Why I Tracked Them Down

As a historian, I have spent the past five years looking for anti-racist Jewish women role models, hoping to place them in a radical Jewish tradition to which I could feel connected. Rather than simply writing theoretically about racism, sexism and anti-Semitism, I wanted to portray women who took action in a decisive moment in American history. So I began to study Jewish women who went South for the civil rights movement.

I discovered that in the decade between the terrors of the McCarthy years (the 1950s) and the beginning of the women's liberation movement (the late 1960s), Jewish women's experiences in the Southern civil rights movement had nearly disappeared from history. And even in the burgeoning field of Jewish women's history, Jewish women's experiences in the Southern civil rights movement have yet to make it into our canon.

Born in 1961, the same time as the Freedom Rides, I grew up in a household with only tenuous connections to Jewishness and progressive politics. But like the women I interviewed, my family did pass on the message that being Jewish created an obligation to discern and fight for "what is right."

When women's history came my way in high school, I embraced it. Feminism became my tradition, not Judaism. Women's history became my practice. Women, I was fond of saying, are my people. However, that left a number of questions unanswered. These questions circled around as I began to think about a topic for my Ph.D. dissertation. Why had I spent so many years in women's studies examining the history of every group that has been "othered" except my own? Why couldn't feminists break the impasse over accusations of white women's racism? There were other questions, but the most generative one was: what kind of Jew did I want to be? These questions required role models who shared my values and who had weathered such controversies.

Top to bottom:
Roberta Galler, Miriam Glickman, Janice Goodman, Florence Howe, Jackie Levine, Trudy Orris, Carol Ruth Silver

The civil rights movement was the crucible in which, during my own lifetime, racism was contested and "second wave" feminism forged. Despite the general consensus that Jews were well represented among those fighting for racial equality in America, Jewish women were barely visible in movement histories. I felt driven to find them, talk to them, and record their stories. I began to search for Jewish women civil rights veterans to interview.

Their stories fill gaps in several historical narratives: American Jewish women's history, civil rights history, and the history of Jewish radicalism. The stories invoke a long tradition of Jewish women's activism. Finally, the women's lives demonstrate that there are many ways of being Jewish, including fighting for social justice.

Jewish women have actively tried to better our world, yet until very recently they have been invisible in our history. Many Jewish scholars analyzing the civil rights movement have trouble acknowledging those activists who are women, and civil rights scholars often have trouble recognizing secular Jews as Jews. Civil rights historians focus on religion, rather than ethnicity, as driving forces for civil rights movement activism. This makes it difficult to analyze the motives of the predominantly secular Jews who went South. As I examined their backgrounds and beliefs, I saw a clear link between activists' Jewishness and their civil rights involvement.

This is not an attempt to "claim" Jews who do not want to be "claimed" against their will, but to showcase these essentially non-religious Jews for young people today attempting to establish diverse connections to Jewish tradition.

Writing Jewish women civil rights activists into history gives access to new perspectives and questions that go beyond obvious "Jewish concerns." The 15 Jewish women with whom I conducted in-depth interviews could have chosen to pass as white, but instead they embraced the fight against racism as their own. I see their experiences as a precious historical resource.

—Debra L. Schultz

1954

In **Brown v. Board of Education** of Topeka, Kansas, the Supreme Court declares segregated schools are inherently unequal.

1955

Rosa Parks and the black women of Montgomery's Women's Political Council lay the foundation for the **Montgomery Bus Boycott** and the founding of the **Southern Christian Leadership Conference**, led by **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

1960

The **Woolworth lunch-counter sit-ins** in Greensboro, North Carolina, launch a wave of nonviolent protests in the North and South. The **Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee** is founded.

1961

On May 4, the first bus of **Freedom Riders** organized by the Congress of Racial Equality leaves Washington, D.C. When CORE suspends the rides in response to intense violence, SNCC activists **Diane Nash** and **John Lewis** continue them.

Our Unsung Civil Rights Movement Heroines

by Debra L. Schultz

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Dorothy Miller (Zellner), who lost her shoes to high-pressure fire hoses after being clubbed, gives an affidavit to James Forman.

