Mississippi Freedom Summer, 1964

Fifty Years Later —
The Old Jim Crow, the New Jim Crow

The Editorial Board

Heather Booth, Freedom Summer volunteer (with guitar), with Fannie Lou Hamer, vice-chair of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and field organizer for SNCC.

Photo by Wallace Roberts
O
n the books, there was the Fourteenth Amendment, in force since 1868, guaranteeing that “No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States . . . nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” There was the Fifteenth Amendment, guaranteeing the right to vote since 1870. There was Brown v. Board of Education, the 1954 Supreme Court decision that racial segregation in education violated the Constitution — and there was about to be a new Civil Rights Act, signed by President Lyndon Johnson on July 2nd, 1964, which would make segregation in all public facilities, nationwide, illegal.

Then there was the reality, especially in Mississippi — “a state sweltering . . . with the heat of oppression,” as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. had said the previous year in his “I Have a Dream” speech. In the state’s five congressional districts, the black portion of the population ranged from 21 percent to 52 percent, yet blacks constituted under 3 percent of registered voters in three of the five and under 7 percent statewide, thanks to onerous and discriminatory voter registration “testing,” economic retaliation, and racist intimidation and violence by police, officials, and vigilantes. Mississippi’s segregated education system, meanwhile, graduated only 42 percent of white students from under 7 percent statewide, thanks to onerous and discriminatory voter registration “testing,” and discriminatory voter registration “testing,” under 3 percent of registered voters, ranging in age from 18 to 25, had trained for a week at a college campus in Ohio before travelling south, where white officials and vigilantes were waiting and ready for this so-called “communist invasion.” SNCC’s trainers saw the young volunteers as “so naive, so vulnerable, so maddeningly certain of themselves,” writes Bruce Watson in Freedom Summer (2010), that they would experience the summer of 1964 as the “exodus” of their lifetimes. Invited by the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) with the thought of shining a national spotlight on the horrors being perpetrated in Mississippi, the volunteers were screened and trained for a week at a college campus in Ohio before travelling south, where white officials and vigilantes were waiting and ready for this so-called “communist invasion.” SNCC’s trainers saw the young volunteers as “so naive, so vulnerable, so maddeningly certain of themselves,” writes Bruce Watson in Freedom Summer (2010, Viking), that “the thought of throwing them into the hellhole of Mississippi terrified those who bore its bruises and bullet wounds. . . . Mississippi sheriffs, cops, and highway patrolmen already knew their names, justice and saw parallels between the story of the Hebrews’ enslavement (and liberation) in Egypt and the Negro’s fight for freedom.”

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Robert Moses, field secretary of SNCC and co-director of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), an umbrella for the major civil rights groups then working in Mississippi, is pictured here at the Statewide Freedom Schools Convention, August, 1964. Born in Harlem in 1935, Bob Moses is a Harvard-trained math educator who received a MacArthur Fellowship (the “genius” award) in 1982 and used it to create the Algebra Project, a nationwide program to improve math education for blacks and other minorities. Moses had come to make change in Mississippi in 1961, but found the state’s racism to be intractable. By the time Freedom Summer was underway, writes Bruce Watson in Freedom Summer (2010), he was “little known outside civil rights circles but a legend within.”

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also came to provide care for the activists and the black communities supporting them. Volunteer lawyers from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and National Lawyers Guild provided legal services amid arrests and beatings. Thirty-six members of the United Federation of Teachers attended a Freedom School orientation session in Memphis, and then went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi and spread out to Freedom Schools across the state. A Caravan of Music brought folk singers south, including Pete Seeger, Phil Ochs, Judy Collins, and Julius Lester.

The National Council of Negro Women, at the instigation of Dorothy Height, its national president, and Polly Cowan, a Jewish supporter, organized a program, “Wednesdays in Mississippi,” which for two summers surreptitiously brought interracial and interfaith teams of Northern women to Jackson, Mississippi, from where they spread out to civil rights sites across the state before returning to organize support at home. There were also ministers and rabbis who came to protest at court houses, accompany voters to registration offices, and teach in Freedom Schools. (Already on site in Hattiesburg was Rabbi David Z. Ben-Ami, a child refugee from Nazi Germany who had brought his family to Mississippi in 1963 and was appointed to the Mississippi State Advisory Committee of the United States Commission on Civil Rights at the start of Freedom Summer. Ben-Ami would soon lose his contract at the local Temple B’Nai Israel because of his civil rights activism.)

**VOICEs OF FREEDom SUMMER**

“I still feel that I would let Andy go to Mississippi again. Even after this terrible thing happened to Andy, I couldn’t make a turnabout of everything I believe in.”

Carolyn Goodman (Andrew Goodman’s mother)

**HEAr! HOW OUR BROTHERS DIED FOR FREEDOM AND HOW WE ARE CARRYING ON THE FIGHT IN MISSISSIPPI!**

*COURAGEOUS MOTHER OF JAMES Chaney At New Zion Baptist Church THURS., AUG. 27, 1964*

Pete Seeger leading a song in Meridian, Mississippi, shortly after announcing the discovery of the bodies, which were hidden by the murderers in an earthen dam.

their hometowns, their full descriptions . . . [and the volunteers] would be classified into two groups, ‘niggers and nigger-lovers.’”

