

Exonerate Ethel Campaign Call Notes October 20, 2016

INTRO - Jenn Meeropol, Executive Director, RFC (10 minutes)

- Welcome
- Been dramatic week or so for campaign
 - Some great media coverage, including terrific, double-length segment on 60 Min, made compelling case for exoneration. More on that later
- First, want to welcome any journalists, but treat call off the record. Email exonerate@rfc.org to arrange interview.
- Next, gauge who's on call
 - Press 1 if saw the 60 Minutes episode
 - About 70%. Great.
 - Available on Recent Press Coverage page on our site, and we'll include a link in the notes: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-brothers-rosenberg-cold-war-spying/>
- Also want to know if you're a current RFC supporter or just learned about us recently.
 - Press 1 if the petition is 1st thing that brought you to us.
 - About 50% donors & 50% new to us.
- Overview of call
 - All of you muted unless we call on you to ask a question. Will explain how to do that when Q&A starts
 - In a moment, turn it over to father so you can hear his personal story
 - Then back to me:
 - Explain what RFC is & why running campaign
 - Where campaign stands today
 - What you can do next to help
 - Questions from you: emailed & over the phone
 - Email questions now, or at any point: exonerate@rfc.org.
 - If don't get to yours, will try to answer in notes we send after call, or add'l email later to call registrants
 - We'll try to keep our part as brief as possible to leave plenty of time for questions and still wrap up by around 9 pm.

Robert Meeropol's STORY (10 mins)

- What happened: 1950, when 3 & brother 7, Julius arrested charged with conspiracy to commit espionage
- The political context:
 - at height of McCarthy period, Red Scare, Korean War,
 - public convinced communists were going to destroy us.
 - In this atmosphere that trial took place; they were convicted & sentenced to death.
 - For allegedly "stealing the secret of the atomic bomb" which would put everyone in the US at risk. This was the justification for execution
 - Created atmosphere in which govt could demonstrate that communists weren't dissenters but instead a threat to our way of life. The majority of the public bought it
- What Julius did do & why

- Caught him & David & Ruth Greenglass.
- Arrested Ethel as lever. The deal the govt offered the Greenglasses and the Rosenbergs. Greenglasses took it, Rosenbergs didn't: result Ruth swore she helped steal/pass secret of atomic bomb, never prosecuted. Ethel swore she didn't do anything and was executed
- What you remember
 - Very little: prison visits
 - General sense of dread, us vs. them, powerful forces & something terrible could happen, then it did
 - But prison visits were calm, parents acted normal, visits were comforting
- Starting the RFC
 - That experience led me to start the Rosenberg Fund for Children.
 - "When I was 40, sat up in bed & knew what I wanted to do - help others kids in this country experiencing what brother & I did.
 - As bad as our experience was it could have been worse; it wasn't because we were lucky to have community of support. Repression thrives in isolation; resistance flourishes in community
 - Started the RFC in 1990 to provide that community of support for other children experiencing similar oppression & led it until daughter Jenn took over when retired in 2013
 - Jenn will explain what RFC does, why managing campaign

WHAT IS RFC? - Jenn (5 min, to 8:25)

- Community mattered to my dad and his brother. Widespread fear, but people donated money so they could attend progressive schools and camps and receive therapy and participate in creative and artistic programs.
- Prison visits; as my dad mentioned, without those visits he wouldn't have memories of his parents
- That's what the Rosenberg Fund for Children does, reach out to families & help their kids in the same way the movement helped my dad & uncle. Grants for kids' educational support and emotional well-being: for summer camp, art and drama classes, dance and sports programs, therapy and funds to visit a parent in prison.
- Who do we fund: Kids whose parents are Black Lives Matters activists or organizers against police brutality, worked for economic justice and labor rights, international human rights, free speech and free press issues, LGBTQ equality & reproductive rights, freedom for all political prisoner, range of peace and anti-war efforts. And young activists who are grand jury resisters and organizers committed to gender equality, religious freedom, environmental justice, and Immigrants rights who've faced repression for their efforts.
- My dad started the RFC in 1990, 26 years old. Award about \$370,000 a year to hundreds of kids across the country. We've awarded over \$6 million in our history but grassroots organizations funded in large part by modest donations from thousands of people across the country.