When it comes to the civil rights movement, most people know that two Jewish men—Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman—and their black colleague James Chaney were murdered in Mississippi in 1964. What most do not know is that Andrew Goodman had been in Mississippi for one day when he was killed. Rita Schwerner had been there for six months when her husband was murdered by a white supremacist gang because he was "an agitating, trouble-making, nigger-loving, Communist, atheistic Jew outsider." Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman are mythologized as Jewish civil rights martyrs. But what happened to the woman who risked her life, did the hard daily work of organizing in black communities for six months, faced her husband's murder, and who managed in her grief to point out to the media that the only reason they noted James Chaney's death was because he was murdered with two white men?

History will remember Rita Schwerner as the widow of a martyr; she sees herself as an ally of the civil rights movement. I see her also, and significantly, as a

1963

Sheriff Bull Connor responds to nonviolent protests in Birmingham, AL, with police dogs and fire hoses. Mississippi NAACP leader **Medgar Evers is murdered.** Dr. King leads the **March on Washington.** **Four girls are murdered** in a Birmingham church bombing.

1964

Hundreds of volunteers go South to organize the **Mississippi Freedom Summer** project and the **Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.** President Lyndon Johnson signs the **1964 Civil Rights Act.**

1965

Malcolm X is murdered. Marchers are brutally attacked on a bridge in Selma, Alabama. Media coverage turns the world's attention to the **Selma-to-Montgomery march.** **The 1965 Voting Rights Act** becomes law.

1966

The concept of **"Black Power"** gains popularity within SNCC and with the founding of the **Black Panther Party.**

1968

Martin Luther King Jr. and **Robert F. Kennedy are assassinated.** Richard Nixon is elected President.

"I would have stayed forever down there."
—Miriam Glickman

Selma-to-Montgomery march for voting rights. Dr. June Finer, Medical Committee for Human Rights, treats foot-weary Doris Wilson.

© 1978 MATT HERRON

Jewish woman activist. She was one of the most visible of the numerous Jewish women who went south from 1960-1966 to integrate public facilities, teach in Freedom Schools and adult literacy campaigns, participate in sit-ins, freedom rides and voter registration drives, and get arrested.

Why Did They Go?

Most were relatively privileged, well-educated Northern students who could choose to come South to work in a social justice movement; they came from backgrounds that both encouraged and limited their life choices; they were the children of Jews struggling to assimilate into American culture without losing their Jewish connection entirely; they were white women in a movement led most visibly by black men; they were competent and experienced women willing to take action before the feminist movement made it legitimate to do so; they were secular Jews in a black Christian movement working in the anti-Semitic and virulently racist South. They were risking their lives for democratic ideals.

The experiences of the women I interviewed suggest that Jewish origins were a motivating factor. Whether or not they were religiously affiliated, they were exposed to a Jewish moral framework about social justice—diffuse as it might have been in Jewish liberalism. This often included explicit injunctions against anti-black racism. And almost all the women I interviewed had absorbed a consciousness about the Holocaust at young ages, certainly a factor in engendering their desire to "fight back" against racism and injustice.

Several of the Jewish women I interviewed used similar imagery in describing Jewish experiences under the Nazis as one motivation for their involvement in the civil rights movement. Dorothy Zellner (née Miller), born in 1938, as an adolescent read "zillions of books about the war and about the Holocaust." She posed to herself the question, "If I had been alive in 1943 in Warsaw what would I have done? And I decided very early on that I would have had to fight." Barbara Haber, a California psychotherapist born in 1938, said that "what it meant to be a Jew was 'never again,' and what 'never again' meant was not never again to Jews, but never again to stand by and let things like that happen."

Harriet Tanzman, a freelance writer, teacher and Pacifica radio producer who has made it a mission to preserve the legacy of the civil rights movement, worked in Georgia, Mississippi and Alabama between 1964 and 1966. She likened her generation to children of Holocaust survivors. Born in 1940, she told me, "We were the children of the people who had gone through an absolutely devastating experience. If they were in this country, they felt that there but for complete chance they would have been, we all would have been, dead. There was a tremendous sense of injustice in the world and at the same time [they were] raising children to think that they should lead a moral and just life, [to] be there for themselves—the whole individualism was very strong—but also to have some sense that you are there for other people, whether the other people are Jews or whoever they are, but to take some stand or to try to avert the injustice in the world."

Trudy Orris joined her husband, a military doctor, in Germany, at the end of World War II. As Orris put it, "Whenever I met anybody German, I would say to them, 'What did you do during the war?'" One evening, a German musician said to her, "If you're asking me if I was a coward, I was a coward. I knew what was happening, but I couldn't do anything about it. My best friend was taken away. What are you going to do when your turn comes?" Orris recalled, "I stopped, I couldn't answer him. I was really stunned. I said I didn't know what I would do but I would hope that I would do the right thing." The man said, "What you hope and what you do are two different things."