Still they went, in two waves from Ohio, to give support to the hundreds of activists of COFO, the Council of Federated Organizations, a coalition of civil rights organizations that was trying to register black voters and create some three dozen “Freedom Schools” (on a budget of $2,000) in small, impoverished towns throughout the state. Eventually, more than a hundred doctors and other healthcare workers from the Medical Committee for Human Rights arrived to provide care for the activists and the black communities supporting them. Volunteer lawyers from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and National Lawyers Guild provided legal services amid arrests and beatings. Thirty-six members of the United Federation of Teachers attended a Freedom School orientation session in Memphis, and then went to Hattiesburg, Mississippi and spread out to Freedom Schools across the state. A Caravan of Music brought folk singers south, including Pete Seeger, Phil Ochs, Judy Collins, and Julius Lester.

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who was Jewish, headed the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) field office in Meridian, Mississippi and was an indispensable organizer; Goodman was a Queens College student from a progressive Jewish New York family; Chaney was a black Freedom Rider and CORE activist from Meridian, Mississippi. Their corpses were successfully hidden from dozens of search parties for forty-four days (in the course of which eight black volunteers were murdered by the Klan were recovered). The Klansman family, called the murder “the first interracial lynching in the history of the United States.” The request of Schwerner’s family to have their son buried alongside James Chaney was refused by the State of Mississippi, which still enforced racial segregation in its cemeteries. Alongside this triple murder, violence was ever-present throughout the non-violent Freedom Summer campaign. Activists were driven off the road in high speed chases, one of which took the life of Wayne Yancey, a black volunteer from Chicago. Four other volunteers were critically wounded, and at least eighty received beatings. More than a thousand homes or businesses were bombed or burned. Still, the black community was undeterred. In Hattiesburg, a Freedom School based in six churches attracted an initial enrollment of 585 — “We had expected seventy-five,” said Terri Shaw, who did communications work for the school — with the eldest student a man of 85 who “had taught himself to read, but wanted to learn more in order to
take the registration test.” (Hattiesburg was also where Rabbi Arthur Lelyveld of Cleveland, Ohio was savagely attacked with a tire iron and hospitalized. Before going home to recuperate, he told reporters that Mississippi Jews should “stand up for decency and freedom with all the risks involved . . . ”) Overall, more than three thousand black Missis-
sippians attended the Freedom Schools—many of them gaining basic literacy and critical-thinking skills, as well as knowledge of black history and other subjects, while encountering white people as peers and comrades for the first time in their lives.

According to Bruce Watson, it was primarily dirt-poor farmers, independent small busi-
ness people, and a federally employed postal worker or two who took the risks of providing housing, food, protection, and support to the Freedom Summer volunteers. People employed by the white establishment, or domestic workers who depended upon white households for their livelihood, or local government employees such as school teach-
ers, could not afford the exposure. Among the most notable of the local leaders whom Watson cites in his book were Fannie Lou Hamer, the twentieth child of sharecroppers who’d been viciously beaten by police and was “sick and tired of being sick and tired”; Aaron Henry, a pharmacist who succeeded the assassinated Medgar Evers as black Mississippi’s spokesperson; Victoria Gray, who ran a cosmetics business and became a SNCC field secretary; and Amzie Moore, a postal worker, World War II veteran, and “father figure to Bob Moses” whose home in McComb served as a meeting place and shelter for civil rights activists.

Voter registration efforts during Freedom Summer were thwarted, as they had been since Bob Moses first attempted to lead a registration drive in Missis-
sippi in 1961, by racist officials, a heritage of terror among rural black Mississip-
pians, and a lack of adequate resources for what Terri Shaw called the “hot, dusty work” of visiting rural communities that had dirt roads and little telephone service, to help people find the courage and the transportation to attempt to register to vote. “Register-
ing to vote had always carried grave risks in Mississippi,” writes Bruce Watson, “but Freedom Summer saw those risks stalk the streets. Canvassers were often

**VOICES OF FREEDOM SUMMER**

“The atmosphere in the class is unbelievable. It is what every
teacher dreams about — real, honest enthusiasm and desire to
learn anything and everything. . . . They drain me of everything that
I have to offer so that I go home
at night completely exhausted but
very happy in spirit.”

*Pamela Parker (see p. 13)*
I f we organize, we can change the world. I learned this lesson powerfully from my experience with the Mississippi Summer Project in 1964.

I was 18, a white Chicago student, joining with others to shine a spotlight on the conditions in Mississippi and the horrors of America’s apartheid system. I went to live with the Hawkins family in Shaw, Mississippi. Andrew Hawkins (the father) was to be a delegate to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in Atlantic City. He knew more about Chicago politics than I did. Mary Lou (the mother) organized cotton fieldworkers for better wages and was the first black woman to bring her children to Shaw High School, an all-white school. The family was so generous, giving three of us volunteers their bed to sleep in for that summer. In their family there is a heart-rending tale of courage.

Voices of the Volunteers: Heather Booth

Heather Booth was the founding director of the Midwest Academy, training social change leaders and organizers. Booth was the founding director and is now president of Americans for Financial Reform and was the founding director and is now president of Americans for Financial Reform. She is currently consulting with groups that include the Alliance for Citizenship (working on voter registration) and the campus organizing program at the University of California. Heather Booth is currently consulting with groups that include the Alliance for Citizenship (working on voter registration) and the campus organizing program at the University of California. Her writing can be found at www.crmvet.org, as well as in the anthologies, Freedom Is a Constant Struggle and Finding Freedom, Memorializing the Voices of Freedom Summer. Some of her letters were included in Freedom Summer.

