



# EXONERATE ETHEL ROSENBERG

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## Exonerate Ethel Rosenberg Press Kit

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### **I. Press Release**

**September 10, 2024**

#### **For Immediate Release: Newly Declassified National Security Agency Memo Reveals That U.S. Government Knew Ethel Rosenberg Was Not A Spy Long Before Her Trial and Execution**

*Rosenberg was executed on grounds that she conspired to provide Soviets nuclear secrets*

*Sons of Ethel Rosenberg call on President Biden to formally exonerate their mother*

Washington D.C. – The National Security Agency (NSA) released a formerly classified document that confirms that the U.S. Government knew that Ethel Rosenberg was not a spy long before her trial and execution. In response, her sons, Michael and Robert Meeropol, are calling on President Joe Biden to exonerate Rosenberg by issuing a presidential proclamation stating that she was wrongfully convicted and executed.

“My brother and I are both relieved and angered to learn that the U.S. government concluded that our mother, Ethel Rosenberg, was not a spy, seven months before her trial in 1951 and nearly three years before her execution in 1953. We are relieved to know the truth, but we are angered that the U.S. government committed this unspeakable injustice and then took 74 years to finally tell the truth by declassifying and releasing this key exculpatory memo,” said **Michael Meeropol**, 81.

“We are deeply gratified to have finally confirmed our long-held view based on decades of research by us, our attorneys, historians and journalists that our mother was not engaged in espionage, said **Robert Meeropol**, 77. “To right this wrong — this injustice committed against her and our family — the U.S. government must correct the historical record officially, and we urge President Biden to issue a presidential proclamation stating that our mother, Ethel Rosenberg, was wrongfully convicted and executed.”

In response to a July 2022 Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request by the Meeropol brothers, the National Security Agency (NSA) released an August 22, 1950 handwritten memo from Meredith Gardner, then-chief analyst of the NSA. The newly declassified memorandum reveals he concluded from reviewing Soviet intelligence that Ethel Rosenberg was not a spy. Specifically, Gardner explained in the memo (in section 5) that “she knew about her husbands [sic] work, but that due to ill health she did not engage in the work herself.”

Despite this finding by the government’s top expert on decoding Soviet communications seven months before Rosenberg’s trial, federal prosecutors proceeded to try her on the charge of conspiring to commit

espionage, recommended the death penalty, and colluded to deliver a swift, unjust death sentence. The long-discredited Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), J. Edgar Hoover, was made aware of the conclusion of Gardener's memo but chose not to share it with those with the power to alter her conviction, including presidents Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower.

The release of this recently declassified memo serves as the capstone for an overwhelming body of evidence that the U.S. government knew that Ethel Rosenberg never spied for the Soviet Union.

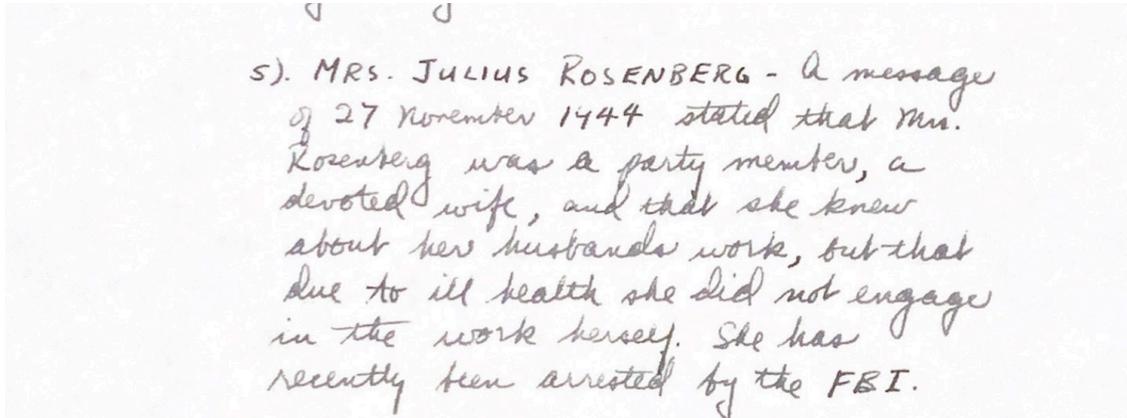
"I was ten and my brother was six when we were orphaned by the execution of our parents," said **Michael Meeropol**. "That unjust act by the U.S. government shaped our lives. Despite our good fortune to have been raised by loving adoptive parents, whose last name we live out our lives with pride, we have relentlessly pursued the truth about our parents throughout our adult lives. We are deeply gratified that we finally know the truth about our mother."

"As we pressed the NSA to declassify and release this memo, which proves that our mother was not a spy, we benefited from the tremendous support of Congressman Jim McGovern (D-MA) and his staff. Moreover, we believe that National Director of Intelligence Avril Haines' call for more transparency encouraged a new and more open approach by the NSA, which declassified this exculpatory memo, thanks to the staff of its FOIA division. We hope this release is not a one-time exception to a history of secrecy but signals a broader shift by the national security community to greater openness," said **Robert Meeropol**.

