Robert Meeropol was six years old when his parents Ethel and Julius Rosenberg were executed for conspiracy to commit espionage in 1953. Though this was certainly a significant event in his life, it was not the single defining moment as one might assume. It is also not the central theme of his memoir, though it does play a strong supporting role. In fact, Meeropol has only vague memories of his parents. What he does remember are years spent in orphanages and foster homes before he and his brother were adopted by Abel and Anne Meeropol. While the event did cause some childhood trauma, he reflects that I cant help feeling that I gained as much as I lost during those years. An Execution in the Family is hardly the work of a bitter man fuming at the establishment for the loss of his parents. Rather, it is the story of a thoughtful person and his struggle to find his purpose in the world. Reared on left-wing politics and social activism, he knew he wanted to help others, but he was unsure of the route to take, and his writes of his confusion and troubles with engaging frankness. Part of his restlessness stemmed from his inability to come to terms with his past. Up into his early twenties, he never revealed who his biological parents were, even to his closest friends. Ultimately, however, events forced him to acknowledge his lineage and confront the facts, plunging him into his own in-depth investigation of the Rosenbergs case. Eventually he was able to prove publicly that his parents trial had been unfair and that critical testimony against them had been tainted. He also had to acknowledge that his parents names would never be completely cleared. The process proved rewarding in many ways, notably because it served to reveal a greater purpose for him: In 1990 Meeropol started the Rosenberg Fund for Children to support children of political prisoners, beginning his life as an activist and offering him an opportunity to honor both his biological and adoptive parents in the process. My parents’ resistance inspired a movement. That inspiration survived their execution, he writes. With this memoir, Meeropol hopes in turn to inspire others. --Shawn Carkonen

My Personal Review:
Robert Meeropol's memoir of life as one of Julius and Ethel Rosenbergs two sons, with its sardonic title echoing James Agee's novel A Death in the Family (although strictly speaking its incomplete, since Meeropol had *two* executions in his family), is a powerful and moving account of growing up under the shadow of the legalized murder of both his parents by the United States government.

Having a parent in prison is not easy for a child. Having a parent executed is even worse. But having had *both* your parents executed for crimes they almost certainly did not commit, and having them become for a time the most vilified couple in America is a huge psychic burden, one which Meeropol repressed for a long time. In many ways, as he points out, he was fortunate -- he was adopted by a loving couple who raised both him and his older brother well. He received a good education, married and began a career and a family. But underneath it all was a secret he told to almost no one until he was in late twenties: that his parents had been sent to the electric chair for conspiracy to commit espionage on behalf of the Soviet Union.

Not all of Meeropol's book is about the Rosenberg Case. He has had an interesting life on his own merits, and much of it makes for engrossing reading. If I have any reservations at all about the book its because, maybe due to his being dyslexic, possibly because he's worked with children for many years, Meeropol's prose style is a little simplistic. To put it mildly. He uses commas so sparingly that I began to suspect he'd read way too much Hemingway. An average paragraph will read: CLAUSE COMMA CLAUSE FULLSTOP CLAUSE COMMA CLAUSE FULL STOP CLAUSE COMMA CLAUSE FULL STOP. I'm not saying that he should have necessarily imitated the later Henry James, but the unintentionally faux-Hemingway prose style does get a little monotonous at times.

The most gripping part of the book for me was Meeropol's growing realization that, while his parents were almost certainly not guilty of the charges for which they were executed, he was forced to accept the possibility that his father had participated in an illegal and covert effort to help the Soviet Union defeat the Nazis by supplying them with technical military information not related to the atomic bomb. Reading his sons account of how he came to grips with the fact that Julius Rosenberg allowed his devotion to the Communist ideology to enable him to give military secrets to the Russians (who, it should be pointed out, were our allies at the time) in spite of the disaster that it brought to his family, you are impressed with Robert Meeropol's desire to find out the truth about his parents, no matter what it might be.

Meeropol makes a strong case that, not only was his father not guilty of providing the Russians with the secret of the atomic bomb, he was executed along with his wife as the result of a criminal conspiracy between the attorney general of the United States and a Supreme Court Justice, who worked together to obstruct justice with the intent of placing them in the electric chair. Further, it is quite possible that Ethel Rosenberg may have been completely innocent of any wrongdoing at all. Meeropol's parents, he writes, were killed not for any crime they may have committed, but because they were Communists who would not cooperate with the FBI.
I cant recommend this book too highly. It depicts one of the most important and tragic stories in American history as seen through the eyes of one of its victims who refused to be victimized. Today Meeropol is a staunch opponent of the death penalty and runs the Rosenberg Fund for Children, a charity that aids the children of political prisoners -- a very appropriate way of honoring his parents memory. You owe it to yourself to read this book. You may not agree with everything he says, but what he has to say should be heard.

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