

sensational, noisy, and ultimately bloody that trial could be made, the less likely it would ever be that anyone would ever suspect that the real truth lay elsewhere.

The Rosenbergs, in short, were not victims of political hysteria. Their victimization was of a purer and more wanton kind than imagined: for the purpose of avoiding embarrassment. Indeed, the *Times* article reported that “in the early 1950s” the FBI had undertaken a systematic investigation of Koval’s Manhattan Project colleagues. “The early 1950s” is as good a way as any of bracketing the years in which Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested (1950) and executed (1953). While their trial was being played out, the verdict decided and the sentence handed down, appealed, stayed, and finally carried out, the U.S. government was investigating how a scientist who had been privy to the manufacture of nuclear fuel (the most difficult and significant part of the process, according to experts) had gained the unquestioning trust of his colleagues and familiarized himself with the workings of the innermost chambers of the top-secret project. Once their research was completed, the investigators requested of their subjects “that the matter be kept confidential.” Those interrogated complied, and their silence sealed shut the affair for the next half-century.

Five days after the article appeared, the *Times* published a letter from Robert and Michael Meeropol, sons of the Rosenbergs, saying that the revelation about Koval established that “the charge that Julius and Ethel Rosenberg stole the secret of the atom bomb was a fraud from the moment that the prosecutors, with the connivance of the Atomic Energy Commission, made that case.” They concluded: “Our parents were sacrificed so that

the United States intelligence agencies could save face and cover up their negligence.”

It was a relief to see those words in print. Nevertheless, I was still waiting for the public outcry I knew must be coming. Surely, surely, in a few more days, the *Times* would publish a raft of letters from people who remembered the case, had read the article and had responded in effect, “At last, we’ve finally been proved right beyond question! The government’s malfeasance has been exposed, and it was greater than anyone ever suspected!”

This didn’t happen. So I began making phone calls, including to people fairly involved in the case. A surprising number of the people I talked to hadn’t read the article — and they weren’t the only ones. The *Times* itself seemed not to have noticed its own story: On February 1st, 2008, Koval’s name was not mentioned in an article reporting that “a group of historians, led by a government watchdog group” [the National Security Archive] and joined by the Meeropol sons, was petitioning the government for the grand jury transcripts pertaining to the Rosenberg trial. The article began with the supposition “that little . . . could still be left untold” about the case and went on to pinpoint Gouzenko’s revelations, but simply related them to the discovery of “[a] spy ring” of which the Rosenbergs were accused of being members. Once again, Koval had sunk out of sight like a stone — just as he had after World War II.

In 1989, the Soviet Union fell and some (not all!) of its top-secret archives were made public, revealing yet more information on various sensational trials — among them, it was claimed, that of Alger Hiss. No mention of Koval’s name was heard. Why not? Could it be that Russia itself was embarrassed (as has been conjectured) by the fact that it had, indeed, needed

the expertise of the enemy camp to gain the secret of the bomb?

Perhaps, in the end, this dreadful story is about the fear of embarrassment, and the monstrous consequences such fear is capable of engendering. As such, I find it more shocking than any account of evil perpetrated in the name of greed, or hatred, or fanaticism, or lust, or sadism. Those, at least, we know are radically evil — of course human lives will be lost to them! But this? ■



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