"When I came back to the United States I was a different person. I felt that the most important thing that I could do is to work in the black movement. If anything happened, then somebody didn't have to say to me, what did you do?"

Leaving Home

Growing up in the 1950s, these college-educated, second- and third-generation Jewish women ran right into the dilemma of what to do with their lives when they realized they wanted more than marriage and family. "The concept of getting married, living happily ever after, and not doing anything after that, always bewildered me," recalls Janice Goodman, born in 1938 and now a lawyer in Manhattan. "I did a lot of housecleaning as a child. I did not see cleaning the house as an occupation."

The need to escape confinement to the home is a recurrent theme. For the primarily urban Jewish women I interviewed, images of suburban life symbolized the trap they sought to avoid. I asked Rita Schwerner Bender what enabled young Jewish women like herself to face the danger of going South. "I did not see myself as saving anyone," she replied firmly, "but I did have a view of saving myself from a split-level house [in the suburbs]."

After she described a "horrible" jail experience in Albany, Georgia, that included a hunger strike, I asked Miriam Glickman, who was born in 1942, why she stayed. She replied: "There wasn't anything else I could have been doing at the time that had anywhere near the pull that this did, of helping make the world a better place. I mean what were the alternatives? I could go back and get a 9-to-5 job somewhere. Those days women were teachers, nurses, and psychologists/counselors. And Jewish women weren't nurses. So I had the other two to choose from. I would have stayed forever down there."

Telling Mom

Once young Jewish women made up their minds to go South, they faced two hurdles—figuring out the organizational connections that would get them there and telling their parents. Sociologist Doug McAdam, who studied participants in the 1964 Freedom Summer, has argued that women had to be "overqualified" to make it to Mississippi in order to overcome sexism in the selection process and parental resistance. They had more activist experience prior to going South than the men, though the roles they played in the projects were often more limited.

The word that best characterizes parental reactions is "ambivalent." Because their daughters were usually acting in consonance with the values they taught at home, parents had a hard time arguing against the morality of the impulse to take action. Still, naturally, they were frightened for their daughters' safety, and all the more so after the disappearance of Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney in June 1964.

When Carol Ruth Silver, a San Francisco lawyer and former politician, told her mother she was going South on one of the early Freedom Rides, Silver recalls: "My mother said, 'You're going to kill me, you can't do this, it's dangerous.' I said, 'Mother'—I remember this conversation very well— 'This is what you taught me to do and this is what you taught me to be. If I don't do it, then I will not be true to all that you have taught me.' She knew it was true and she was very frightened for me."

Ilene Strelitz Melish, now editor of the Stanford Daily, had a much more difficult time with her mother during the training session for the 1964 Mississippi Summer at Oxford, Ohio. Sara Evans, in her 1980 book *Personal Politics* quotes Melish:

"She sent me a telegram signed with my brother's name saying that she had had a heart attack and I must come home immediately (none of which was true). Telephone calls, with her screaming, threatening, crying until I hung up, came every day. After the phone calls I would disappear into the ladies' room, and cry out the engulfing rage and accumulated frustration. When I recovered, I desperately threw cold water on my face as it was rather well advertised that there were psychiatrists around looking for people showing signs of breaking down and who thus should be weeded out before they got to Mississippi. Mississippi had nothing over a Jewish mother and I had conscious fear of some unseen psychiatrists spotting me red-eyed and misinterpreting the source of my difficulty."

Freedom Riding

A little history: The major civil rights campaign in the South after the catalytic 1960 Greensboro lunch-counter sit-ins was the Freedom Rides. On May 4, 1961, an initial group of 13 Freedom Riders (three white female, three white male, seven black male members of CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality) left Washington, D.C., in two buses. They planned to ride through the South to New Orleans to test the 1960 Supreme Court ruling in *Boynton v. Virginia,* which banned segregated terminal facilities in interstate travel. They were met by hostile white crowds in the Deep South.

In Anniston, Alabama, Klan members stopped one of the buses, threw a bomb inside, and attacked the escaping riders as the bus burst into flames. The bus burned to the ground as state troopers took the injured riders to a local hospital. In Birmingham, a white mob met the second bus, attacking and seriously injuring several of the Freedom Riders. The designated riders endured more violence before the Kennedy administration reluctantly intervened.