Heather Booth picketing the Bolivar County Courthouse. Photo by Wallace Roberts

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Voices of the Volunteers: Chude Pam Allen

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Chude Pam Allen was a Freedom School teacher in Holly Springs, Mississippi. In 1964 she was a Christian and a religion major in college. Today she is a member of the Bay Area Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement and coordinates speakers for schools and community groups. Her writing can be found at www.crmvet.org, as well as in the anthologies, Freedom Is a Constant Struggle and Finding Freedom, Memorializing the Voices of Freedom Summer. Some of her letters were included in Letters From Mississippi (New American Library, 1965).
I was a SNCC organizer off and on between 1961 and ’65, first in Georgia and then in Mississippi. It never occurred to me not to go South. My parents transmitted to me their belief that a better, more just world was possible. This belief lasted longer than their membership in the Communist Party. It was rooted in their Jewishness. I grew up with Jewish Life and JEWISH CURRENTS. I went to an IWO (International Workers Order) Yiddish shule.

When I told my parents I was going to work for SNCC, I repeated all the things they’d taught me: what a mentor does is fight for justice; the Jewish people will never be safe from disaster unless discrimination against any group is impossible; if African Americans in the South could vote, they would vote out of office the Southern racist reactionaries who dominated the government.

My parents agreed with everything I said, but told me that actually doing something wasn’t worth the risk. The theories, the talk, the political songs I grew up with were beautiful and correct, but they were meant to be just that: theories, talk and songs. Talking the talk was great; walking the walk, not so much.

Voices of the Volunteers:
Larry Rubin

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But South I went.

SNCC work was tedious. We canvassed from house to house in groups, preferably with both black and white canvassers. At first, we generally made small-talk: The weather’s been hot, the church picnic is coming up. The second time, if trust had developed, we spoke about registering to vote, or joining the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. We encouraged black tenant farmers to get together to vote in elections for members of their county Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Committee. Among other things, these committees determined who would get how much in subsidies for planting — or not planting — cotton.

Through canvassing, I learned I was white. Growing up, I’d always been encouraged to discover my own individuality. But in Mississippi, most everybody had to fit into a category developed in the Master-Slave culture, and my category was “white” — even though, if anything, I thought of myself as “Jewish.” Local African-American leaders were very generous in helping people of diverse backgrounds work together despite cultural differences, but to the average person we visited while canvassing, I was . . . well, white. I lacked the skills that might have helped me better overcome what my whiteness meant to local people.

The best I could do was stay mostly silent while a black canvasser did the talking. This demonstrated that white and black people could work together without the white person being in charge. I never had a problem with this, because I was never in charge. I was strictly a foot soldier the entire time I was in the South. The racist segregationists called us “outside agitators.” We might have been outsiders, but we did no agitation. Local community leaders at mass meetings did. A large part of our work was to arrange for cars to carry people to these meetings.

I’m proud of the fact that I helped workers at a brick-making factory take the steps to form a union. During the campaign, one of the Marshall County deputy sheriffs who had arrested me several times told me that his brother worked at the plant and needed the union. He said the twenty or so whites would vote with them, while the eighty black workers for a union.

Still, in retrospect, I realize that for most of the time I worked in the South, I didn’t have the skills, wisdom, or knowledge to do much good as an organizer.

On the other hand, the African Americans with whom I worked showed me what real courage and persistence in the face of terror and violence looked like. If a family lost their home as a result of trying to register to vote, someone in the community would give them a place to live, although it was very dangerous to do so. Local people shared their homes with SNCC organizers, and if “night riders” threatened to attack, they protected us with rifles. They proved that if people stick together, they could make change. I was inspired by their example to spend most of the last fifty years working for a better society through the labor movement. Day-to-day life in Mississippi was controlled by taboos. If you were a black man and did not doff your hat to whites, you could be beaten. If you were black and tried to register to vote or participate in any of the activities we canvassed for, you could lose your job, be put off the land you sharecropped, or be beaten, burned out, or killed. Yet over the years, black people — sometimes whole families — fought against oppression. They tried to register to vote again and again. SNCC did not create the struggle for the right to vote, we merely supported it.

The authorities continually harassed us. I was beaten on the street, run off a plantation at shotgun point, arrested any number of times on charges like “suspicion” of stealing the shirt I was wearing or the car I was driving. In Belzoni, Mississippi, I was put in a room where deputies and cops threatened to hang me. They said, “We haven’t killed us a Hebe in a long time.”

Many of the volunteers that came for Freedom Summer did not, at least at first, fully understand the danger we were in. They had courage that comes only from youth and inexperience. Not me. I knew from growing up in a leftwing family during the McCarthy period that “they” were out to get us. I stayed scared the entire time I worked in the South. It felt like a tight knot in my stomach that would not go away.

The local people with whom we worked had a deep religious faith that helped keep them going and helped them sleep at night. I had political analysis. It kept me awake.

I never spoke about my leftist, non-religious Jewishness. I believed that if I did, black folks might marginalize me. As it turned out, I was wrong. When Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland gave a speech on the Senate floor presenting “evidence” that Communists were behind “the so-called Civil Rights Movement,” he mentioned me at some length. Soon after, the newspaper in Marshall County, where I worked, carried my photo under a headline “Local Civil Rights Worker has Communist Background.” I thought for sure that I would be ostracized by the black community. But to them, Eastland was just spouting words. They really did not care what I was, as long as I was working in the freedom fight. In fact, some people found it easier to look beyond my white skin when they saw that Eastland had attacked me. Eastland, they knew, was just talking the talk. Despite all my weaknesses as an organizer, I was walking the walk.

