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Recommended Citation

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Is The Holocaust A Lesson For Afro-Americans?

Duke University April 8, 1994

Good Morning. I am extremely happy and proud to have been invited to take part in this program. Throughout my entire adult life I have been a student of race relations, which has meant that I have read about and tried to understand racial bigotry in all of its ugly forms, At some point it dawned on me that to fully understand race relations, it would be necessary to look outside of the black-white relations and to study what happened to another minority group. This led me to look closely at what Jews had to endure before and during the Second World War.

The Jewish Experience, and especially what happened under the Holocaust, means a great deal to me, a person who is not Jewish. I do not mean to be trite in any manner by saying that during my 13 years at UT, some of my most significant and enduring relationships with students have been with those who are Jewish. This all started

my very first semester when I played basketball with several young men. It has grown to where they and others have invited me as a guest in their homes in Dallas, Houston, New York, Washington, and Charleston, South Carolina, and they have been guests in mine. I have learned a great deal about the Jewish faith and life in general from them. I correspond with several of my former students who are now making their way in the world. One of them, Elaine Rosenblum, who now lives in NYC, sent me a two volume work by Art Spiegelman, that is compelling reading about the Jewish experience. The books are both called MAUS. Vol. 1. A Survivor's Tale: My Father Bleeds History. And, Vol. 2 is A Survivor's Tale: And Here My Troubles Began.

My Jewish students, more than any other group, have encouraged me to continue challenging my students to think about certain issues. There have been times in class when my black students have become "mad" upon learning about some historical event; white students have become "apologetic" and wonder about the necessity of discussing certain such awful things. My Jewish students reply that it is very

important for us to confront, to discuss, to understand these aspects of our past.

In my quest to fully understand the plight of black Americans, I thought that I could learn a great deal by going to and doing research in Germany, a place where man's inhumanity to man and woman reached its logical and awful conclusion. I reasoned that learning about the Holocaust would be enlightening in and of itself and this type of research would help put the violence in Kentucky—the subject that I was working on at the time—into a certain historical context. Therefore, in July 1985, I went to Germany for the first of what has become six times. The most educational aspect of the trip occurred when I went to Dachau Concentration Camp, which is located a few miles outside of Munich. I saw artifacts, photographs, and above all a film that showed in very graphic, horrifying ways how people were put to death. To state it simply, people were murdered in horribly, obscene, and often bizarre ways, to the fullest extent of their executioner's imagination. In my ongoing attempt to understand the

Holocaust, I eventually travelled to Poland, to visit Triblinka and Auschwitz-Brikenau, and what had been the Warsaw Ghetto.

As I had hoped, learning about what happened to Jews greatly assisted me when I came to write my book, Racial Violence in Kentucky. This study documents racial violence in three distinct ways. The most dramatic way, of course, was lynchings. Kentucky had at least 353, with over 75% of the victims being black. By any definition, the number of lynchings was shocking, the extreme cruelty—the burning and mutilating—and especially the extent that such horrible acts were routinely justified by whites, including officials.

Next, there is a discussion of "Mob Rule," the practice of blacks being physically removed from various areas. This is something that European Jews can most surely identify with. Whites often forced blacks out of numerous small towns and counties. Mob rule, in fact, led to some Kentucky Counties being completely "cleansed" of Afro-Americans down to the present. Mob rule also raises questions about a right that is viewed as sacred: The ownership of property.

The final part of the book discusses the most brutal form of violence of all: "Legal Lynchings," executions that carried state sanction and presumably had been dealt out fairly and judiciously. Again, this is another tie that links the Afro-American and the Jewish experience. A few "trials" took less than an hour before finding the black guilty and sentencing him to death. So many Afro-Americans were put to death immediately after being found guilty that Kentucky eventually passed a "30 Day Cooling Off Law," but this too was blatantly violated by whites turning to "mob justice." Comprising around 10% of the population, Afro-Americans accounted for 57% of the people put to death by the state. It is extremely important to understand that no blacks served on juries; every Afro-American executed had been found guilty by an all-white jury. Also, we will never know how many times all-white grand juries refused to indict whites for criminal offenses against Afro-Americans.

Briefly before closing, I want to mention several historical connections between about race relations in Kentucky (and again by extension, all of America) and what Jews experienced in Europe under

Nazi rule. The Holocaust and my work on violence are a vivid reminder of what happens when people are stripped of their most basic human rights. Once Kentucky blacks and European Jews were denied rights, they were victimized by the group in power. It is very important to understand that the "legal system" had become an agent for the ruling elite, that it was the oppressor of the powerless, not their protector.

My work on Kentucky racial violence, and the Holocaust speak to the Selective Memory of people. Prior to my book being published, I conducted an interview with Karl Dawson, a county clerk in Russellville, where four black youths were tragically lynched in August 1908. That same summer while in Germany, I had a conversation with "Hans", a retired banker and former soldier.

Here is the key point: Jews and blacks cannot hold responsible the people we encounter today for what happened to our ancestors. But, I personally believe that as bad as racial violence was, as simply unbearable as the Holocaust was, even worst is for anyone to act as if

those things did not happen or to try to lessen the consequences of the suffering of other people. We must never forget!

A final point: a program like this is also the occasion for Afro-Americans and Jews to be reminded that their historical plight has numerous parallels. It is no coincidence that in the early 1900s a group of prominent Jews became involved in the black struggle for racial justice and equality. These Jews well understood that their own existence, which was precarious, was no stronger than the weakest link. Jewish groups gave money to black civil rights organizations. They sponsored fellowships that allowed black creative talents to flourish. A group of Jewish lawyers worked closely with the NAACP in formulating the strategy for what became the Brown Decision of May 1954.

But in the world today, we far too often allow the problems between a Jewish merchant and a black customer to become our way of viewing this entire relationship. Or, we get bogged down from the negative comments of a Jesse Jackson or Lewis Farakahan, or a radical Jew. Instead, we need to realize that this relationship has

been a very positive one, one that has endured for decades in our nation.

So often, when concluding a speech, I use the words of a poet or an author. Well, for once, I want to use my own words, which conclude my book on Racial Violence for I feel those words are most appropriate here. "Many people do not want to be reminded of a time when racial violence was rampant; they think this is too negative and dwells on only the worst aspects of society. Centuries of judicial prejudice and mob violence are not erased quickly. Within our society the dangers still remain, dormant perhaps, but present nevertheless. If we understand the past evils, and are reminded of them, perhaps such evils will stay as they should be, behind in the past."

Starkville, MS

~~Nov. 12~~

Nov 12

ASA 7761 AT 1:05

Arrive at 3:55

Nov. 14

7960 AT 6:15

Arrive at 9:15