"President Biden has the power to right this historic injustice, redress the harm done to my family, and bring peace to my father and uncle in their lifetimes," said **Jenn Meeropol**, the Executive Director of the Rosenberg Fund for Children, who is also Robert's daughter and one of Ethel Rosenberg's granddaughters. "Our family is asking members of the public to support our demand for justice by [signing our petition](#) calling on President Biden to exonerate Ethel at [www.rfc.org/exonerate-ethel](http://www.rfc.org/exonerate-ethel)." This national petition campaign is being organized by the Rosenberg Fund for Children, the organization Robert founded almost 35 years ago in his parents' memory.

**For more information and interview inquiries, please contact: Rachel Harb ([rachel@rfc.org](mailto:rachel@rfc.org) | 413 239-2711)**

**II. Transcribed: Excerpt re Ethel Rosenberg from Recently declassified National Security Agency (NSA) Memo, dated August 22, 1950, from Meredith Gardner, then-chief analyst of the NSA**



22 August 1950

Atomic Energy Espionage Ring

1. All major figures in the Soviet MGB espionage ring which obtained information on the U.S. Atomic Energy project during the war, have been completely identified and arrested by the FBI. The identities [flag] of several lesser personalities who had some contact with the ring are still unknown, but these persons will probably be identified through normal FBI investigation. The key espionage personnel who appeared in 1944 MGB message texts recovered by the AFSA unit are as follow:

c. JULIUS ROSENBERG - covername ANTENNA, later changed to LIBERAL. - Rosenberg served as a recruiting agent in this country for the MGB. From MGB messages it is known that he recruited DAVID [symbol] REENGLASS, a U.S. atomic scientist. Other individuals known from the MGB messages to have been contacted by Rosenberg are as follows:

5. MRS. JULIUS ROSENBERG - A message of 27 November 1944 stated that Mrs. Rosenberg was a party member, a devoted wife, and that she knew about her husband's work, but that due to ill health she did not engage in the work herself. She has recently been arrested by the FBI.

Link to the original, handwritten memo: <https://www.rfc.org/sites/default/files/NSA%20Memo.pdf>

Link to the transcription of the entire memo:

<https://www.rfc.org/sites/default/files/Transcription%20of%20NSA%20Memo.pdf>

### **III. The Guardian: “Family of Ethel Rosenberg say US document proves she was no Soviet spy” (Sept. 10, 2024)**

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/sep/10/ethel-rosenberg-soviet-spy-new-evidence>

Edward Helmore

September 10, 2024

The family of Ethel Rosenberg, who was sent to the electric chair along with her husband, Julius, in 1953 after being convicted of spying for the Soviets at the height of the Red Scare, have called on Joe Biden to formally exonerate her after a newly released document appeared to show that the US government knew she was not a spy.

The couple maintained their innocence until the end and the case of the Rosenbergs has long been seen as a possible miscarriage of justice. Though most historians see Julius Rosenberg as a real Soviet spy, questions about Ethel Rosenberg’s role have lingered and their sons, Robert and Michael Meeropol, have long campaigned in their family’s cause.

Now, according to a National Security Agency document, a top US codebreaker who decrypted secret Soviet communications during the cold war concluded that Ethel Rosenberg knew about husband Julius’s activities in atomic espionage but “did not engage in the work herself”.

The Meeropol brothers, who were just seven and three years old when their parents were arrested, have worked for decades to establish that their mother was falsely implicated in spying. They now want Biden to exonerate Ethel Rosenberg by issuing a presidential proclamation stating that she was wrongfully convicted and executed.

“My brother and I are both relieved and angered to learn that the US government concluded that our mother, Ethel Rosenberg, was not a spy, seven months before her trial in 1951 and nearly three years before her execution in 1953,” Michael Meeropol, 81, said in a statement on Tuesday.

“We are relieved to know the truth, but we are angered that the US government committed this unspeakable injustice and then took 74 years to finally tell the truth by declassifying and releasing this key exculpatory memo,” he added.

Robert Meeropol, 77, said he was “deeply gratified” to have it finally confirmed “that our mother was not engaged in espionage” and to right the wrong – “this injustice committed against her and our family” – the US government must officially correct the record and that Biden must issue “a presidential proclamation stating that our mother, Ethel Rosenberg, was wrongfully convicted and executed”.

The previously unreported assessment released last month was written days after Rosenberg’s arrest. While few investigators doubt that Julius Rosenberg was a Soviet spy, questions about his wife’s involvement have been disputed.

The released NSA memo, written by the linguist and codebreaker Meredith Gardner from decrypted Soviet communications concludes that Ethel Rosenberg “knew about her husbands [sic] work, but that due to ill health she did not engage in the work herself”.

According to the Associated Press, the memo refers to Julius Rosenberg, who worked as a civil engineer, by his Soviet code names – first “Antenna” and later “Liberal” – and characterizes him as a recruiting agent for Soviet intelligence.