For forty-five years, Larry Rubin has worked in the labor movement as an organizer, media and public relations specialist, speechwriter, publications editor, and political advocate. He was also a reporter for the Dayton Daily News and served four terms on the Takoma Park, Maryland, City Council. He was a speechwriter for the National Education Association and the U.S. Department of Education. He also served as a staff member of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council and was part of a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania project preparing neighborhood communities for school busing. Rubin has been active in Machar, a secular humanist Jewish group, and was its Sunday-school principal.
followed by a police car, inching along, shotgun on display, tires popping the gravel. One look at a cop was enough to send weary bodies scurrying inside. “Nevertheless, approximately 17,000 blacks made the attempt, with less than ten percent having their applications accepted by local white registrars. The results made crystal clear the need for federal voting rights enforcement, and helped set in motion the political energy that forced passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

**Freedom Summer also made a reality of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), which had been established in April, 1964 by COFO with the aim of challenging a Jim Crow delegate-selection system that invariably produced an all-white delegation to the Democratic National Convention (DNC).** Throughout the summer, the MFDP held precinct and district caucuses open to all races and gathered signatures of potential black voters who wanted to register. A state convention then gathered in Jackson, where a slate of sixty-eight delegates, including four whites, was elected to go to the DNC in Atlantic City. Sixty-four of them came by bus to New Jersey. Speaking on behalf of the MFDP’s challenge to the seating of the segregationist delegation, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told the DNC’s credential committee that “if you value your party, if you value your nation, if you value democratic government, you have no alternative but to recognize, with full voice and vote, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.” Fannie Lou Hamer gave moving testimony about the dangers she and other African Americans faced when they tried to exercise their right to register and vote. Her words were so potent that President Johnson scheduled an impromptu press conference to upstage her, but she was nevertheless heard by the nation on late-night news.

The MFDP’s challenge was kept off the convention floor by the credentials committee long enough for vice-presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey, United Auto Workers’ Walter Reuther, and civil rights leaders including Roy Wilkins and Bayard Rustin to bring forth a “compromise” (which was ultimately backed, reluctantly, by Dr. King). At-large seats would be assigned to two MFDP delegates hand-picked by Democratic power-brokers. Mississippi’s segregationist delegation would be fully seated, but only if they pledged to back Johnson and Humphrey in the campaign. A promise was also made that the DNC would bar segregated delegations from the 1968 convention.

The MFDP refused the compromise — as did all but three of the Mississippi segregationists by refusing to pledge themselves to the Johnson-Humphrey ticket (at election time, 87 percent of Mississippi’s mostly white vote would go to Barry Goldwater). The Mississippi delegation’s empty

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**From the digital collection of the University of Southern Mississippi**

Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party Ballot, with Fannie Lou Hamer as Congressional candidate.

This page and next, SNCC posters. Above, with John Lewis on the left.
seats in the convention hall were then occupied by the MFDP activists, using borrowed passes from other state delegations — and when their chairs were removed, they stood and protested with freedom songs.

In his 1998 book, Walking with the Wind, Congressmen John Lewis, who chaired SNCC during Freedom Summer and is a storied veteran of many other key civil rights campaigns, described the Atlantic City “compromise” as “the turning point of the civil rights movement.... Untill then, despite every setback and disappointment and obstacle we had faced over the years, the belief still prevailed that the system would work, the system would listen, the system would respond. Now, for the first time, we had made our way to the very center of the system. We had played by the rules, done everything we were supposed to do, had played the game exactly as required, had arrived at the doorstep and found the door slammed in our face.”

The result of this sense of betrayal, and of the intense encounter with naked racism that marked Mississippi Freedom Summer, was radicalization for many of the staffers and volunteers. While the Freedom Schools and voter registration campaigns continued in 1965, SNCC became riven with painful internal conflicts over its relationship with the rest of the civil rights movement, over white participation in the organization, about sexual tensions, over appeals-to-conscience non-violence versus disruptive non-violence versus armed self-defense. Bob Moses soon resigned as SNCC field secretary and left Mississippi; John Lewis returned to his home state of Alabama (where in March, 1965 he and Hosea Williams would lead a march across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma and face a head-cracking police attack). Under Stokely Carmichael’s leadership, 1966–68, SNCC became reoriented toward “Black Power” and enraged and revolutionary in its rhetoric — particularly so after the 1966 gunning down of James Meredith, who had integrated the University of Mississippi four years earlier (Meredith survived the shooting), and the 1968 assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., the movement’s great prophet of non-violence. Expanding SNCC’s concerns to “anti-imperialism” — including repeated denunciations of Zionism which were tinged with anti-Semitism — Carmichael (later renamed Kwame Ture) alienated many liberal civil rights supporters, both white and black, which resulted in the loss of much of SNCC’s funding base in northern liberal and Jewish communities. In many instances, Jewish neoconservatives-in-the-making used the rhetorical excesses of Carmichael and other black activists to cultivate distrust within a Jewish community that was itself emerging, with the help of civil rights transformations, into a newly middle-class, mainstream status. The well-spoken social action leader of the movement for Reform Judaism, Albert Vorspan, who had been arrested in an integration campaign in St. Augustine, Florida, pushed back with a critique of Jews who were “carrying their synagogues on their backs into the homogenized white suburbs of our nation,” he wrote, and “laps[ing] into hysteria when integration plans seem to threaten the academic standards of their children’s schools . . . .” Even amid these conflicts, however, as Michael E. Staub notes in his 2002 study of Jewish liberalism, Torn at the Roots (Columbia University Press), “1965 was also the zenith of interreligious cooperation and interracial solidarity” in the civil rights movement, with “Jewish leaders and leading Jewish organizations remain[ing] highly visible in their advocacy of a civil rights agenda. Most memorably, in March of that year the American Jewish Congress, the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the National Community Relations Advisory Council all sent large delegations to the mass march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama . . . .” Nevertheless, SNCC was being deliberately sidelined by Democratic Party liberals, and the days of black-Jewish solidarity and church-synagogue bonding were growing short and cold. A survey of 250 Freedom Summer veterans by sociologist Doug McAdam, writes Bruce Watson, found that their Mississippi experiences, including the Democratic establishment’s power-play in Atlantic City, had “moved two thirds leftward and crippled [their] respect for authority. . . . In the fall of 1964, this sea change spearheaded a generational challenge to America . . . .”

