

SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL

Darkness visible

A new film about the Rosenbergs probes a horror that has yet to heal.

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It was a name that was whispered, always whispered. The Rosenbergs, the Rosenbergs, the Rosenbergs.

Growing up Jewish in Brooklyn in the 1950s, the story of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg -- convicted of giving the secret of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union, sent to the electric chair in 1953 at the height of Cold War anticommunist hysteria, proclaiming their innocence to the end -- was terrifying to children as well as to their parents.

"They were as Jewish as they come, you could almost smell the pickled herring," says Abe Osheroff, a union activist who knew them. "There was the perception at the time," says Michael Meeropol, the Rosenbergs' son, orphaned at 10 along with his 6-year-old brother, Robert, "that it could have been anyone's parents."

"But you could only think that," says Ivy Meeropol, Michael's daughter, "if you thought they were totally innocent."

"Oh, the poster," she says, walking into the HBO hotel suite and catching a first glimpse of the artwork for her Sundance competition documentary, "Heir to an Execution." It shows a passionate kiss between two young people. Her grandparents. Both in handcuffs.

"I still think of myself as a writer," says the film's director, 35, whose background includes five years as a speechwriter and legislative aide for a

Florida congressman followed by much freelance journalism. "I'd been thinking a lot about dealing with this, thinking 'I'm a writer, and I'm avoiding the biggest story in my life. What's that all about?'"

What resulted was an exceptional documentary, short-listed for this year's Academy Award, a compelling emotional narrative laced with explosive political material. It tells a story both personal and universal about parents and children, belief and cynicism, a story that has the unforeseen twists and complexities only reality affords.

It also proved to be a story difficult to tell because 50 years after the fact, people are still frightened by it. Even in death, no one wanted the Rosenbergs; their cemetery plot was acquired through subterfuge, and still today, when Meeropol attempts to visit her grandparents' grave at the film's opening, the cemetery staff refuses to tell her where it is.

Also frightened was a prominent film producer, who, when contacted about participating in the project, wrote back a long, passionate letter in which he said, the director remembers, "we cannot revisit this dark hole in our history, especially with anti-Semitism on the rise."

More personally, Meeropol's grandparents' brothers and sisters and their children, with one exception, still refuse to talk about the case either on camera or off. "I was a little naive about approaching those relatives. I had no idea there would be such a wall," she says. "They had a hard time talking about their memories, it was just so traumatic. They've lived in hiding for so long, they don't know any other way."

Everyone is frightened by what Ivy Meeropol calls the "blood lust" that swirled around the Rosenbergs, the savage demand for their deaths that newsreel cameras recorded. "I've watched that footage a million times and still can't get over it," she says. "How is it that all these people who never met them so much wanted to kill them? That's the kind of thing that kept me going."

"Heir to an Execution" is also a story that, perhaps for the first time, puts a recognizably human face on the real Rosenbergs, people who've been fictionalized in everything from Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" to Robert Coover's "The Public Burning" and E.L. Doctorow's "The Book of Daniel."

"I wanted to find the people who knew them, get closer to them, take them out of the mythic realm as figures who were either villains or martyrs," Ivy says.

Michael Meeropol, a major presence in the film and at the festival with his daughter, knows what she's talking about. When he casually mentioned to a left-wing French union official that his parents had committed perjury by denying at their trial that they were members of the Communist Party, which

they were, "he said, 'That's impossible. They could never tell a lie.' That's the kind of iconic status they had."

Given that, Michael says, and "given how many years have passed, I never thought it was possible to make a film like this, broad in its scope but unbelievably personal. Up to now the Rosenbergs have been stick figures of history, framed by whoever's making the picture."

Ivy remembers being curious about her grandparents since early childhood. "I knew my father had been adopted, but when I wondered what happened to his other parents my dad would say, 'They died.' All kids want to know the gory details, but he wouldn't say at first. My aunt, a psychotherapist, said he should tell me the truth or else I'd make up a crazy story, though I couldn't have made up anything more horrific than what happened."

When Ivy, "aware of the fact that I'm now about the age of my grandparents when they were executed," decided to make "Heir," she acknowledges that in large part "I needed it for myself. Growing up, I didn't ask my father personal questions, I didn't want to bring up painful memories, so I was absolutely driven by my own need to know a lot of things."

But what also drove her was the fact that "I was tired of the simplistic version of this story, what history remembers, the way everyone thinks they stole the secret of the atomic bomb. I knew this wasn't true, I knew they were more than that, and I wanted to bring their story to people who don't know it or have closed their minds to it. And I needed to know what was worth standing up for, what they were willing to die for."