In a separate paragraph titled “Mrs Julius Rosenberg”, Gardner describes a decoded message as saying Ethel Rosenberg was a “party member” and “devoted wife” – but not herself a spy and had no code name.

The Rosenbergs were put on trial months after the memo was written despite Gardner’s assessment. The Meeropols said the memo would have been available to the FBI director, J Edgar Hoover, but he chose not to share it with those with the power to alter her conviction, including Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight D Eisenhower.

The Meeropol brothers maintain that the memo serves as the “capstone” to the body of evidence that shows their mother did not participate in spying for the Soviets.

“I was 10 and my brother was six when we were orphaned by the execution of our parents,” Michael Meeropol said.

“That unjust act by the US government shaped our lives. Despite our good fortune to have been raised by loving adoptive parents, whose last name we live out our lives with pride, we have relentlessly pursued the truth about our parents throughout our adult lives. We are deeply gratified that we finally know the truth about our mother.”

The brothers thanked the national director of intelligence, Avril Haines, for supporting a more open approach by the NSA. “We hope this release is not a one-time exception to a history of secrecy but signals a broader shift by the national security community to greater openness,” said Robert Meeropol.

A statement by the Rosenbergs’ granddaughter Jenn Meeropol said Biden had “the power to right this historic injustice, redress the harm done to my family, and bring peace to my father and uncle in their lifetimes” and called on members of the public to support their demand.

But the Rosenberg case is likely to remain controversial. The Emory University historian Harvey Klehr has said Ethel Rosenberg conspired to commit espionage because “she was an active participant in her husband’s spy network, not just someone who happened to agree with her husband about politics”.

Another historian, Mark Kramer of Harvard University, said this week that the interpretation of the Russian communication was debatable and other documents contained “damning evidence” against her.

## **IV. Why Ethel Rosenberg's Execution Was Wrongful**

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The National Security Agency (NSA) released a formerly classified document that confirms that the U.S. Government knew that Ethel Rosenberg was not a spy long before her trial and execution. The release of this recently declassified memo serves as the capstone for an overwhelming body of evidence that the U.S. government knew that Ethel Rosenberg never spied for the Soviet Union.

### Background and Timeline on the Case of Ethel Rosenberg

1. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested respectively on July 17 and August 11, 1950, accused of conspiring to commit espionage for the Soviet Union.
2. Ten days after Ethel's arrest, on August 22, 1950, a top NSA official responsible for decoding Soviet communications, Meredith Gardner, wrote a memo explaining that Ethel Rosenberg was not a spy. This memo was declassified in August of 2024 and released by the NSA, and it is one of the documents sought by the sons of the Rosenbergs in their FOIA request filed in 2022.
3. The trial of the Rosenbergs, who were charged with conspiracy to commit espionage, commenced on March 6, 1951, and concluded with their convictions on March 29, 1953.
4. On June 19, 1953, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed after several judicial appeals and pleas for presidential clemency.
5. In 1975, Michael and Robert Meeropol, the sons of the Rosenbergs, filed a FOIA request which forced the release of many previously secret files. These documents revealed that during the trial, the judge communicated secretly with the prosecutors, including the infamous Roy Cohn, an assistant U.S. attorney, who helped prosecute Ethel Rosenberg by orchestrating what was later proven to be perjurious testimony by her brother, David Greenglass.
6. When the NSA released the VENONA transcriptions in 1995 – Soviet cables that documented Soviet spying in the United States – it was revealed that the Soviet spy agency, the KGB, gave all of its agents code names, among them David and Ruth Greenglass and Julius Rosenberg. However, the Soviet Union did not give Ethel Rosenberg such a code name. In fact, David and Ruth Greenglass and Julius Rosenberg did participate in espionage for the Soviet Union.
7. In a videotaped interview on CBS's "60-Minutes II" in December 2001, David Greenglass, Ethel's brother, admitted that he told the FBI that he would not cooperate with them if they charged his wife. He also admitted that he gave false testimony against his sister, Ethel, to save his wife, Ruth, from prison or the death penalty. He said on camera, "I would not sacrifice my wife and my children for my sister. How do you like that?"
8. In his grand jury testimony made public in 2015, Ethel's brother, David Greenglass, had contradicted his sworn trial testimony that Ethel participated actively in a conspiracy with him, his wife, Ruth Greenglass, Julius Rosenberg and others to spy for the Soviet Union.
9. In 2008, the released grand jury testimony of Ethel's sister-in-law, Ruth Greenglass, revealed significant contradictions with her trial testimony. When asked by the grand jury whether or not she was the one who had taken notes, Ruth responded "Yes. I wrote [the information] down on a piece of paper and [Julius Rosenberg] took it with him." This contradicted what Ruth asserted during the trial, where she said that it was Ethel who had written down the information.
10. Decades after Ethel's execution, William P. Rogers, then Deputy Attorney General in the Eisenhower administration, said of Ethel Rosenberg that "She called our bluff" further indicating the government knew she was not a spy and had cynically tried to coerce her to testify against her husband and possibly others. Later, Rogers would serve as Secretary of State under President Richard M. Nixon.