Voices of Freedom Summer

“Senator Humphrey, I’ve been praying about you and you’re a good man, and you know what’s right. The trouble is you’re afraid to do what you know is right. You just want this job. . . . but Mr. Humphrey, if you take this job, you won’t be worth anything. . . . I’m going to pray for you again.”

Fannie Lou Hamer

Voices of Freedom Summer

“Our ‘white’ staffers had at least three particularly attitude-changing experiences that ‘white’ Americans almost never have: working with blacks in complete equality; being on the receiving end of white racial hostility; and being immersed in the highest expressions of black culture while meeting the black community at its very best. What thinking young person could avoid being changed by even one of these experiences, much less by all three together?”

Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael)
Above: Gwen Thompson and Susan Schrader in Meridian.

At left, top: A. Philip Randolph speaks to a statewide Freedom Schools convention in Meridian.

At left, bottom: Children of Meridian marching to the police station to demand the release of a local activist, Freeman Cocorof, in 1965.

Photo by Robert Williams, founder of the Memo Digest, a black newspaper, courtesy of Lenray Gandy
I went down to Mississippi as a Freedom School teacher. My first location was in Ruleville, where I stayed for a while with Mrs. Hamer herself. Then we opened up a Freedom School in Indianola, still in Sunflower County, and I moved there with one or two other Ruleville freedom school and community center volunteers. After the summer, I stayed when most Northern volunteers went back to school or work, having been appointed by Staughton Lynd to be co-coordinator (with Ralph Featherstone) of the whole state’s Freedom Schools. From my base in Jackson, I drove all around the state, checking in and helping out as I could.

After about one year, I moved my base briefly to Greenwood, and then for almost another year to the nearby tiny rural town of Sidon, where I worked on the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and also the nascent Mississippi Freedom Labor Union, as well as whatever Freedom School activity was relevant. We had come to realize that the consciousness-raising (overcoming what Steven Biko later called “the colonization of the mind”) was all “Freedom School.”

In terms of my Jewish identity, except for my Jewish values embodied in “Justice, justice shalt thou pursue!” I was essentially unaware of it, focusing instead on my whiteness and how to recognize and then overcome my previously unacknowledged white privilege.

I do remember being very upset to find out the hard way — when I was one of a few Jewish volunteers who tried to attend a high holiday service, but were denied entry — that some Jewish Mississippians were still white Mississipians. In the fifty years since, I’ve noticed that, like myself, a great many of the summer volunteers stayed active in peace and justice work. In particular, in recent years, I’m impressed that many of the original Jewish civil rights workers, like myself, have been out in front on issues of justice for the Palestinians. We consider it all one struggle, I guess.

Elizabeth Aaronsohn is a retired teacher educator at Central Connecticut State University who experienced supervising student teachers as very much like riding around Mississippi checking in on Freedom Schools. She earned her education doctorate at age 50. She has been active in social justice causes, notably in a Connecticut-based group called We Refuse to Be Enemies — Jews, Muslims, and Christians Working for Peace and Justice in the Middle East, which is linked informally to Jewish Voice for Peace. Aaronson is the author of Going Against the Grain: Supporting the Student-Centered Teacher (1996) and The Exceptional Teacher (2003). She is now a full-time volunteer, grant-writer, and board chair at an urban organic farm in New Britain, Connecticut.
When I speak to students about why I went to Mississippi during “Freedom Summer ‘64” to fight for civil rights, I tell them the first and most significant factor was that I am Jewish. My Jewish teachings and values made it feel like the right thing to do. Growing up in a Jewish home in the post-Holocaust 1940s and 1950s, I was taught that not only was discrimination against Jews bad, but against Negroes and others, too. If discrimination was tolerated against one group, my family taught, it could be turned against us next — so opposing racism was a practical as well as an ethical issue.

News about the first Negroes breaking the color line in baseball was discussed in my household with the same excitement as the news about Jews in the major leagues. The civil rights stories of the court fights against school segregation and the long-running Montgomery bus boycott signaled to me an optimistic option for a post-war America — in comparison to the grey flannel suits, suburban homes “built of ticky-tacky,” and the political fear of McCarthyism.

As I became involved in the civil rights movement, I was excited by the number of Jewish synagogues that organized their congregations to go to the 1963 March on Washington and the visible role played there by a number of rabbis. I felt comfortable, the next year, in approaching the synagogue where I had been a bar mitzvah for books, materials, money, and support for Mississippi Freedom Summer — and they were freely given. I was proud when I arrived at orientation and saw that a large percentage of other volunteers were also Jewish. I drew two very different sets of conclusions from the time I spent in Mississippi. On the positive side, I learned:

- Local people were the brave ones. Volunteers would return home; local families knew they would remain to face intimidation and retribution.
- Finding us places to stay, work, eat, and create communications and security systems took tremendous skills — “ordinary people doing extraordinary things.” I still marvel at what it took to make that summer happen.
- Young people were in the lead. Most SNCC and CORE activists were in their teens and early twenties.
- I learned as much or more than I taught. Teaching by asking questions and engaging in a dialogue about how to make a better world, and learning how to understand each other and live and work together, were at the core of our Freedom Schools. My ideas about teaching were forever changed.

