

THE TRIAL AND EXECUTION  
OF JULIUS AND ETHEL  
ROSENBERG

# Background

- ▣ Nondescript couple who were accused in 1950 by the U.S. Government of operating a Soviet Spy network and giving the Soviets plans for the atomic bomb



# The Environment



- ❑ Irrational fear of Communists living among us
- ❑ Korean War broke out the summer before the trial
- ❑ Soviets had successfully detonated an atomic bomb
- ❑ China had come under Communist control
- ❑ FBI under pressure to route out Communists
- ❑ Senator McCarthy was on the war path

# The Rosenbergs

- ▣ Julius and Ethel both born in New York City
- ▣ Their parents were Russian immigrants
- ▣ Married in 1939 and both were committed Communists
- ▣ Two sons: Michael and Robert
- ▣ Arrested in July 1950
- ▣ Trial began March 1951



# Series of Events



- ▣ Ethel's brother, Sgt. David Greenglass, worked on the atomic-bomb project
- ▣ He passed secrets to Julius Rosenberg
- ▣ Julius passed secrets to Soviet agents

# Trial



- ▣ Ethel's brother (who was also arrested for spying) testified against them
- ▣ Both Julius and Ethel pleaded their 5<sup>th</sup> Amendment rights
- ▣ Lots of evidence against Julius...not much against Ethel

# Sentencing

- ❑ Convicted of spying for the Soviet Union
- ❑ Judge sentenced them to death because their “betrayal... undoubtedly...altered the course of history to the disadvantage of the U.S.”
- ❑ Pope appealed for their lives
- ❑ Executed on Jun 19, 1953
- ❑ The only two civilians executed for espionage-related activities



# Different Views of Rosenbergs

- ▣ Committed Communist spies who endangered the United States
- ▣ Martyred victims of the Communist hysteria of the time
- ▣ They were guilty but the death sentence was way too harsh



# Current Evidence

- ❑ Declassified Soviet documents show that Julius used the code name “Liberal” and he was the leader of a spy network of young U.S. Communists
- ❑ Former Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev claims Rosenbergs provided significant information
- ❑ Evidence against Ethel is generally considered weak



# The Children

- ▣ Robert and Michael were orphaned by the execution
- ▣ Relatives afraid to adopt them
- ▣ Finally adopted by songwriter Abel Meeropol
- ▣ Wrote books about their parents
- ▣ Letter to sons



*Robert and Michael in 1953, at the ages of 5 and 9, when they were adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol.*