CORE decided to fill the jails and put out a national call

COURTESY FLORENCE HOWE.

Florence Howe, Baltimore, 1965, speaking about her participation in the civil rights movement.

"It was a mark of honor to resist."

—Dorothy Zellner

In Mississippi's segregated jails, race and gender did matter.

Jacqueline Levine during the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery. Her sign reads "American Jewish Congress of New Jersey."

COURTESY JACQUELINE LEVINE.

for Freedom Riders. By the end of the summer of 1961, 328 had been arrested in Jackson, two-thirds of them college students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a significant number of the white women Freedom Riders were Jewish. Three-fourths of them were men and half were black. Among the black women were young fearless leaders like 19-year-old Ruby Doris Smith, whom several of the Jewish women cited as an inspiration, including her fellow Freedom Riders Carol Ruth Silver and Elizabeth Slade Hirschfeld.

On June 6, Silver, three black male college students from Virginia University, and two white male divinity students from Yale left the Trailways bus station at 1:15 a.m. in the presence of a lone UPI reporter. The group arrived in Jackson at 1:10 p.m. After allowing all the other passengers to disembark, they shook hands with each other and moved to their destinations—the blacks to the waiting room marked "white interstate," and the whites to the "colored interstate." At that point, one of the reporters came up and asked if they were Freedom Riders. When they said yes, he said to Silver, "We were told there was a white woman in the group, but that she probably would not go through with it." She replied, "Well, that certainly did not come from me," as she brushed by him into the waiting room.

In a scene that had been elaborately planned by the police, they asked the white students if they would move on. When an interviewer asked the policemen how many Freedom Riders there were, one policeman answered, "Wal, there's three black niggers and three white niggers." For that moment, at least, what mattered most was not that she was a white woman; by virtue of her action, she was identified as a "nigger" of no specific gender. Arriving at the prison, Silver was taken to a cell labeled "adult white female." In Mississippi's segregated prison system, her race and gender did matter.

Jewish Women in Southern Jails

On June 8, 1961, four new young women (Silver refers to them as "girls" in the detailed diary she kept during her incarceration) were thrown into her cell. During the day, detectives questioned the women. They asked Silver if she had ever dated "Negro" boys and if she would be willing to marry one. She told them defiantly, yes, that she had been engaged to a Negro boy once, which was a lie. They also interrogated her about her religious beliefs and were intrigued with her self-definition as agnostic, a term they had not heard before.

After what Silver described as a four-minute hearing, the five women were convicted of breach of peace and sentenced to four months in jail and a $200 fine with two months' suspended sentence. By the following Friday, there were 14 white women Freedom Riders sharing one small cell in the jail. Silver's diary points out the rather startling fact that more than half the women in this tiny cell of 14 white women Freedom Riders were Jewish. Among the women were Helene Wilson, 26, from Washington, D.C.; Teri Perlman, 19, from New York City; and Jane Rossett, 18, from Durham, North Carolina. Betsy Wychoff, 46, a former Mount Holyoke College professor, had been the only white woman Freedom Rider in jail prior to Silver's arrest. On June 9, jailers threw in two more mattresses and two more Freedom Riders, Del Greenblatt, a Cornell University student in medieval history, and Winona Beamer, from Dayton, Ohio.

On June 13, the three cells of women (one white and two black) discussed going on a hunger strike to protest the stated intention of sending the male Freedom Riders to the notorious Parchman Prison, where it was rumored that they would be put to picking cotton. When they learned on June 14 that the young men were taken to Parchman, they decided "to go on a hunger strike until either the boys come back or we are sent there."

On June 21, four more Freedom Riders from California were thrown into their cell, bringing the total number of white women to 18. There was not enough room to throw all the mats down on the floor, so they slept three people to two mats and five people to four mats. The same day the black women in two cells of six and seven each were thrown into one cell. All 13 black women were put in one cell to make room for a drunken white woman who occupied a whole cell herself, presumably to protect her from both black and white Freedom Riders.

"It Was Hard Not to Fight Back"

On June 23, they heard the news. All the women were going to be transported to Parchman penitentiary, where the male Freedom Riders were jailed. Silver describes the four-hour ride in the paddy wagon between Jackson and Parchman as more frightening than any previous part of the whole jail experience:

"Twenty-three girls, white and Negro, were crowded into a truck that had no springs and bounced along toward an unknown future. Many of us had black and blue marks when we arrived because the drivers delighted in stopping and starting suddenly which threw us against each other and the sharp corners of the seats. But the most terrifying part of the ride was the three occasions when the driver suddenly jolted off to the side of the highway and stopped. We imagined every horror, from a waiting ambush of the Ku Klux Klan to mined roads." For Elizabeth Slade Hirschfeld, this experience evoked, she said, images of Nazis and concentration camps.