However, on the unexpected and disappointing side were experiences that showed me that not all Jews are liberal and committed to opposing discrimination. My wife and I, for example, tried to go to Jewish services at the synagogue in Meridian, Mississippi, in early July, 1964. We were turned away on the front steps by an angry Jewish woman who shouted: “We are Southerners first — you are not welcome here!” Two months later, in Atlantic City at the Democratic National Convention, influential liberal northern Jews and national Jewish organizations that had promised to back the Freedom Democratic Party’s challenge to the segregationist Mississippi state delegation reversed their positions under the arm-twisting of Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey.

In the later 1960s, new civil rights slogans and terms appeared: Black Power, Black Liberation, Black Nationalism. To me, they seemed to be reasonable and thoughtful (if angry) responses for aspirations that remained “a dream deferred” as black leaders were assassinated, movements for economic justice thwarted, legislation obstructed and unfunded, and court decisions unenforced. However, other Jewish friends and family felt threatened, put off by the anger, unsure how to be involved, or guilty for the advantages they enjoyed. After Mississippi, I became a New York City school teacher in Harlem. I had watched my union, the UFT, move to the right under the leadership of Albert Shanker and away from hearing the angry voices of black and Latino parents unhappy with the quality of education in their neighborhoods. “Community Control” became a hope for improving their schools while “Defending the Contract” became the union’s slogan. Whatever was left of a Black-Jewish alliance came to a crashing end as a result of the emotionally laden 1968 “Ocean Hill-Brownsville” teachers’ union strike. Cries of “anti-Semitism” were hurled, and the organized Jewish community jumped to the side of the UFT and opposed community control.

There I was, a teacher, a Jew, an active union member, and an active civil rights supporter. My core values and identities were thrown into conflict. This was a challenging time for me, and probably ended my belief that there is something inherent or automatic in Judaism and Jewish history that guarantees Jewish support for civil rights and social justice struggles. I decided the UFT was wrong in going on strike.

Nowadays, the debate about Israel and its role in the world dominates the agenda of national Jewish organizations. I’ve been told that if I am not a Zionist, then I can’t properly call myself Jewish, and that if I don’t support everything that Israel does, I am a “self-hating anti-Semite.” Dare I respond with: What does it mean to be Jewish without a commitment to social justice?

When I’m asked now, at 75, what keeps me committed to a vision of social justice, I’m afraid I don’t answer that question as I used to. I talk about what I learned when I was 17 from my Puerto Rican, female class president about white male “privilege;” when I was 22, from a black college secretary about taking a walk in other people’s shoes; at 25, from a couple of older black women in Mississippi, who housed and fed young activists, about how courage, commitment, and leadership come in many forms; and more recently, at age 71, from a young, undocumented, woman from Mexico, who was my swimming lifeguard, about what her life was like without “papers,” about what ideals she expected her new country, America, to live by, and about the contradictions here that frustrate her.

I still talk about the Jewish roots of my early activism because I think it is important to show that all Jews are not rich businessmen; that somehow the light of social justice glows in our traditions; and that there are choices for all young people. Sadly, I talk about my Jewish roots with less passion because the stories of alliances and struggles for social justice feel dimmer and longer ago.

The positive memories of 1964 shine through in those snapshots I took in Mississippi and remind me of the joy, hope, work, and courage of all the blacks and whites who united that summer to try to make a better world — and to make America a more just country.

Mark Levy served as coordinator of the Meridian Freedom School during Freedom Summer. He is a retired social sciences teacher and worked for over thirty years in the labor movement. Levy has helped initiate a civil rights and activist archive at Queens College/CUNY, where most of the photographs in this article are to be found, and has worked with former Meridian Freedom School students and community activists to preserve and use their own movement’s history.
Some people call me a “red diaper baby.” My grandmother fought in the Russian Revolution and my parents met in the 1930s at Kinderland, a summer camp for politically progressive Jews. Despite the drama of my family personal history, however, it had had little relevance to how I conducted my young life. I expressed many opinions but actually did little. Then, in 1964, at a folk festival, I came upon an informational display where people were recruiting volunteers to join Mississippi Freedom Summer. I waited until I was 21 — July 15th — and took off. (My father was so angry, he did not speak to me for two years.) This choice to go to Mississippi proved to be a defining moment in my life. My family background and my daily existence merged into one reality, allowing my personal identity to emerge.

My experience began in Atlanta where I was sent for training, and where I first encountered Robert Parris Moses, who instantly became one of my lifetime heroes. Robert Moses had a quiet strength and intelligence that inspired me; his way of motivating people to take ownership of their work remains a leadership model that guides my actions to this day.

I was sent to be a teacher at a Freedom School in Columbus, Mississippi. From the start, I discovered the realities of the segregated South, and learned much more than I taught. I cringed at the separate sections in movie theaters, and was appalled that blacks were barred from bookstores and supermarkets. I still become emotional when I remember the extreme poverty and incredible generosity of the local black people who risked everything to provide housing and support for us.

Another lesson came with my first encounter with raw anti-Semitism. Fear of prejudice was an undercurrent in my family: although my dad had a top secret military clearance to work in the aerospace industry, he was wary about the vulnerability of Jews because of his experiences of anti-Semitic discrimination in lodging and employment. In the early 1950s, a cross was burned on our lawn in Connecticut by followers of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Through all this, my parents taught me that my own safety depended upon each person’s obligation to stand up to defend the rights of oppressed people.

