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CHILDREN'S CRUSADES AND CONCENTRATION CAMPS

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Jackson had its first "mass march" on Friday, May 31, 1963, only a few weeks after the black children of Birmingham had joined Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in facing the fire hoses, the dogs, and filling Birmingham Jail and all other local prisons. Medgar Evers, Dave Dennis, Doris Allison, and John Salter (just out of city jail on bond) did what they could to bring some order to the situation. But the chief plans were made by the highschool students themselves. Over 1200 students tried to reach the assembly point, Farish Street Baptist Church, for the demonstration. Transportation problems kept most students back and the police were not about to let us maintain effective car pools. Over a hundred students were arrested just trying to walk from their schools to the church.

At the church, after instructions in nonviolence, prayers, and freedom songs--and after passing a box around to collect any pocket knives or anything the police might call a weapon--the first four hundred students filed out of the church, led by NAACP youth leader Willie Ludden. They marched two by two, carrying small American flags and a few protest signs, down the sidewalks of Farish Street, the heart of the black business district, towards the goal of Capitol Street. Lines of white police in helmets and battle gear soon met them.

Willie Ludden refused to give his flag to the police. He held high the American flag, clutched with both hands, as the police clubbed him to the ground. The white police won the flag. There was no violence nor resistance from any of the student

demonstrators. Each pair walked up to the police to replace those arrested, and often beaten, in front of them. Quickly police placed the whole group under arrest. Medgar Evers was very proud of the black children of Jackson this day. My thought was that this was very much like a demonstration Mahatma Gandhi might have led in India. Then I wondered whether it might be more like a children's crusade against some medieval Saracens. Would the fearful enemy destroy these innocents? Or friends and allies along the way? Would the adults in the Movement in Jackson, in the NAACP offices in New York City, in the White House in Washington, betray the trust of these students? Would my Movement friends and I? Then I became more fearful. Would the parents now join the Movement and follow the children to prison? Or was any of this a crusade? Were the beautiful black children of Jackson marching into Caesar's Coliseum, or just the Jackson Fairground's prison with its modern "Coliseum," an enclosed and domed arena-auditorium?

A week after this several of us from the Movement were speaking in a New York church, the Broadway Tabernacle United Church of Christ. (The old church actually was on Broadway, a few blocks above Times Square and, although the occasion was grim, we did note our names on Broadway, on the big church announcement sign. I wondered if what I planned to say was too theatrical, too melodramatic to be believed. But these people had seen the TV news scenes of Birmingham. And Jackson was worse.) The pastor, Larry Durgen, was a Tougaloo College trustee; the church had a long history of social concern with links through the abolitionists right back to the Revolution and the Pilgrims before that. The Birmingham Movement was represented by the Rev. Andrew Young. Dan Beittel and I represented the Jackson Movement.

I described in detail the children's demonstrations:



"... between six and seven hundred people have been arrested. The people, mostly students, but including several hundred adults, sing of Freedom. But this freedom is not just a blessing for the Negro of Mississippi. The average white man needs to be freed from the prejudice, hatred, and fear which is destroying his own integrity and his soul. Those who have demonstrated for Freedom have done so in a powerful yet non-violent way, with the quiet dignity of faith and love standing up to depravity and hate. Never has the sickness of prejudice been so revealed as in these past weeks in Birmingham and in Jackson.

"One news photograph describes Jackson. This picture shows crumpled American flags and a battered sign, 'We Want Freedom,' all scattered in a street gutter with police standing by. The Mayor of Jackson boasted that he would cage 10,000 Negroes if necessary. He converted livestock exhibit buildings at the State Fairgrounds into prison compounds, building hogwire fences around them. The local press shifted the name of this concentration camp from 'Hog-pen' to 'Fairgrounds Motel.' To imprison 500 students was treated as a joke by the papers. Concentration Camp is a valid term to describe this situation since these students and adults were all political prisoners, fighting an evil government. After two days of police brutality at one Negro high school the students were ready to march.

