

Carol Jochnowitz

## The Manhattan Project Spy

### Were the Rosenbergs Killed to Hide a Government Blunder?

ON NOVEMBER 12<sup>TH</sup>, 2007, the *New York Times* ran a front-page article reporting that ten days earlier, on November 2<sup>ND</sup>, Russian President Vladimir Putin had posthumously awarded an American scientist, George Koval, the title "Hero of the Russian Federation," the highest honor the Russian government could bestow. Koval, who died in early 2006 in Moscow after having lived there for many years, had decades before worked on the Manhattan Project as a top-level scientist, with access to its most highly classified technical material. During that time, the Kremlin now revealed, Koval had systematically relayed information to the Soviet Union about the manufacture of the bomb and its fuel and about the layout of the U.S. plants at Oak Ridge, Tennessee and Dayton, Ohio that housed these projects. The facts he provided "helped speed up considerably the time it took for the Soviet Union to develop an atomic bomb of its own," the *Times* reported the Kremlin as saying.

The article explained that Koval's parents had emigrated from Russia to the U.S. in the early 20<sup>TH</sup> century, settling in Iowa, where George was born in 1913. They were Soviet sympathizers and members of the Association for Jewish Colonization in the Soviet Union, known as ICOR, which encouraged settlement in Birobidzhan, the USSR's "Jewish Autonomous Region." In 1932, possibly spurred by the stringencies of the Depression as well as by ideology, they moved there.

George graduated with honors from

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the Mendeleev Institute of Chemical Technology in Moscow. A brilliant student and a native speaker of English thoroughly conversant with American life, he was recruited by Soviet military intelligence and sent to the U.S. with faked credentials in 1940. He was soon drafted into the army and ultimately routed into the Manhattan Project.

After World War II, a Soviet defector named Igor Gouzenko informed U.S. authorities that the Soviet Union had penetrated the atom bomb project. At about the same time, the government came upon some Communist literature featuring the senior Kovals as examples of happy American emigrants to Birobidzhan. Some time thereafter, George Koval bolted to the USSR, where he stayed for the rest of his life.

*When I read this article in the Times*, I was shocked as I'd never been by any previous revelation about atomic espionage. Not because of what it said Koval had done — after all, we've known about Klaus Fuchs and Ted

Hall for years. Rather, it was because of what the government did when it learned about Koval's antecedents and the extent of his betrayal: They hushed it up out of embarrassment!

So: Here was the man who had actually done what Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were later to be publicly tried, condemned and executed for doing, namely given the Soviets the information that enabled them to build a bomb years before they otherwise could have. Did the government have a fit? Explode in hysteria? Declare that this son of (Jewish) Communists had endangered the lives of every man, woman and child in this country by his traitorous breach of national security? Did the government, in short, do what it did some years later with the Rosenbergs, when it publicly claimed it was discovering atomic spying for the first time? No, it did the opposite! National security could go hang as long as its supposed guardians were protected from humiliation!

This represents a complete inversion of the way we've been socialized to remember those earliest and most frenzied years of the Cold War. I believe it also reveals that the Rosenberg case was the complete inverse of what it has always been presented as being. I no longer believe that the Rosenbergs and Morton Sobell were tried because the Soviet Union exploded an atom bomb in 1949, resulting in a wave of panic that demanded a scapegoat, so that the government went out and found suspects against whom a diaphanous case could be contrived. I now believe, rather, that the Rosenbergs were tried and killed because the government knew that the real culprit had slipped through their fingers — and they were obsessed with keeping this from becoming known. What better distraction than a trial in which the government could be shown tracking down and bringing the 'spies' to justice? And the more

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CAROL JOCHNOWITZ retired in 2003 after serving for many years as the production editor of JEWISH CURRENTS.