In the maximum security unit at Parchman, the women lived in a more menacing environment. In one incident that affected both Silver and Hirschfeld profoundly, Ruby Doris Smith was physically abused by three jailers for refusing to take a shower unless she was given shoes to prevent her from getting athlete's foot. Three women guards took her to the shower in handcuffs, put her in the shower, scrubbed her with a floor brush, concentrating especially on sensitive areas of the skin. They also knocked her down a few times while holding onto the handcuffs.

The reactions to this incident highlighted a salient difference between the approaches of the Jewish women and their Southern Christian comrades. When Smith returned from the shower, Silver and her cellmate were "burning with anger and frustration" after seeing the dark welts on her wrists. Then Smith's voice came from her cell, where she was lying down. According to Silver's diary, she began to speak of Christian brotherhood and love and "how we must not hate because that is a victory for the evil forces which we are fighting." She talked of mental nonviolence, "which is just as important as physical nonviolence—a returning love for hate, sympathy for oppression." Silver recalled that it was very hard for her to accept this approach in her anger, but she did spend a lot of time thinking about it.

Meeting violence with "Christian" love was a basic tenet of the movement, one that was not part of the culture of the northern Jewish volunteers: as Dorothy Zellner described her concept of Judaism, "People were out to get you, they were gonna kill you and it was a mark of honor to fight back, yes, to resist." And yet, because they knew it was not their movement, Jewish women accepted the discipline and strategies of black leaders based on what theologian James Cone named in his 1970 book, *A Black Theology of Liberation.*

Working Together

Of the black-led civil rights organizations working in the South, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), founded in 1960, provided Jewish women with the broadest opportunities to work at the grassroots level with local people. Charles Sherrod, director of SNCC's Albany, Georgia, project, created interracial teams of civil rights workers because he wanted to "free southern blacks from their fear of whites." On such a team, in the spring of 1963, 19-year-old Faith Holsaert, a Jewish New Yorker, went to work in Terrell County with Prathia Hall, a black woman from Philadelphia. They lived and worked closely with Carolyn Daniels, a local black hairdresser and a formidable organizer who was, according to Holsaert, "really the center of SNCC activity in Terrell County. We couldn't have made any inroads in Terrell County without her support."

That same spring, Antioch College student Joni Rabinowitz, daughter of radical lawyer Victor Rabinowitz, came down to Albany, Georgia, to join the SNCC staff. In *Personal Politics*, Sara Evans cites a "stinging series of reports" written by Joni Rabinowitz to indicate that women were aware of having second-class status in SNCC. Sexism in the civil rights movement, the New Left and other 1960s social-change movements is often mentioned as a spur to the women's liberation movement of the late 1960s. In 1963, Rabinowitz wrote: "The attitude around here toward keeping the [freedom] house neat (as well as the general attitude toward the inferiority and 'proper place' of women) is disgusting and also terribly depressing." This was a precursor to tensions that would erupt later when greater numbers of white women participated in SNCC.

While acknowledging the movement's sexism, some Jewish women SNCC veterans insist that it was more egalitarian than most organizations of its time. Holsaert, now a community college teacher, fondly recalls Sherrod, "sexist to the core," nevertheless challenging her to acquire skills she would need to survive in the violent Albany movement: "Faith, I don't care whether you grew up in Greenwich Village where no one drives a car. You must learn to drive a car to be a soldier among equals in this movement."

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Suggested Reading

How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America by Karen Brodkin, (Rutgers University Press, 1998).

Yours in Struggle: Three Feminist Perspectives on Anti-Semitism and Racism by Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith (Firebrand Books, 1988).

White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness by Ruth Frankenburg (University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

The Issue is Power: Essays on Women, Jews, Violence and Resistance by Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (Aunt Lute Books, 1992).

The Civil Rights Marches

During the historic 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, led by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Viola Liuzzo, a white Detroit mother of five, was shot to death by the Klan while driving a young black man, Leroy Moton, who survived the attack by playing dead. Harriet Tanzman, who knew Moton from Selma, was "in an interracial van a half hour later going down the same road so there but for whatever go the rest of us."

