

How the FBI Proved that My Father Wore Overalls:

A McCarthy-Era Story for Our Times

BY PAUL MARGOLIS

In the frightening post-September 11 world, Americans have been all too willing to give up civil liberties in exchange for a sense of greater security. There are real threats, of course, and measures do need to be taken. But, whenever I hear about the urgent need to expand the government's powers to snoop, search, and detain, I can't help thinking of the excesses of another time of fear and how they affected my family.

My late father, Samuel Margolis, was unwittingly caught in the anti-Communist hysteria of the early 1950s. His troubles began when he was accused of being a Communist by coworkers who disliked him. He was investigated by the FBI and other federal agencies and lost his livelihood for several years, but he was eventually able to clear his name.

My father was a radio telegrapher who had served in the merchant marine during World War II. He survived convoy duty in the North Atlantic, dodging torpedoes aboard ships loaded with fuel and ammunition. After the war, he and my mother wanted to start a family, so he "swallowed the anchor" and settled in Southampton, New York. After being hired by a coastal radio station that relayed messages from ships at sea, he became one of a "bench" of operators who worked in shifts around the clock. My parents found themselves as practically the only Jews in what was then an isolated, provincial community one hundred miles from Manhattan.

My father was a virtuoso of the telegraph key, which was still an important tool of global communications in those pre-satellite days. He prided himself on his "fist"—his ability to send and receive Morse code at the rate of 40–50 words per minute. Unfortunately, his social skills were somewhat less developed. He had been spoiled by years as a shipboard radio officer, where his authority was nearly as unquestioned as that of the captain's. He didn't suffer fools gladly, and he never developed the internal mechanism for self-censorship that allows the rest of us to survive at work.

My father apparently made himself unpopular on the job almost immediately. He refused to suck up to his supervisors, barely spoke to anyone, and would occasionally get into fistfights with coworkers. Not surprisingly, his employers wanted to fire him, but somehow they had let the end of his six-month probationary period elapse by a day or two. My cantankerous father stayed on at the coast station, hardly beloved, but grudgingly tolerated. He was, after all, a first-rate telegrapher; he just had some difficulties in dealing with people.

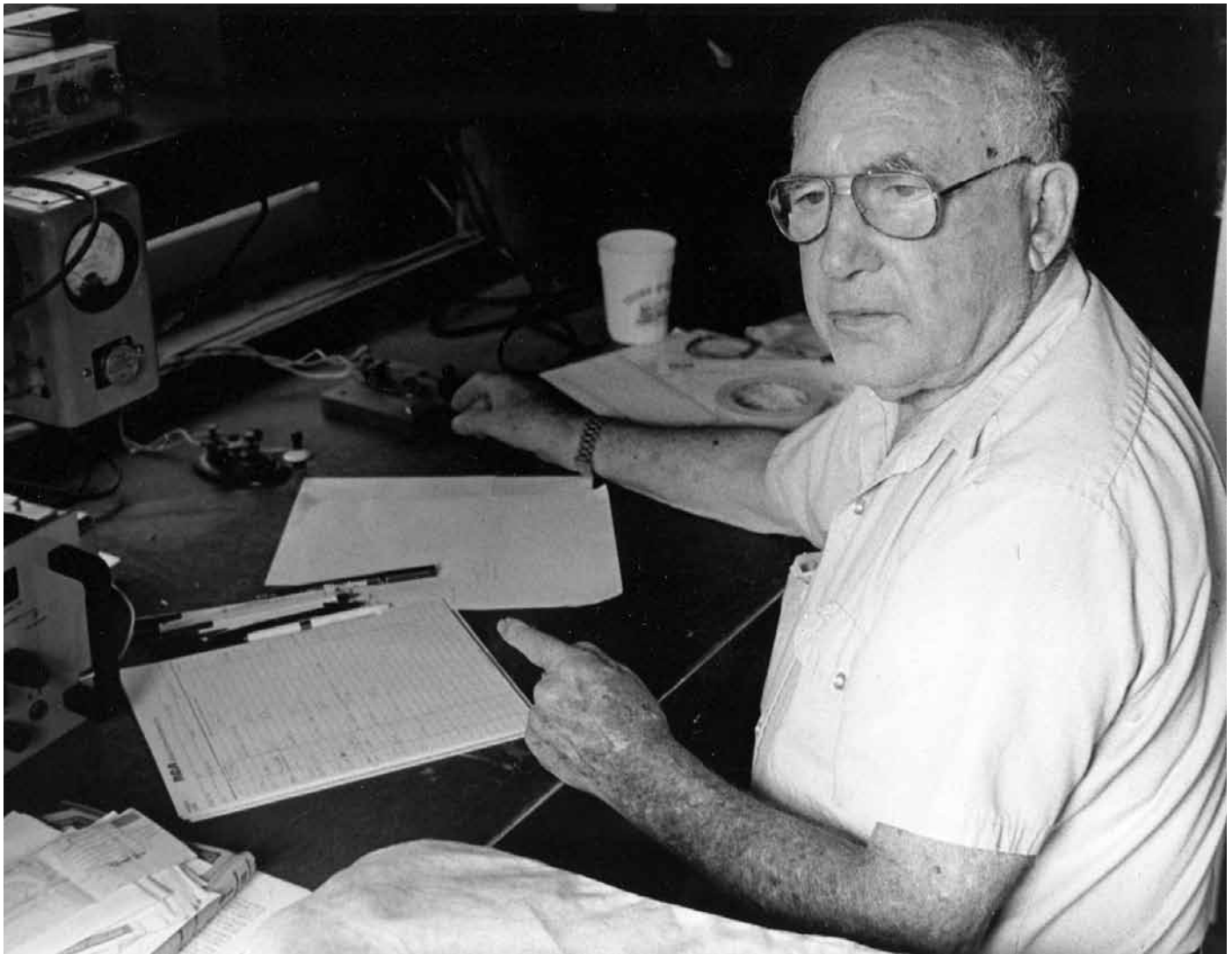
The world had become more threatening to the United States in the years after World War II. A hostile Soviet Union tightened its Iron Curtain around the countries it had occupied after the war. China was "lost" to the Communists, and U.S. troops were nearly driven off the Korean peninsula. In Washington, fingers were being pointed.

Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed he had proof that Communists had infiltrated the government at all levels. Congressional committees were set up to determine the extent of the domestic Communist threat. People were jailed and had their lives and careers ruined; some committed suicide.

This anti-Communist fervor gave my father's coworkers the idea of how they could get rid of him: they anonymously denounced him as a Communist. In short order, he was fired with no explanation, and his union wouldn't lift a finger to help him. He tried to go back to sea, but steamship companies turned him away. The U.S. Coast Guard, which issued maritime papers, told him that his radio license had been suspended pending a federal investigation, and they advised him to get a lawyer. That's how my father learned that he'd been accused of being a Communist, although he didn't know who had done it or why.

Other strange things began to happen. Men in suits came to interview my father's neighbors and coworkers. Did they ever notice anything unusual about him? What sort of visitors did he and his wife have?

Years later, thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, my father was able to get a copy of his 200-page FBI dossier. In it, there were several examples of "suspicious" behavior that had been provided by the locals: he was occasionally seen sporting a two-day growth of beard, and he often wore overalls. Cars with New Jersey



The author's late father, Samuel Margolis. Photo courtesy of Paul Margolis.

plates—belonging to visiting relatives—were sometimes seen in the driveway. My father's less-than-stellar workplace behavior was mentioned, too. The feds probably thought at the time that they'd discovered a pair of rustic Rosenbergs. After spending thousands of 1950s taxpayer dollars, the FBI apparently decided that there was no reason to believe that my father was then or ever had been a Communist. The "evidence" they had collected showed that he was, at worst, a social misfit.

My parents had a rough couple of years until my father could clear his name and get his radio license reinstated so he could work again. My mother was pregnant with me, and they had bought a house just before the troubles started. They went through their savings and ran up legal bills. My father had

almost no income during that period, except for an occasional day's work from a sympathetic neighborhood carpenter who wasn't afraid to hire a suspected Communist. For many years afterward, my father was viewed with suspicion in the small community where we lived. People wouldn't patronize his TV and radio repair business because of the Communist taint. He would have unexplained delays in renewing his radio license and needed to get the local congressman to intercede for him in Washington.

In the end, my father got the best revenge: he outlasted all of his tormentors and lived to eighty-seven. But he was scarred by the experience and never forgot it. Not surprisingly, I grew up with a certain lack of trust in the government and in authority in general.

I understand the need for increased vigilance and expanded security powers in an age of terrorism. I also worry, however, that there will be many abuses and that innocent people will have their lives turned upside down, just as it happened in McCarthy's time.

After a wide-ranging and expensive investigation of my father, the FBI was only able to prove that he wore overalls and sometimes went a few days without a shave. ▼

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