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Invitation to an Inquest

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BOOK REVIEW

INVITATION TO AN INQUEST. By Walter and Miriam Schneir. Pp. 443. Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1968. \$2.45.

"I consider your crime worse than murder" (p. 170). With these words Judge Irving R. Kaufman sentenced Julius and Ethel Rosenberg to the punishment of death for conspiring to pass atom bomb secrets to the Soviet Union. For his lesser degree of implication in the offense, Morton Sobell was sentenced to thirty years, the maximum prison term provided by the law. Walter and Miriam Schneir retell the events leading up to the arrests and convictions in their book, *Invitation to an Inquest*, which is the result of five years of extensive detective work. More than a recanting of the most controversial espionage case of the twentieth century, *Invitation to an Inquest* is an assault upon the moral turbulence of the press, public, government officials, and officers of the court in the fifties. Screaming "red panic" from every page of their book, the Schneirs accuse the FBI of forging evidence and prompting witnesses. Members of the judiciary, from the trial court to the United States Supreme Court, are condemned for their failure to recognize weaknesses in the prosecution's case and for hastily carrying out the sentences imposed by Judge Kaufman. Damaging testimony of chief prosecution witnesses such as David Greenglass, Ethel Rosenberg's brother; Ruth Greenglass, David's wife; and Harry Gold, who provided the only link between the Rosenbergs, David and Ruth Greenglass, and Anatoli Yakovlev, a former Soviet consular official, is attacked as fabrications. The Schneirs' conclusion is that not only were the Rosenbergs and Sobell unjustly convicted, "they were punished for a crime that never occurred" (p. 403).

The Rosenbergs were indicted in the wake of a series of arrests following the sensational spy confession of Klaus Fuchs, a British scientist who worked on the top-secret Manhattan project. Soon after Fuchs confessed to passing secrets to the Russians, Harry Gold, a thirty-nine-year old chemist at a Philadelphia Hospital, admitted serving as Fuchs' contact in America. Within a month, David Greenglass, an Army machinist at Los Alamos during World War II, was accused of giving atom bomb secrets to Harry Gold at a meeting in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

At the trial, Greenglass testified that Julius had recruited him to obtain secret information concerning the atom bomb from Los Alamos. According to his testimony, Rosenberg gave Ruth a piece

of cardboard and retained the matching piece in his possession. Greenglass continued, with his wife's corroboration, that on the first Sunday in June, 1945, Harry Gold visited their Albuquerque apartment with the piece of cardboard Rosenberg retained in his possession and told them he had been sent by Julius. The Los Alamos material was then transferred to Gold in exchange for \$500.

Gold testified he arrived in Albuquerque on Saturday evening, June 2, 1945. Not finding David or Ruth at home, he stayed the night in the hallway of a rooming house and, on Sunday morning, June 3, registered at a hotel under his own name. That same day, he visited the Greenglass apartment, and following instructions from Yakovlev, told David, "I come from Julius" whereupon he produced the matching piece of torn cardboard.

To strengthen the Greenglass-Gold testimony, the Government entered documentary evidence in the nature of a registration card at the hotel showing Harry Gold had registered there on June 3, 1945. To corroborate the testimony that Gold had paid the Greenglasses \$500, a transcript of the record of an Albuquerque bank showing that on June 4, 1945, Ruth Greenglass opened an account and made an initial deposit of \$400 in cash was introduced into evidence.

Based upon their subsequent investigation, the Schneirs are convinced that both Gold and Greenglass testified falsely concerning their Albuquerque meeting. Greenglass is condemned by the authors who note Ruth's statements to his attorneys that David had a "tendency to hysteria", and at times "would become delirious" (p. 344). Gold is branded as a man with "a prolific imagination and history as a liar" (p. 370). To further discredit the credibility of Gold and Greenglass, the authors point to inconsistencies between the story Gold first related to his attorneys and his subsequent trial testimony. Similarly, post-trial testimony by both men before Congressional hearings lends little credence to their trial testimony. When confronted with the evidence of the registration certificate at the hotel, however, the Schneirs' contention that Gold was not in Albuquerque on June 3, 1945, seems to break down.

To refute the conclusiveness of the registration card, the Schneirs stress their discovery that the handwritten date on the front of the card 6-3-45 does not match the back of the card on which a time-stamp machine had recorded the date of Gold's registration as

June 4, 1945. Since normal hotel procedure was to time-stamp a registration card immediately upon registration, the Schneirs conclude that there is no proof Harry Gold was in Albuquerque on the date he admitted being there. Furthermore, the authors contend, in the opinion of a handwriting expert, the registration card is a probable forgery. The identity of the forger? The Schneirs imply that such person is a member or members of the FBI. Confronted with the government's rebuttal that "even those with the frame of mind to accuse the FBI of dishonesty do not accuse it of being completely incompetent" (p. 439), the Schneirs retort that they "have no special knowledge of the FBI's general competence in the field of forgery or other illegal practices, except as reported in the press" (p. 439).

Never connected with the Albuquerque meeting was Morton Sobell, the forgotten man in the *Rosenberg* case. The only prosecution witness against Sobell was Max Elitcher, an engineer who had shared an apartment with Sobell in Washington, D. C., where both belonged to the same Communist Party group. Elitcher testified that when Julius Rosenberg tried to recruit him to provide classified information about military equipment, he stated that Sobell as "also helping in this matter" (p. 121). Elitcher also testified that he accompanied Sobell to a meeting with Rosenberg (although Elitcher did not see Rosenberg) where Sobell allegedly passed a thirty-five-millimeter film can to Rosenberg. The authors, rather than stressing the weakness of the evidence used to connect Sobell to the conspiracy, attack Elitcher by implying his testimony may have been prompted by expectations of avoiding prosecution for falsely signing a loyalty oath.

It is unfortunate that the Schneirs were prey to the very trap they contend Sobell and the Rosenbergs fell victims to—emotionalism. *Invitation to an Inquest* raises grave doubts as to the value of the information passed to the Russians. The authors raise the legitimate question of whether the punishment fit the crime. But when confronted with evidence which they cannot refute factually, they resort to amateur psychology and accusations of "cover-up" by J. Edgar Hoover, members of the FBI—the entire Justice Department. The case set forth by the authors for Sobell and the Rosenbergs is weakened by emotionally charged attacks and continuing protests of no crime.

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