CAMPAIGN AS OF TODAY - Jenn (10 min)

Overview

- 13,000 signers & growing
- Hope for 20,000 w/in few weeks, 50,000 or more when present to Pres Obama later this year
- Have started contact w/ White House. After election will have more communication & present our request

- Lining up allies who can gain the ear of the President
- Working on support from politicians, celebs, & other high profile people. Happy to announce Michael Moore recently endorsed the exoneration campaign; look for more from him and others on social media
- Also building media campaign (see recent [press coverage at <http://www.rfc.org/recentpresscoverage>])

60 Minutes

- Powerful airing of facts showing Ethel Rosenberg was wrongfully convicted, executed.
- Summarized, humanized huge body of objective evidence accumulated over past several decades.
- Reiterated that:
 - Grandmother not a spy for the Soviet Union
 - Grandfather, Julius, not involved in passing atomic secrets
 - Atomic information that was shared with the Soviets passed by other people, primarily high level scientists
 - Evidence against Ethel faked
 - Ethel's brother - chief prosecution witness against her - pressured by govt to lie under oath, providing the perjured testimony that led to her conviction and execution.
 - One thing 60 Mins didn't get into, is that person pressuring grandmother's brother to lie - asst. D.A at time, was Roy Cohn.
 - Went on to become McCarthy's right hand man
 - player in Nixon admin
 - maybe most disturbing at this moment, one of Donald Trump's most important mentors - guy who taught Trump to attack and discredit enemies, & be as ruthless as necessary to accomplish your goals
- Crystal clear that govt was the real criminal in Rosenberg case, not Ethel
- Even Ronald Radosh, one of the most outspoken Rosenberg critic, said about Ethel:
 - "She should not have been executed. The government did it as a mechanism of leverage, hoping that would push Julius to talk. It didn't work. And I think they were shocked that it didn't work."
- Segment ended w/ my father's quote: "The fact that the government facilitated the invention of evidence in order to convict someone of a capital crime should be of concern for everyone."
 - Couldn't agree more.
 - That's why the RFC is running this campaign: we know that government abuse of power is not just a historical significance; it's happening today to families we work with
- Encourage you to watch the segment online & share w/ friends by email or FB

WORKING TO GENERATE OTHER MEDIA COVERAGE

- If journalist & int. In doing story, email exonerate@rfc.org or call office during business hours (413-529-0063)

WHAT'S NEXT & HOW YOU CAN HELP: THREE KEY THINGS RIGHT NOW

1. If you have connections to the White House or are close w/ any Washington inside who might help? Contact us (at exonerate@rfc.org)
2. Help generate additional Media coverage & visibility
 - Write a letter to the editor of your local paper
 - Encourage a sympathetic politician to sign the petition (www.rfc.org/ethel)
3. Keep share the petition

- Email it to your friends & encourage them to sign and share it
- If you're on Facebook, keep sharing petition & media coverage & like, comment, share what we post on RFC FB - helps more people see it

QUESTIONS (30 mins)

Email ?s: exonerate@rfc.org or Press 1 on phone, we'll try to call on you

Jenn Meeropol: I'll start us off with a question we've received from many people via email:
What did you think of the 60 Minutes episode?

Robert: really good, game changer to tell out story on national TV. Not perfect but a made a strong case for exoneration.

Marjory: Do you really think the Obama administration will take the action you ask for?

Robert: Won't be easy but Presidents have taken surprising actions in the past just before they leave office, so it is not impossible and this is the right time to try. The best way to increase our chances is to get as many people as possible to add their names to the petition. We'd like to get 50,00 to 100,000 to join the campaign. 13,000 is a long way from 50,000, but we've seen a strong increase post-*60 Minutes* and I expect that number to grow post-election. It's worth doing everything we can to increase our chances of success.

VICKI: Can you talk more about why you think the campaign is important today?

Jenn: First reiterate what my father said on *60 Minutes*: The fact that our government was able to engineer a conviction and execution based upon false evidence for political purposes is a threat to all dissenters. Perversion of judicial process threatens anyone the government decides to prosecute. Exonerating my grandmother will help demonstrate that the government's claim that we must subordinate constitutional protections to our need for security will generate tragic miscarriages of justice. Government has never admitted that it has executed anyone who was not guilty. Educating the public about what happened to my grandmother will give a powerful boost to the anti-capital punishment movement. Not just of historical or personal significance, see this type of repression affecting the families the RFC supports today. Calling out this type of abuse of power in our past is an important step to stopping it in the present & future.

SANDRA: There are campaigns to free political prisoners including Mumia Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier and Oscar Lopez Rivera. How do you balance pushing for these pardons with your call for exoneration for your mother?

Robert: I don't view any of these efforts as competing with each other. They are complementary. A demonstration of government misconduct in one case increases awareness of the possibility of misconduct in others. Proof of government overreach in sentencing, whether it is the death penalty, life imprisonment or multi-decade sentences, raises questions about over sentencing in other cases. I support the release of all political prisoners, and I don't think I'm going out on a limb in claiming that political prisoners support the Exonerate Ethel Campaign. In fact, we recently received a letter endorsing the exoneration campaign from Mumia Abu-Jamal & expressing his support of our efforts.

DAN: What about your father? Is there a plan to pursue exoneration for him?