In Mississippi, I was shocked when I learned that some of my co-workers were not at all concerned about the rights or safety of Jews, but rather blamed us for many of the problems of blacks in America. I remember a young man saying that Jews were the worst bigots because they were slumlords and thieving grocery storeowners. I tried to point out that I and my family were not part of this wrongdoing — but I was Jewish and therefore guilty. Racial epithets came my way. I got a taste of what many black people and others experience throughout their lives, and I will always be grateful for the help of black coworkers who taught me to shed the hurt and to define myself as the person I am, not the person someone thinks I am.

Freedom Summer put me and all the volunteers in harm’s way, with threats of real violence always present. Vigilantes drove around the Freedom School, trying to intimidate us. Friends were stopped and employed by police for no reason. Driving south to Jackson for a meeting, our black colleagues had to lie on the floor of the car to avoid provoking violence on the way. One time, I picked up the telephone and heard the chatter of people who were tapping our phone; suddenly they realized that the line was open and threw a switch to activate a dial tone. These frightening realities made me realize how committed I was to the cause, gave me confidence in my own worldview, and laid a foundation for me to act positively on my beliefs and my social commitments. I will be eternally grateful for the experience.

Voices of the Volunteers:

Patricia Barbanell

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Patricia Barbanell holds a doctorate from Columbia University and has extensive experience in K-12 education and museum education. Her specialties are integrated arts, multicultural programming and technology integration. She is past president of New York State Art Teachers and the New York Council of Educational Associations, and helped to write the New York Learning Standards for the Arts.
double the rates for whites, average black family wealth is less than a tenth that of white families, and poverty rates are as high as 50 percent for some black urban communities.

Lyndon Johnson is said to have murmured, “There goes the South for a generation” when he signed the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Certainly, the deep allegiance to conservative Republicanism found in Mississippi, Alabama, Texas, Georgia, Louisiana and other slave states of the 19th century’s Confederacy — all of which were solidly Democratic and segregationist until Johnson signed that bill — can be traced to white resentment of the civil rights revolution and the federal laws that gave it legal clout. As Martin Luther King, Jr. learned, however, in his attempt to bring the movement north to Chicago and other urban centers, American racism is not only a Southern phenomenon. True equal opportunity for black Americans has been fought over in bitter political struggles everywhere in the country, especially since Johnson’s “Great Society” ambitions yielded to the “government-is-the-problem” ideology of the Reagan Administration (1981-1989), and far-right, fringe conservatism began filtering into mainstream Republican politics. Blaming African Americans (and other poor people) for their low status is a beloved trope of that conservative culture — but liberals are hardly immune to it.

Al Vorspan noted this back in 1965, chastising Jews for the “weary refrain” from their “segregated [suburban] flesh-pots…” “why can’t they pull themselves up by their bootstraps the way we did,”’” and “‘Why don’t they thank us?’” A “generalized anxiety seeps through the Jewish consciousness, distorting and confusing reality,” Vorspan added, whenever issues of “Negro evil-doing,” i.e., black criminal activity, or black anti-Semitism, are raised. That “generalized anxiety” must now be dealt with anew if the Jewish community is again to be mobilized in solidarity with the African-American community, especially on one of its leading issues: the mass imprisonment of black men. In the decades since President Richard Nixon launched the “War on Drugs” in 1971, the number of incarcerated people in the U.S. has shot up to 2.2 million, which dwarfs that of any other developed country both in sheer numbers and in percentage of the population.

Registering for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

VOICES OF FREEDOM SUMMER

“Freedom Summer injected a new spirit into the very vein of life in Mississippi and the country. It literally brought the country to Mississippi. People were able to see the horror and evil of blatant racial discrimination. If it hadn’t been for the veterans of Freedom Summer, there would be no Barack Obama.”

John Lewis

— and between 50 and 60 percent of those felons are people of color (www.sentencingproject.org). When it comes to drug-related crime, in particular, although government statistics show the rates of illegal drug use among white and black Americans to be equal, non-whites constitute fully two-thirds of those jailed.

Let it be noted that the formerly segregated states of Louisiana, Alabama, Oklahoma, Texas, and Mississippi have the highest incarceration rates in the county. In Mississippi, of the nearly 183,000 citizens denied the vote because of felony convictions, nearly 108,000 are black, some 14 percent of the state’s total African-American population. All told, state voting policies now disenfranchise one in thirteen African Americans, according to Bill Keller, who recently resigned his position at the New York Times to start up The Marshall Project (named after Thurgood Marshall), a journalistic venture dedicated to what Keller calls “the vast and urgent subject of our broken criminal justice system.”

This mass incarceration of people of color is not a matter of “punishment to fit the crime” — especially insofar as crime rates have dramatically fallen for the past two decades while the imprisonment of black men remains grotesquely common. Instead, it is a new form of racial control that civil rights attorney Michelle Alexander has aptly named “The New Jim Crow.” In her 2010 book of that title, Alexander describes how the entire criminal justice system functions to bring the weight of the law down on black and brown heads much more heavily than on whites — and how once a person is labeled a felon, “the old forms of discrimination — employment discrimination, housing discrimination, denial of the right to vote, denial of educational opportunities, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, and exclusion from jury service — are suddenly legal. As a criminal, you have scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a black man living . . . at the height of Jim Crow.”

The New Jim Crow, she argues, is thus a caste system, and its “genius” and distinguishing feature “is that it appears voluntary.”

Photo by Wallace Roberts.

Mourning their murdered comrades, Mount Zion Church, Neshoba County.