"These young demonstrators ranged in age from eleven to twenty. Soon even younger children were arrested. In Birmingham mass arrests people were carried to jail in school buses. Jackson placed many of their Negro students in garbage trucks (supposedly unused or cleaned.) This was a perfect symbol of what the leaders of Mississippi think of their Negro citizens. To the average white man the Negro is just not a person. Perhaps many of the Germans failed to see the Jews as persons.

"Five hundred children were taken to the fairgrounds concentration camp. Here the sickness of prejudice further showed itself. The police were not prepared to feed so many people; some got sandwiches but others were insulted. The police put baloney in a barrel before the students along with a barrel of milk and another of water; then bread was thrown on the on the ground and the order given, 'Go eat it, you dogs.' Police spat on the ground in front of the students who then refused to eat anything. The next day stew was prepared for the prisoners, cooked before them in garbage pails--probably clean, but still disgusting. To break the spirit of those in prison, the police used several methods. They would take out the leaders, usually college students like Annie Moody, or older highschool students like Cleve Donald. Those who led in singing or in prayer might suddenly be seized by police and taken from the compound to another jail. One time police asked the students to select spokesmen to give complaints about their alleged mistreatment; those who did complain were then taken to other jails or isolated. But despite all such things the police have not broken the spirits of those who fight for freedom.

"I talked to a twelve year old boy a few days ago. He had been in the concentration camp and described his experiences. He was loaded into a crowded garbage truck, all closed in and dark. A young girl said, 'We will suffocate. We will die in here,' and began to cry. (And some people did faint and pass out from the heat and lack of air.) This little boy (probably Gene Young, a 12 year old who replaced the seized college students as a leader) touched the girl's arm and said, "Let's sing." Soon the whole truck load of young prisoners was singing. Then the guards began beating on the truck to silence the singers. The boy said, 'I realized the police were more afraid of us than we were of them and I knew everything would be alright.'

"This is the kind of spirit that is alive in Jackson, Mississippi and it is so powerful that

some day it will overcome all the hatred and sickness in the soul of the bigot and the silent moderate and will bring a true freedom to Jackson, to Mississippi, and to all America."

At the Broadway church our comments were the sermon for the day. Even as I preached I worried about what was happening back in Jackson where Medgar Evers, John Salter, and others might be attempting to worship at a segregated white church. I knew many in the New York church would find my comments unbelievable. And, at that time, it was all hearsay. I had not been inside the Concentration Camp. But one of the tasks entrusted to me by Medgar Evers was to interview some of the college students and younger children as they got out of the prison and make as accurate assessment as possible of it all to report to Medgar. Reality was too grim for us to afford exaggeration. I would also recommend certain students for Medgar himself to talk with.

Medgar Evers protested the prison conditions and mistreatment to Washington. To our horror, Washington investigated and announced that conditions in the prison were fine, that the black children were not being abused and were being well treated. Some food problems were hinted at, but the students were blamed for some sort of alleged protest fast. I knew why the students refused to eat the food. They refused to crawl on the ground like dogs; these kids did not know anything much about Gandhian fasting. We would never get these stories into the national press, probably because FBI or Justice Department investigators so praised the police for their good work in the prison. We would have been moved by the white racist press of Jackson, which of course did not print the stories since a whites might have been shocked. But the national press did not print the stories, probably they believed Washington instead of the people. So the American people knew little in the white people of Jackson.

Some of the conditions in the prison compound were inevitable, although the way the Mayor had boasted of his preparations he might have given some thought as to how to feed the prisoners and where they might sleep. He seems to have prepared his concentration camp far in advance. One effort was made to help clean the hog-barn-prison, but even this attempt at sanitation could not be done without the sickness of racism and the sadism of the Jackson police being revealed.

