



Stealing Fire: Memoir of a Boyhood in the Shadow of Atomic Espionage

Boria Sax (Mount Vernon, N.Y.: Decalogue Books, 2014)

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Why would an American citizen betray his own country by passing on nuclear secrets to its sworn enemy? How does committing this kind of espionage prevent a person from living a full and authentic life? Just as importantly, what effect does this activity have on innocent members of the spy's immediate family? While Boria Sax does not attempt to fully answer these questions in his part autobiography/part history *Stealing Fire: Memoir of a Boyhood in the Shadow of Atom Espionage*, he provides important and sometimes disturbing insight into all of them. In this slim volume of eleven short chapters with multiple explanatory sidebars throughout, Sax narrates a personal journey through the reality of American espionage and its human as well national security costs, using the story of his own father, Saville "Savy" Sax, as a case study of why Americans gave away vital nuclear secrets to the then-Soviet Union during the height of the Cold War. Making use of recently released FBI records (albeit limited and acquired with difficulty) on the Hall-Sax case, Sax interweaves history with a personal memoir of growing up the child of a pro-Soviet spy which expands this narrative beyond the more familiar story of the Rosenbergs.

The first chapter of *Stealing Fire* provides an introduction and frame to the story – explaining how the author of several books about the role of animals in literature and culture came to write this Cold War human narrative – no less than the confirmation of a truth about his father that he had long suspected, when a *Washington Post* reporter called him to discuss his father's role in the espionage case of the better-known Theodore "Ted" Hall. (1-2, 128).

In the two chapters that follow, Sax takes the reader through his family history, describing his Russian Jewish paternal family background, his father's family's immigration to the United States, and most importantly, how his father became enamored of the Soviet Union and what it stood for. Chapters IV through VI narrate Savy Sax's college years as a marginal student at Harvard and increasing commitment as a Communist activist that led him to become a partner in crime with his charismatic roommate, Ted Hall. (54-56) In these chapters, Sax also digs more deeply into how large the Bomb loomed in the American imagination in the years immediately following World War II. He also probes into *why* an American would pass on atomic secrets to an enemy, using the metaphor of Prometheus' theft of fire to give to humanity to describe the mistaken idealism that motivated at least spies from this era. (44-45, 49) Finally, Sax points to the unique appeal of spying and war, both of which "offer people the opportunity to engage with impunity in such activities as killing and fraud that are otherwise socially unacceptable." (36).

The next several chapters shift the focus to the effect of Savy Sax's activity and subsequent tailing by the FBI on his subsequent (dysfunctional) marriage and family life, ranging from an increasingly abusive relationship with his wife to frequent moves, even while trying to maintain a veneer of normality. (69-710) For example, in Chapter X, the author describes the ways in which Savy Sax, finally interrogated by the FBI but never charged with anything, had integrated dissembling and guardedness into his personality so thoroughly that it permanently impaired his ability to relate to

people, poignantly noting that “since a spy must always conceal so much of his true character, he can never really open up about anything at all.” (102). Sax’s concluding chapter (notably titled “The Nineteen Sixties and After”) plus his Afterward shifts the focus to the long-term effects of growing up the child of a spy. Here Sax pointedly makes clear that the difference between the experience of Sax and his siblings differing from that of the Rosenberg sons differs less in kind than in degree.

In evaluating *Stealing Fire*, Sax writes a fascinating and riveting memoir that seeks to push back against the recent valorization and romanticization of espionage against one’s country. In telling the story of the often unacknowledged victims of espionage, Sax notably reaches the opposite conclusions of the orphaned Robert and Michael Meeropol regarding their parents, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Overall, Sax succeeds in his goal of presenting his father’s story in the context of the early Cold War, although, despite the author’s best efforts, the book at times cannot decide whether to be a memoir or history. In addition, the sidebars placed throughout the book can disrupt the flow of the narrative, even while providing important background information. Rather, Sax is most successful in shaping this memoir as a poignant counter-revisionist take on recent historical revisionism that attempts to cast Soviet-era spies as heroes; even his compassion for his father shines through throughout. In conclusion, *Stealing Fire* is a tale very much worth telling.

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