JEWISH CURRENTS

SPRING-SUMMER 2014
People choose to commit crimes, and that’s why they are locked up or locked out, we are told. This feature makes the politics of responsibility particularly tempting, as it appears the [prison] system can be avoided with good behavior. But herein lies the trap. . . . All of us violate the law at some point in our lives. In fact, if the worst thing you have ever done is speed ten miles over the speed limit on the freeway, you have put yourself and others at more risk of harm than someone smoking marijuana in the privacy of his or her living room. Yet there are people in the United States serving life sentences for first-time drug offenses, something virtually unheard of anywhere else in the world.

“Arguably,” Alexander continues, “the most important parallel between mass incarceration and Jim Crow is that both have served to define the meaning and significance of race in America. . . . Slavery defined what it meant to be black (a slave), and Jim Crow defined what it meant to be black (a second-class citizen). Today mass incarceration defines the meaning of blackness in America: black people, especially black men, are criminals. That is what it means to be black.”

This reputation for criminality has been used as an excuse for white-on-black violence ever since the post-Civil War Reconstruction era. Blacks had to be kept down, lynched and terrorized lest they riot, rape, and pillage; blacks had to be gunned down by police as a matter of self-defense. It is a reputation cultivated by white supremacists, yes, but also by television, by police officials, and even by the “gangsta” aspirations of some black youth. Black = criminal explains why police stop-and-frisk methods, although they obviously target thousands of innocent young men, are acceptable to many whites, and why “Stand Your Ground” defenses seem credible to juries even in cases in which unarmed young black men have been shot in the back (or in the back seats of cars). The stereotype of black criminality is deeply rooted in America’s racialized class system, and is also a key ingredient of America’s gun culture and “law-and-order” mentality. The New Jim Crow can therefore be enforced, as Michelle Alexander puts it, in “new race-neutral language” and has been “accompanied by a political movement that succeeded in putting the vast majority of blacks back in their place. Proponents of racial hierarchy found they could install a new racial caste system without violating law or the new limits of acceptable political discourse, by demanding ‘law and order’ rather than ‘segregation forever.’”

Reckoning with the fear of crime, and recognizing that our criminal justice system is enforcing a new form of Jim Crow, are as central to today’s struggle for civil rights as the campaign to win voting rights and stand up to racist terror was in Mississippi half a century ago. Back then, the symbols of oppression were nooses, “white only” signs, and burning crosses; today, the key symbol is handcuffs. Just as Robert Kennedy reacted to his 1967 tour of the Mississippi Delta — “My God, I did not know this kind of thing existed. How can a country like this allow it?” — so must we, fifty years after Mississippi Freedom Summer, open our eyes to the ongoing realities of racism in America, and be outraged and mobilized by what we see.

Jewish Currents

Jewish Activism Against the New Jim Crow

There are now many centers of activism against mass incarceration, the War on Drugs, and the racially discriminatory nature of the U.S. criminal justice system. Attorney General Eric Holder has been forceful about lessening penalties for minor drug crimes, removing the stigma and the legal obstacles that block felons from resuming successful and constructive lives, and restoring the vote to people who have served their sentences. New York’s Mayor Bill De Blasio has so far stood behind his pledge to curb the racial profiling and stop-and-frisk practices of the city’s police department. Numerous governors, including conservative Republicans, have begun to balk at the extraordinary expense of mass incarceration. Activist organizations ranging from the ACLU to the American Friends Service Committee to the NAACP to local black churches have assigned resources to the cause.

For the past several months, JEWISH CURRENTS, in concert with a task force within the Woodstock Jewish Congregation and now in partnership with Jews for Racial and Economic Justice and T’ruah (formerly Rabbis for Human Rights-North America), has been engaged in a campaign to raise Jewish consciousness and catalyze Jewish participation in this movement against the New Jim Crow. Our work has included preparation of a Passover hagadah supplement that focuses on mass incarceration and human freedom, a Jewish study guide to Michelle Alexander’s The New Jim Crow, and a traveling exhibit based on this article about Mississippi Freedom Summer. The exhibit, accompanied by speakers if desired, is available for showing in synagogues and other Jewish institutions. A growing trove of resources can be found at jewishcurrents.org/resources-new-jim-crow. Please be in touch with us about involving your community: editor@jewishcurrents.org.

Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. in police custody during the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott campaign, 1955-56.

(Credits and resources on next page.)
Sources for Quotes and Photographs:


Queens College/CUNY Civil Rights Archive, Mark Levy Collection, [http://archives.qc.cuny.edu/civilrights](http://archives.qc.cuny.edu/civilrights).

*Queens College/CUNY Civil Rights Archive*, [http://archives.qc.cuny.edu/civilrights](http://archives.qc.cuny.edu/civilrights).

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University of Southern Mississippi Civil Rights Digital Archive, [digilib.usm.edu/crmda.php](http://digilib.usm.edu/crmda.php).

Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement website, [www.crmvet.org/disc/mdp.htm](http://www.crmvet.org/disc/mdp.htm).

*Other photographs courtesy of Chade Pam Allen, Galen Gockel, and Wallace Roberts.*

**Recommended for Further Learning:**

**Books**

*Faces of Freedom Summer*, photographs by Herbert Randall, text by Bob M. Tusa, 2001, University of Alabama.

*Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement*, by Vincent Harding, 2009 edition, Orbis Books.


*We Had Sneakers, They Had Guns*, by Tracy Sugarman, 2009, Syracuse University.

**Film**


**Websites**

Bay Area movement veterans: [www.crmvet.org](http://www.crmvet.org).


Facing History and Ourselves: [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org).