What this involved was re-creating the world of left-wing activists from which the Rosenbergs emerged, entering it through interviews with friends like Osheroff who are still alive and remember a time of hunger and privation, when, as one says, "you had to be dead from the neck up not to feel radical change was necessary." People, Ivy says, who were "idealists with good intentions who sincerely believed the Soviet Union was a better way. It's painful that people continue to dismiss that, and I wanted to reclaim it for them."

More than that, she says, "I'm another generation removed from this. I could ask different questions. I'm not afraid of this stuff."

If Meeropol was unafraid, that doesn't mean people weren't afraid for her. People like her father, whose directness and honesty are one of the film's strengths. "I was skeptical initially. If she'd done this at the age of 23, she would have done it without me," he says flatly.

"I had to work on my dad to get him to agree," Ivy remembers. "He worried about me, he worried about me being labeled 'the granddaughter of the

Rosenbergs,' and he worried about me being obsessed with this story. I told him it would be cathartic, and he said catharsis is not just relief at the end, it's pain in the middle."

As for the director, she had worries of her own. "I was afraid that the people on the left, who'd been my surrogate family, would really be upset with me for pushing and asking hard questions. All these people who'd been so invested in their complete innocence, I didn't want to hurt them. So many people feel so passionately about them, I had to live up to those expectations."

Given her lack of filmmaking experience, Meeropol also had to sell herself to the film's backers. "I had to convince people I could do it, that I could be in charge and not have someone else direct me. I had to prove myself every step of the way," she recalls.

The director also says she felt pressures "to have me turn the camera on myself more. But I felt this film wasn't about me, and I consciously tried to only use myself when it served the story. I wanted people to watch with me rather than watch me."

If Meeropol was unafraid of the Rosenberg story, certain aspects of it did give her pause, starting with the figure of David Greenglass, Ethel's brother. Not only was his testimony the key evidence that sent his sister to the death house, but he recently admitted, in a book and a segment on "60 Minutes," that he made it up to save himself.

"People wanted me to do things like Michael Moore with Greenglass. 'Let's stake him out, let's run down the street after him.' But the film wasn't about that. It wasn't about me trying to seek justice," says Meeropol. Instead she elected, quite effectively, simply to drive by Greenglass' house on camera and then tell her father what she'd done.

Equally difficult to deal with were what's become known as the Venona transcripts, secret Soviet cables that the government decoded in the 1940s and that were finally declassified in 1995. Though, as Robert Meeropol says on camera, it's possible that the transcripts are government disinformation, it is also possible that they are genuine, and what they say about the Rosenberg case and what the government knew about the couple has been devastating on a number of levels.

In broad strokes, what Venona shows, and what's come to be largely accepted, is that it is likely that Julius Rosenberg did spy for the Soviet Union. However, it is equally clear that a) he did not steal the secret of the atomic bomb, the crime for which he was tried and executed, and b) his wife did no spying at all. That the government arrested Ethel Rosenberg and tried to use her as a weapon to get her husband to confess is the equivalent, Michael

Meeropol says, of "taking her as a hostage and killing her when he doesn't come across. That's just awful."

"Venona was hard," Ivy says. "I really did grow up believing they were completely innocent. It was easier to believe they had been picked at random. But what I wanted to find was a deeper truth, why they would keep saying they were completely innocent."

"For me, the Rosenbergs knew what kind of legacy they'd be leaving for their children if they stood up and did not succumb to the government characterization of them. They believed what they were doing was not what was depicted in the trial, in the media. They were being the kind of people they had taught my father and uncle to be. On a deeper level, they wanted to be till the very end people their sons would admire."

Michael agrees. A passionate and articulate man, he finds himself dealing with his parents' story after having thought he was finished with it at least three times. He says when Venona came out he thought "this could very well be true" but points out that when the American Bar Assn. retried the Rosenbergs for atomic espionage in a 1990s mock trial, "we won. They were not guilty."

As to his thoughts why, given everything, his parents did not cooperate with the government, Michael says, "The only way to not go through to the end is to play the government's game all the way, to put other people in their position. That's what they didn't do. For them to have to live with the knowledge of what they had done to other people, life would not have been worth living, and they would have done Robbie and I an injustice."

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[Illustration]

Caption: PHOTO: REUNION: In "Heir," young Michael, left, and Robert are taken to Sing Sing to visit their parents.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Associated Press;
PHOTO: EMOTIONAL NARRATIVE: "Heir to an Execution" director Ivy Meeropol with her father, Michael Meeropol, son of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. Ivy finds that 50 years later, people are still frightened by what she calls the "blood lust" that swirled around her grandparents.; PHOTOGRAPHER: Francine Orr Los Angeles Times

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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