Jacqueline Levine, today a community-relations activist from New Jersey involved in anti-racist work and Jewish causes, who flew in for the Montgomery rally at the end of the march, had a somewhat more idealized experience. Although she had wanted to go to Birmingham in 1963, there was no Jewish organizational framework in which she could participate, as she did for the 1963 March on Washington. Because there was a small American Jewish Congress contingent going down to Selma, she felt more comfortable going, she said, and pleased to be participating as a Jew.

Later, as president of the Women's Division of the American Jewish Congress and a vice-president of the Council of Jewish Federations, Levine invoked her experience in Montgomery as she appealed to the General Assembly of the Council for women's equality in Jewish life.

"Seven years ago I participated in the glorious March from Selma to Montgomery, a march undertaken for the purpose of securing voting rights for all Americans. I stood, one balmy Alabama night, under a starry Alabama sky, and I heard the never-to-be-forgotten voice of Martin Luther King ring out in his never-to-be-heard-again prophetic cadences as he said, 'We are all witnesses together.' He did not mean witness as onlooker, witness as voyeur. He meant witness-participant. And so are we women, when we ask to share in communal responsibility, asking to be witnesses, participants, in our own Jewish community."

Jewish women had multiple motives for going South, but clearly their primary impetus was to be part of a democratic movement to fight racial injustice. Like many young people of their generation, they sought to hold America to its democratic ideals. Going South also provided adventure, "authentic" experience (in which theory and practice were linked), a sense of community, and—for some—an escape from boring jobs, difficult families, the prospect of marriage and life in suburbia. It provided an opportunity to explore one's "vocation," to experiment with different identities. For some of the women I interviewed, those experiments included their first interracial collaborations; assuming leadership; being an activist; and experimenting with sex. Through it all was the intoxication of the "freedom high," of danger and of putting one's full self on the line for a just cause.

Dr. Debra L. Schultz is a founder and Acting Director of the Women's Program of The Open Society Institute (Soros Foundations Network), which works to include women in the development of more democratic societies. This article is based on a book she is now preparing for publication.

Meanwhile, Up North ...

The Golden Ghetto's Shame

by Alice Sparberg Alexiou

I observed the civil rights movement as a teenager in Great Neck, New York, the *goldene medina,* far from the agony of Mississippi and Alabama. Great Neck, our Depression-bred parents told us, was paradise, filled with huge houses and lush landscapes, swimming pools and tony stores, in contrast to the mean streets of Brownsville or Far Rockaway where our parents had grown up. Except for a small black population on Steamboat Road dating back to the 19th century, Great Neck was then all white and all Jewish. We didn't experience anti-Semitism as our parents had. Our schools were rated among the best in the country.

Great Neck had everything. Including a conscience.

Despite our affluence, in Great Neck our politics remained liberal. In those days, hardly any Jews in Great Neck voted Republican. Like black people, we Jews too had suffered from racism and we weren't going to forget it. Unlike other white people, we were enlightened. We would, we were determined, right wrongs. My parents, born in America to poor immigrants who had fled the pogroms of Russia and Poland, sent regular contributions to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (as did many Great Neck Jews). They belonged to a liberal, Reform synagogue whose rabbis had been preaching about the injustices suffered by "Negroes" since the early days of the movement.

My family had a black housekeeper, Mattie.

And like many in Great Neck, my family had a black housekeeper. Her name was Mattie, and she worked for us for 22 years. Women like Mattie worked in countless Great Neck homes. And the ladies of these houses, while their husbands were away at work, were discovering right in their own kitchens just how complicated the race issue was in America.

My mother tried to make Mattie feel like a member of our family. Mattie slept in a comfortable room, with a television and a private bathroom. Every Friday night when she went home to Bedford-Stuyvestant for the weekend, my mother loaded her down with big cuts of kosher meats to feed her family. On the nights when Mattie cooked dinner for us, my mother insisted that she join us at the table. Mattie did so, but reluctantly. My mother also asked Mattie to call her Esther instead of Mrs. Sparberg. Somehow Mattie couldn't.

In 1968, a Jewish businessman in Great Neck donated space for a local branch of the NAACP. The previous year, race riots had burned cities across America during the "Long Hot Summer" and Lyndon Johnson's presidential commission concluded that the cause was two separate societies, "one black, one white, separate and unequal." That same year, at