Robert: My father's situation is different from my mother's because, among other things, Morton Sobell, my parents' co-defendant, admitted in 2008 that he and Julius were involved in providing the Soviet Union with military industrial information (electronics, radar, aviation) during the

1940's. So we can't make a strong case that Julius did not commit espionage. Further, unlike Ethel, the KGB files and Venona transcriptions indicate that, unlike Ethel, and like David and Ruth Greenglass, Julius was given a code name by the KGB [note: see the Rosenberg Case Overview at <http://www.rfc.org/caseoverview> for additional details].

Julius did not steal the secret of the atomic bomb. This justification for his execution was false, and so I would like to see his execution declared wrongful. But this more nuanced demand will be harder to achieve. That said, the centenary of Julius' birth will take place in 2017 after Obama leaves office. I would consider mounting such a campaign at that point but it would depend upon who our next President is.

DORIS: What do you mean by exoneration? Is this different from a pardon?

Robert: Good question, I know there's confusion about this. Let me start with the genesis of the idea: August, 2006, when Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis gave me a copy of his 1976 proclamation declaring Sacco and Vanzetti's conviction and execution wrongful. I thought wouldn't it be great if we could get something similar in my parents' case. While the Dukakis Proclamation was a state, not federal, action, and I knew it would be harder to get a Federal Proclamation, the thrust of the Dukakis Proclamation had the advantage of simply proclaiming that Sacco and Vanzetti's trial had been unfair and, therefore, their conviction wrongful, rather than claiming they were innocent. That more closely matched my parents' situation, once Morton Sobell admitted involvement with my father. Then I knew a proclamation that they were innocent would be impossible, but one that declared their trial and conviction unjust might not be. Of course, once the grand jury material showed the Greenglasses' perjury concerning Ethel, I focused on my mother's case

Most Presidential actions of this nature are pardons. We are not asking for a pardon because a pardon implies guilt & I've learned that pardons are not awarded posthumously. Instead we are asking for a proclamation along Governor Dukakis' lines. Unusual, but the President himself, or acting through his Attorney General, has the power to issue such a proclamation. I can't predict the exact wording of the Proclamation, if we succeed in getting one. Like the Dukakis Proclamation, it would probably declare her trial unfair and therefore her conviction and sentence unjust. Since defendants are presumed innocent until convicted in a fair trial, a statement that Ethel's trial was unfair and her conviction unjust will reinstate the presumption of innocence for my mother. I consider this an exoneration.

Via email: Did anti-Semitism play a role in the trial?

That's a hard question to answer. Some people say anti-communism was the primary driving force of my parents' frame-up, others says it was anti-Semitism. I believe it was a deadly mixture of the two. Anti-Semitism certainly seemed to play a role in the there sentence. And it's true that there were Jewish people on all sides of the case defendants, family members, prosecutors, judges, defense attorneys (but not on the jury). The Jewish community was divided. The mainstream, seeking Americanization, was terrified that all Jews would be seen as communists and traitors, and so viewed the Rosenbergs as pariahs. The case took place just five years after the revelations of the Holocaust, so they were particularly fearful. Many believe Judge Kaufman (a Jewish judge) issued the death sentence in part to prove his loyalty to America.

Via email: Was there an actual secret of the atomic bomb?

Robert: There's no James Bond type secret. As one atomic scientist said to me years ago, it's an industry not a recipe. The scientist explained that while there were lot's of engineering secrets along the way, there was no single secret.

Via email: Would White House & press contacts be helpful? If so, how do we share them?

Jenn: Yes, we have some contacts we've been in touch with and are working to develop others but it's always useful to have contacts in the administration and/or with the press. If you have contacts you think would be helpful that you're willing to share with us, please send an email with more info (ideally names, contact info & why/how you think they'd be helpful) to exonerate@rfc.org. Thanks.

Via email: Are you expanding the campaign internationally?

Jenn: Perfectly fine for people in other countries to sign & share the petition. We're focusing on the US but you don't have to live in the US or be a US citizen to sign; we welcome support from people in other countries & encourage you to share the petition with contacts around the world.

Hector: How do we not recognize the heroism of the Rosenbergs (including Julius) in refusing to name names despite the threat of death and acting in accordance with their beliefs & principles?

All we can do is point out both Ethel's and Julius' heroism in refusing to name names and remaining true to their beliefs. This remains true whether or not either for both of them are ever exonerated.

JM: We're running out of time, so I'm going to close the call with a reminder about what else you can do to support the campaign:

- keep sharing petition & media coverage, encouraging friends to sign
- Encourage opinion makers in your community to support the exoneration effort (religious leaders, community organizers, etc)
- Like, comment, share what we post on RFC FB - helps more people see it
- Write a letter to the editor or to a sympathetic politician
- Stay tuned for additional updates

Thank you