

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are executed in 1953

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Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were executed for atomic espionage.

(Originally published by the Daily News on June 20, 1953. This story was written by Henry Lee.)

Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the A-traitors who for two years had tried to outbluff Uncle Sam with the help of fellow Communists all over the world, finally were executed at Sing Sing Prison shortly after 8 o'clock last night.

The mousy Julius, his mustache shaved off, entered the death chamber first, at 8:04 P.M. and was pronounced dead, after the customary three electric shocks, at 8:06 ³/₄.

But when Ethel followed at 8:11 ¹/₂ P.M., it required five shocks to complete the death sentence, and she was not pronounced dead till 8:16 P.M. She had already been unstrapped when Drs. H.W. Kipp and George McCracken ordered the executioner to give her two more shocks.

[The Rosenbergs are sentenced to death for espionage in 1951](#)

Both died calmly - and silently. There had been some speculation that, near the end, they might crack and take advantage of government offers to save their lives by making a clean breast of their spy operation. There had been some belief, too, that they might die

chanting the dreary Communist slogans by which they had lived. But they fooled everybody - and their fellow Commies fooled them. Not one showed up in Ossining to carry on the demonstrations which the Commies have been staging all over the world for the last two years in their behalf. They died very much alone.

The only emotion was displayed by Ethel. As she entered the room, she turned to shake hands with Mrs. Helen Evans, the regular matron and then, impulsively, drew Mrs. Evans to her, hugging and kissing her a moment.

Julius was dressed in a white T-shirt and brown pants. Ethel wore a dark greenish, loose-fitting dress and both were wearing brown loafers.

For Julius, the last walk was comparatively short. For Ethel, it was long.

Only 40 Feet Away.

Just before the electrocutions, Julius was placed in one of the half dozen pre-execution cells only 40 feet from the chair. Ethel remained in her own cell in the condemned women's section - some 200 feet from the chair.

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CITY LIMITS

SPIES DIE IN CHAIR

By HENRY LEE

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Had she died first, there would have been a chance for a last good-by as she passed his curtained cell. As it was, the cell was empty - and her husband dead - when Ethel went on her last walk.

The only three newsmen permitted to witness the dual execution - the first daylight executions in the memory of Sing Sing attaches - returned from the death house at 8:25 P.M. to brief 38 other newspapermen on the deaths.

Walking the last mile with both spies in addition to guards or matrons, was Rabbi Irving Koslowe, prison chaplain. For Julius, he recited the 23d Psalm, intoning "Though I walk in the valley of the shadow of death." For Ethel, he intoned a combination of the 15th and 31st Psalms.

All through the quick proceedings, the rabbi's head was bowed, and he constantly murmured prayers for the couple.

The daylight execution - a very dim orange sun was disappearing behind the cliffs on the west side of the Hudson - was made necessary by a week-long series of court actions. The executions had been deferred beyond the customary 11 P.M. Thursday date, and the authorities wanted them to be over before the Jewish Sabbath began at 8:31 o'clock last night.

Though every government security agency reportedly had undercover representatives in Ossining - in addition to hundreds of prison guards, state troopers, county and local police - there were no disorders.

In explaining the additional two jolts given to Ethel, Dr. Kipp said he had detected a faint heartbeat after the first three. "There must be no heartbeat at all," he said, and for that reason had signaled the executioner to give the two additional jolts of 2,000 volts each.

Both spies were preceded by the rabbi as they walked slowly, calmly, to their last moment on earth. Ethel, 37-year-old mother of two sons, had a half-smile on her face. Julius, was impassive-faced, but alas she extended her hand to matron Evans and then pulled her close for the last hug and kiss.

She winced slightly when the electrode was placed against a shaved spot on the top of her head and the leather mask dropped over her face to the lips. Quickly the second electrode was placed against her right leg and the body straps applied. To the witnesses, she



appeared plump - actually she had gained 10 pounds in her two years at Sing Sing. Her rather tight, small-lipped mouth was tense.