Two exhibit buildings, one for males and one for females, plus the cattle and hog pens were inside the wire compound. Boys were kept in the cattle stockade building and the exhibit building. Further wire and barricades separated the prison huts. At night spotlights kept the outside grounds very bright and clearly illuminated the armed guards, standing like sentries, rifles on their shoulders, and some patrolling the perimeter with their frightening police dogs on chains. The doors of each building were barricaded and even the windows, about ten feet above the ground, were covered with wire mesh. A few windows were just boarded up. Armed guards inside the buildings kept order.

Early in the evening of the first mass arrests the guards at one of the girl's buildings called the prisoners to order and announced that Jackson was not going to put up with all this "damned nigger marching and fill the jail shit like Birmingham. We are gonna' finish this thing in Jackson, here, tonight. We got gas for you niggers."

"Gas? What's he mean?," whispered a younger girl to one of the college coeds.

"I don't know. He's just trying to scare us," the Tougaloo student muttered, trying to reassure the child. (The task of some of the college students was to be in each demonstration so as to help give leadership to the younger students and children in prison.) "Jackson's bad, but

its not Germany. Don't listen to him."

"What's that?" cried out another girl, pointing to the far end of the building.

Ugly, whirling clouds of gray-white smoke were pouring through the heavy mesh of the screened windows. Soon the cloud came closer and closer as each window began slowly to let in the frightening smoke. The ceiling of the building began to disappear in the horrible fog, the lights casting a pale beam through the terror. There was just enough light to see the cloud, now hanging about eight feet above the floor, bulging towards the children. One white policeman was bellowing forth laughter and shouting, "God, it stinks in here. Too many niggers. Can't stand that smell. Let's get outta here quick, men. Let's go."

The police all went out the only door. One called out as he left, "Block that door! Shoot any black bitch that tries to get out."

One girl started screaming, "It's poison. They're going to kill us! They're going to kill us!" Some screamed hysterically, others began crying. The older girls tried to calm them. (Fortunately most of these students were too young to have heard much about the European Nazis. They had plenty of fear for the white police of Mississippi, but if they had known about their German counterparts, there might have been pandemonium and mass hysteria. Some of the girls crouched down, huddled near the concrete floor, as the drooping smoke slowly poured over their heads and sagged down, down, down, to where they lay. They began gagging, coughing, and moaning.

A man's laughter, white laughter, came from behind the cloud. Then more men could be heard. The white police were back inside the building. "That'll kill all the crabs, you nigger whores," one shouted, "and fleas and bedbugs too, ha, ha, ha." Other police joined the

hilarity. Then some of the girls began to laugh, but in nearly hysterical voices. Most of the girls realized at the same time that this was not a poison gas but the very familiar smelling spray used to kill mosquitoes. (Jackson, like most Deep South cities, had a specially designed truck which traveled the city streets each summer night. Mounted on the back of the truck was a machine which sent out great white clouds of smoky insecticide, used chiefly against mosquitoes but which also killed most of the wonderful fireflies, the lightning bugs, such a wonderful memory of my own Southern childhood and the dusk of summer nights in Vicksburg. This spray was supposedly harmless to humans, but often so thick that traffic had to stop almost a block behind the spray-truck. On a normal summer evening children, white and black, would delight in playing in the fog, running and dancing in and out of the clouds. By the summer of 1963 black children, aged six or seven, in Jackson called it "tear gas" but still enjoyed the play.

The girls in the prison recognized the smell immediately as they were engulfed in what they thought was a cloud of death. They were no longer afraid of the smoke. But every moment of such terror is like a knife wound in the guts that never quite heals. (Movement people bear more unseen wounds deep inside their guts, and minds, and souls, than any FBI agent ever observed on their bloody foreheads while he was taking notes on the sidelines, or taking names of the radicals, the demonstrators.)

Outside the compound the city bug-truck slowly moved away from the women's building and began aiming its smoke at the men's building. There were ventilation fans, high in the ceilings of the buildings (which were, after all, designed to give white state fair visitors, in their segregated entertainment, a cool, fresh atmosphere in which to view pure white hogs and prized pickled pears and jams). The fans quickly sucked in the spray-fog up to the roof before it

gradually descended. Most of the men knew what the spray was immediately and did not panic. No doubt some white public health official, perhaps someone honestly concerned about the health of the children, had ordered the buildings fumigated to kill any lurking insects. Probably this kind-hearted man never knew that the buildings had not been cleaned out prior to the prisoners beings brought in.

