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RED LOVE

By David Evanier

340 pp. Scribners.

David Evanier's fictionalized rendering of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, executed in 1953 for passing atomic secrets to the Soviets and here called Solly and Dolly Rubell, draws us into a world that 45 years of Cold War indoctrination has made as remote as Byzantium. These 33 vignettes from a variety of viewpoints evoke the dreams, often shredded in the impersonal grinding of sanctimonious dogma, of Americans drawn to the Communist Party from the Depression to the McCarthy era. Mr. Evanier carefully sketches them as the alienated and downtrodden, radical idealists envisioning universal harmony in a world free from oppression and hatred, utopians whose minds but not hearts were off-center. Sammy Kuznekow, orphaned at two, starving, joins the Young Communist League and goes off to the Spanish Civil War only to see savagery and ineptitude at their worst among the Russian army, concluding of his once idealized Soviets "they're even worse than the Nazis." Buffalo-born Antonio Carelli's Communist father gets deported to the Soviet Union. Antonio follows him only to land in a series of Russian labor camps where the suffering defies credulity. Mr. Evanier views his characters with sympathy, especially Solly himself, turned inexorably toward Communism in 1930 at eleven under the crush of poverty and Alabama racism, so esteemed by his comrades that Davey Lapidus's own mother says, "If Solly trusts you, my son, so do I." Yet, facing execution, Solly will be sold out by the Party that views him more useful dead than alive. If overly episodic and at moments disingenuously comic, this novel is a vivid and significant record of a time when a wartime ally was frantically redefined as an evil empire while propagandist fanatics of left and right raced off the spectrum to meet seamlessly at the lunatic fringe.