Sketch of Julius Rosenberg in the electric chair.

Julius, 35, an electrical engineer was impassive-faced, but almost strange looking with his mustache shaven. He seemed to waddle to his death, witnesses said. It took about a minute to strap him and fasten the electrode, then Dr. Kipp watched him closely, waiting for him to exhale to give the signal for electricity.

As the jolt rocked him, the maining air was forcibly expelled from his lungs with a hissing sound. At the same time, there was the buzzing of the electricity. And then silence except for the whispered prayers of Rabbi Koslowe.

With the impact of the electricity, Julius' body strained against the head, body and leg straps and rose slightly.

There was a pause. Then came the second jolt and silence and then the final jolt. Quickly Drs. Kipp and McCracken ripped open the T-shirt, exposing the spy's hairy chest, and applied a stethoscope. They pronounced him dead and nodded to two guards who rolled a surgical table alongside the death chair.

In moments, the death cell was in readiness again, and Ethel entered. The same procedure - the same reactions - followed, except for the necessity to give her the extra two jolts. As she died, witnesses noted, a wisp of smoke rose from the left side of the electrode at the top of her head.

Though neither showed signs of collapse, Ethel was undoubtedly the stronger because by prison tradition, the weaker always goes first to the chair in dual executions. Almost at the last moment Warden Walfred Denno made his decision on the basis of reports from Principal Keeper Louis Kelly and the rabbi as to their comparative physical and mental conditions.

Besides the three newspapermen, official witnesses were Marshal William A. Carroll, Deputy Marshal Thomas Farley, Warden Denno, the two physicians and Rabbi Koslowe.



In addition, guards were present, but two matrons, Mrs. Evans and Mrs. Lucy Many, who had walked to door with Ethel, were executed from actual death scene.

According to the warden no arrangements have yet been made for disposition of the bodies, but the couple's lawyer, Emanuel Bloch, of New York, was expected to claim them. Because of the Sabbath, there will be no funeral today, it was said.

Through the tension of their last day - the adverse decision by the Supreme Court in Washington, President Eisenhower's new refusal to grant clemency, the quickened, taut tempo in the prison itself - the Mr. and Mrs. Spy team remained calm.

Sketch of Ethel Rosenberg in the electric chair.

As on Thursday, the couple were allowed to visit lengthily, both morning and afternoon, in front of Ethel's cell, separated by a heavy wire mesh screen and supervised by guard and matron. They had heard separately the bad news from the prison radio loudspeaker. They were together when the second news flash - that Ike had once again refused clemency - blared over the speaker. There was no apparent reaction from either.

About 6 P.M., Rosenberg's brother, David, drew up outside the main prison gate in a car bearing Massachusetts license plates. With him were his wife and an unidentified woman.

Only David was allowed inside, but - because of the nearness of the execution hour - he was not permitted to see his brother. He left after 15 minutes.

Ossining All Set, Violence Never Came

Mindful of a "march on Sing Sing" six month ago by Rosenberg sympathizers, of bomb threats against the judge who sentenced the couple to death and of worldwide demonstrations on behalf of the atom spies, authorities prepared to cope with violence in Ossining last night. None came.

The little Westchester community in which the dour electrical engineer and his wife were put to death was an armed camp on execution day.

All approaches to the prison were barricaded. The full prison staff of 290 was on duty or alerted for it. Ossining's 25 cops were posted in strategic points throughout the town.

Fifty state troopers stood guard at the railroad station, outside Sing Sing, and at highway entrances to Ossining.

But those who had organized and put into effect the ceaseless barrage of demonstration for the spy team obviously had given up. No pickets, no slogan-shouting zealots appeared.

No “mercy train” - and there had been “mercy trains” to Washington several times, and one to Ossining on Dec. 21, 1952 - pulled into the railroad station.