it back to Julius. "What have we done to deserve such unhappiness? All our years we lived decent, constructive lives." "I firmly believe that we are better people because we stood up with courage through a very grueling trial and a most brutal sentence, all because we are innocent." "I'm certain we will beat this frameup. . . ." The word "Communist" never appears except in quotation marks; when Julius seeks to define the faith for which he is prepared to die, he can say only that he is "a progressive individual"—this after a fragment of autobiography, addressed to his lawyer, which makes it especially clear that he was a Communist. He is even forced to speak of espionage—to him, surely, the very crown of the "decent, constructive" life of "a progressive individual"—as a "crime": "Can I deny the principles that are so much part of me? This I can never do. I cannot live a lie nor can I be like the Greenglasses and the Bentleys. My entire life and philosophy negates this and it is obvious that I could never commit the crime I stand convicted of."

No doubt there is a certain covert truth-telling in all this, with "we are innocent" standing for "my resolve is unshaken; I will not confess." But one is forced to wonder whether the literal truth had not in some way ceased to exist for these people. It is now about seventeen years since Communists told the truth about themselves—the "popular front" was inaugurated during Julius Rosenberg's student days at City College—and enough time has passed for the symbolic language of Communism to have taken on an independent existence. On July 4, 1951, Julius clipped a copy of the Declaration of Independence from the New York *Times* and taped it to the wall of his cell. "It is interesting," he writes to Ethel, "to read these words concerning free speech, freedom of the press and of religion in this setting. These rights our country's patriots died for can't be taken from the people even by Congress or the courts." Does it matter that the Declaration of Independence says nothing about free speech, freedom of the press, or freedom of religion, and that Julius therefore could not have found it "interesting" to read "these words" in that particular document? It does not matter. Julius knew that America is supposed to have freedom of expression and that the Declaration of Independence "stands for" America. Since, therefore, he already "knew" the Declaration, there was no need for him to actually read it in order to find it "interesting," and it could not have occurred to him that he was being untruthful in implying that he had just been reading it when he had not. He could "see himself" reading it, so to speak, and this dramatic image became reality: he *did not know* that he had not read it.

Similarly, when he says "it is obvious that I could never commit the crime I stand convicted of," we cannot assume that he is simply lying. More probably, what he means is something like this: If it were a crime, I could not have done it. Since in the language of the unenlightened what I did is called a crime, and I am forced to speak in that language, the only truthful thing to say is that I did not do it.

It is as if these two had no internal sense of their own being but could see themselves only from the outside, in whatever postures their "case" seemed to demand—as if, one might say, they were only the most devoted of their thousands of "sympathizers."

"We didn't ask for this; we only wanted to be left alone, but framed we were—and with every ounce of life in our bodies we will fight until we are free."

"Together we hunted down the answers to all the seemingly insoluble riddles which a complex and callous society presented. . . . For the sake of these answers, for the sake of American democracy, justice and brotherhood, for the sake of peace and bread and roses, and children's laughter, we shall continue to sit here in dignity and in pride. . ."

"At stake here are the rights, security and very lives of all brave people of all shades of opinions."

"The world is watching our government's action in this case and the conscience of men of good will is outraged by the brutal sentence and the miscarriage of justice in the Rosenberg case."

"The Rosenbergs' calm prediction fit is Ethel Rosenberg who writes this!] that the people would refuse to acquiesce in legal murder has been borne out a thousand times over."

"Is it worth forfeiting two warm, young lives [this too is Ethel], about whose guilt the world says there is reasonable doubt, to save the face of the United States?"

"By our conduct in this case, when our lives are at stake, we are illustrating the fundamental tenets of our democracy."

The tone is no different, really, when they write of the more personal furniture of their lives:

For about an hour beginning at about 9:00 p.m. I walk and sing songs, mostly folk music, workers' songs, peoples' songs, popular tunes and excerpts from operas and symphonies. I sing Peat Bog Soldiers, Kevin Barry, United Nations, Tennessee Waltz, Irene, Down in the Valley, Beethoven's Ninth Choral Symphony. . . . In all frankness, I feel good and strong while I sing.

