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James Donovan, seated left, represents his client Rudolf Abel, seated right (wearing glasses) in proceedings filed against Abel, during 1957, in Brooklyn's federal court. Abel faced the death penalty for espionage. Image, by unnamed photographer, online via Spy Museum.

After meeting his client for the first time, Jim Donovan thought that [Rudolf Abel](#) - at least in some respects - was a straight-up guy. He told him they faced a tough case - Abel agreed - and urged the defendant to cooperate with the feds.

Abel refused. He'd already refused the deal he'd been offered by the feds when he was in Texas:

*... the FBI offered him freedom and a \$10,000-a-year job in United States counterintelligence if he would "cooperate."* (See *Strangers on a Bridge*, by James Donovan, at [page 16](#).)

Using American slang, Abel told his lawyer he'd turned-down the offer:

*They must think all of us are rats who can be bought.* (*Strangers*, at [page 16](#).)

That's what Abel thought about the man who'd betrayed him:

*He's a rat [Abel said of Hayhanen]. I can't understand how a man, to save his own skin, would betray his country and place his family in complete dishonor at home.* (*Strangers*, at [page 16](#).)

Abel knew that Donovan had a tough job. The charges against Abel could carry the death penalty. Not only that, Donovan's family would likely face scorn beyond the insults hurled at Donovan personally. Among other things, reporters wanted to know:

*How can a man stand up for the enemy and still be considered a patriot?*

The best the lawyer could do for *himself* was to professionally handle the unprofessional insults and behavior of others.

The best he could do for his *country* was to show the world that American justice means something - even if the defendant is a Soviet spy.

The best the lawyer could do for his *client* was to save his life.

He must have recalled the words of Miles McDonald - a New York Supreme Court Justice - who'd earlier told Donovan:

*I hope you know what lies ahead. Since John Adams defended the British soldiers for the Boston Massacre, in 1774, no defense lawyer has taken on a less popular client.* (Strangers, at page 13.)

Donovan had to address the press. After he met with his client, he told the gathered reporters:

*It [Abel's arrest and indictment] should be sharply distinguished from such a case as that of the Rosenbergs who were charged with betraying their own country. Assuming the charges in this indictment are true, Abel is quite evidently ... a man who has performed an exceedingly hazardous mission for his own country ...* (See video clip of press conference included in a Department of Defense documentary about the "Hollow Nickel" case.)

In other words ... Rudolf Abel was no Julius Rosenberg, an American whom the United States had executed in 1953. But not all members of the press, or the public, were buying what Donovan was selling.

At the trial, no matter what the public thought, the former Navy officer had to give Rudolf Abel - an extremely talented but lonely man who could paint, invent and play classical guitar like an expert - the best defense he could muster.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/JAMES-DONOVAN-and-RUDOLF-ABEL-Bridge-of-Spies>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/JAMES-DONOVAN-and-RUDOLF-ABEL-Bridge-of-Spies>

## Media Stream



### James Donovan and His Client Rudolf Abel

When Rudolf Abel (Willy Fisher) was arrested by federal agents, in 1957, he asked the Brooklyn Bar Association to select counsel for him. After some consideration, James Donovan accepted Abel's defense.

In this photograph, taken in 1957, we see Donovan (seated on the left) with his client Rudolf Abel (seated, wearing glasses, on the right).

Although Donovan encouraged Abel to cooperate with the federal government, Abel refused to do so. All he would admit is that he was a citizen of the Soviet Union who was unlawfully residing in the United States.

Photo, by unnamed photographer, who took a picture of the proceedings involving Rudolf Abel in Brooklyn's federal courthouse.

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