I am reading *Science and Politics in the Ancient World*, by Benjamin Farrington. He gives documentary proof that the enemy of scientific growth was superstition imposed on the people by the nobles of the state and heads of the church for the purpose of maintaining the status quo and their preferred class position.

. . . After a while, some of the pain gripping me eased. It needed only a radio program, and 'Ballad for Americans,' for the finishing touch. With Frank Sinatra's recording of 'House I Live In,' I had a tremendous upsurge of 'courage, confidence and perspective'!

Did you ever notice the comfortable feeling one gets reading and listening to rain? I thought, what a wonderful world we live in, and how much man could do with full utilization of his creative ability.

. . . the Dodgers [have] made me bite off every last confounded nail; 10-0, what a trouncing! It's that indomitable spirit that has endeared them to so many. But it is chiefly in their outstanding contribution to the eradication of racial prejudice that they have covered themselves with glory.

I have been reading again *Gentleman's Agreement*, and it made me realize how starved I was for intellectual exchange. . . .

I'm simply carried away, enthralled, enraptured! You can't guess. Well, I've been listening to 'Old Man Tosc' conducting the NBC summer symphony. What a magnificence of sound that guy can call forth; it's positively incredible.



It Would be heartless to multiply these quotations merely in order to make a display of the awkwardness and falsity of the Rosenbergs' relations to culture, to sports, and to themselves. But it is important to observe the dimensions of their failure, how almost nothing really belonged to them, not even their own experience; they filled their lives with the second-hand, never so much as suspecting that anything else was possible. Communism itself—the vehicle of whatever self-realization they achieved—had disappeared for them, becoming only a word to be written in quotation marks as if it represented a hallucination, and they faced death armed not even with the clichés of the proletarian revolution but only with the spiritless echoes of a few fellow-traveling newspapers and the memory of City College in 1934.

We need not doubt that Julius was strengthened by singing "Kevin Barry" or "United Nations" and that Ethel was cheered by hearing "Ballad for Americans," or, making allowance for her language, that she was "enraptured" by the NBC summer symphony. It is even possible to believe that Ethel was actually excited at the "trouncing" administered by the Dodgers to the Giants (it was the second game of the 1951 pennant play-off), and that her excitement was related to her appreciation of the Dodgers' "outstanding contribution to the eradication of racial prejudice." We know how easily these responses could have been changed: if "Old Man Tosc" had slighted Paul Robeson, if the Dodgers had fired one of their Negro players, if *Gentleman's Agreement* had been unfavorably reviewed in the *National Guardian*. But the initial responses and their contradictories would have been equally real, and equally unreal.

There is something in this more profound than insincerity. The ideal Communist responds only to the universal—to Revolution, to Progress, or, in Julius Rosenberg's revealing phrase, to "the kind of people we are." *Gentleman's Agreement* or "Ballad for Americans" are merely particular objects in which the universal happens at the moment to embody itself, and it is all the same if these objects disappear so long as new ones take their place. Whether he cheers the Yankees or the Dodgers, whether he damns Franklin Roosevelt as a warmonger or adores him as the champion of human rights, the Communist is always celebrating the same thing: the great

empty Idea which has taken on the outlines of his personality. Communists are still "idealists"—perhaps all the more so because their "idealism" is by now almost entirely without content—and the surprising degree of sympathy and even respect that they can command among liberals is partly to be explained by the liberal belief that "idealism" in itself is a virtue.

Consider the continual display of Judaism and Jewishness in these letters:

Our upbringing, the full meaning of our lives, based on a true amalgamation of our American and Jewish heritage, which to us means freedom, culture and human decency, has made us the people we are.

In a couple of days the Passover celebration of our people's search for freedom will be here. This cultural heritage has added meaning for us, who are imprisoned . . . by the modern Pharaohs.

. . . our fellow Jewish expression summarizes my feelings for [Emanuel Bloch]. *Ich shep nachuss und quell fun ihm.*

At Hebrew school . . . I absorbed quite naturally the culture of my people, their struggle for freedom from slavery in Egypt. I found the same great traditions in American history.

The Jewish services were impressive. . . .

What solace to hear your voice during the Jewish services. . . .

It is amazing how intellectually stimulating Jewish services can be. . . .

I'd appreciate it if you would give the question of the Jewish holidays and their special significance for us, as part of a prison congregation, your serious consideration between now and our next talk.

This holiday [Chanukah], signifying the victory of our forefathers in a struggle for freedom from oppression and tyranny, is a firm part of our heritage and buttresses our will to win our own freedom.

The heritage of our Hebrew culture has served our people throughout the ages and we have learned its lesson well.

Except for the crudely calculated introduction of the word "Jewish" in places where it could not have been necessary in communication between a man and his wife, most of these sentences merely repeat the worn platitudes of a thousand sermons about the Jewish tradition. Since the propaganda built up around the case emphasized the fact that the Rosenbergs were Jewish, they simply adopted the role that was demanded of them.¹ If something else had been needed, they could as easily have taken up the pose of Protestantism or Catholicism or Gandhism, and for any one of these roles they would have made use of the available platitudes (Communists are of course not alone in their predilection for the second-hand).

But is there any difference between the patently disingenuous passages about Judaism and the occasional passages where the Rosenbergs might be thought to be expressing sentiments closer to their hearts? Supposing even that they had been ready to confess their espionage and proclaim it defiantly as the service to humanity they must have believed it to be, can it be thought they would have expressed themselves any less falsely than they have done in their claims of innocence or their pious espousals of "our people's heritage"?

The point is that all beliefs, all ideas, all “heritages” were really the same to them, and they were equally incapable of truth and of falsehood. What they stood for was not Communism as a certain form of social organization, not progress as a belief in the possibility of human improvement, but only their own identity *as* Communists or “progressives,” and they were perfectly “sincere” in making use of whatever catchwords seemed at any moment to assert that identity—just as one who seeks to establish his identity as a person of culture might try to do so either by praising abstract painting or by damning it. The Rosenbergs thought and felt whatever their political commitment required them to think and to feel. But if they had not had the political commitment could they have thought and felt at all?

Well, we cannot dispose of them quite so easily. They did suffer, for themselves and for their children, and though they seem never to have questioned the necessity of their “martyrdom” or the absolute rightness of all they had ever done (“. . . when [the children] are older, they will know that all the way through, we . . . were right . . .”), they wept like anyone else at the approach of death; if it were not for that, one might wonder whether they had any real sense of what they were giving up when they chose to give up their lives.

For the final image is Still their glassy serenity of conscience. It has been reported that when the United States Marshal came to tell Ethel Rosenberg that the final stay had been rescinded and the execution would take place in a few hours, she said simply, “Well, the Rosenbergs will be the first victims of American fascism.” (The “Rosenberg Dedication Book” prints a brief note from Julius to Emanuel Bloch, dated on the day of execution, which also attributes these words to Ethel.) For her, this was a sufficient definition of what was about to happen to her. Perhaps the fact that she could say this, externalizing even her own death—not she was about to die, but a “victim of fascism”—should be for us a sufficient definition of what she had made of herself.

Inevitably it has been suggested that the Rosenbergs did not write these letters. Yet there is nothing in the quality of the letters to make one believe they could not have written them; they were people of no eloquence and little imagination, and their letters display none. (The “Rosenberg Dedication Book” demonstrates that there were writers available who could have done better.) Unquestionably there has been heavy editing, but again there is no reason to suppose that the Rosenbergs themselves may not have done the editing, both after the letters were written and in the process of writing them. In any case, the question is of no importance. The letters, if they were not written by the Rosenbergs, are what the Rosenbergs would have written. In their crudity and emptiness, in their absolute and dedicated alienation from truth and experience, these letters adequately express the Communism of 1953.

¹ It is striking that the Rosenbergs’ letters make no reference to the claim that they were “framed” because of anti-Semitism; this would seem to indicate that that particular line of propaganda has not paid off. Julius speaks in one of his letters of the possibility that the “frame-up” might stimulate anti-Semitism by encouraging the belief that all Jews are Communists. In another letter he refers to the “smear campaign” attributing anti-Semitism to the Soviet Union.

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