In Mississippi and in the rest of America, as in the rest of the world, there will always be enough men and women who laugh at the terror their humor inspires in their prisoners. Such people would not laugh much more heartily if the gas were a new version of a Nazi poison instead of some new variation of DDT. And the voices of justice and order will ignore the complaints, and the moderates and liberals will remain concerned with cleanliness and propriety, vigilantly guarding their deafness and blindness, insisting that times are normal.

On the day of this first mass demonstration, with over four hundred children being jailed and many beaten, the Jackson Daily News lead headline of the afternoon paper managed to proclaim: "VIOLENCE POPS IN OTHER STATES." 1 The paper also had pictures of the empty but waiting prison compounds at the state fairgrounds. Among other words of wisdom Mayor Allen Thompson managed to condemn outside agitators and to call Tougaloo College the local "cancer," 2 and so the school was called "Cancer College" by whites for months to come. On the editorial page of the paper was a cartoon featuring "Lefty Wing," a bearded beatnik with dark glasses. This must have been one of their most popular characters for he had appeared off and on for many years. The cartoonist, Bob Howie, was an artist whose talents were well suited to the Jackson press. This time "Lefty Wing" was shown spouting tears and crying, "Police Brutality! (they've hurt my feelings) Boo Hoo." 3 At the side of this piece of art was a column

by Jack Lotto called, "On Your Guard." The title read: "Commie Team Cues Agitators."

There was a preface in heavy print:

To help its readers keep on guard against propaganda, the Daily News has for some time been bringing you this authoritative weekly report. This particular column is printed from the Daily News of August 15, 1962. 4

The first two sentences give the flavor of the article:

The four top Negro Communist leaders in America are moving on special top priority assignment into the troubled South. The mission of these Moscow trained agitators is to encourage and promote racial incidents and divide the people. 5

The preceding day, in his front page column, Editor Jimmy Ward had managed to describe the actions of black demonstrators as "some bucks squatted in the gutter." 6 I was not surprised when the paper finally began running one of its most popular features of the 1961 summer of the Freedom Rides. This was a front page item: 7

A G I T A T I O N

B O X S C O R E (as of 9 A.M. Saturday)

Pavement Packers.....	421
Sign Toters.....	28
Stool Sitters.....	16
Curb Squatters.....	8
Sluggers, Chunkers.....	11
Knee Benders.....	14
* * *	
Arrested.....	479
In Jail.....	25
On Bond.....	34
In Fairgrounds Motel.....	421

*SO what
was said - the
was kind of ok*

It all looked like some great sports event, with all the hits, runs, plays, and everything reported in detail. All it lacked was a headline: "LIONS VS. CHRISTIANS." The local favorites, led by Capt. Ray and coached by Mayor Thompson had won the series in 1961 against the visiting club, the "Freedom Riders," despite their complaints about bad calls by the umpires, Bobby Kennedy and J. Edgar Hoover. There was a bit of a setback for the all white home team in the fall of 1962 in "Meredith vs. Ole Miss," but now it was the summer of 1963 and the hope of all the South rested on Jackson's fair haired team. The blonde, blue-eyed cheerleaders had gotten things off to a rousing start in the pre-game warm up festivities in the Woolworth's sit-in riot. Now the big game was finally starting.

The arena was packed. Ross Barnett sat in his accustomed box with its white columns, Rebel flag, and garlands of magnolia leaves and blossoms. Nearby, in hoopskirts, sat the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution,) the UDC, (United Daughters of the Confederacy), the Women For Constitutional Government, (of the John Birch Society sort), the Ladies Foreign Missionary Society (of the Southern Baptist sort,) and the rest of the Vestal Virgins. All the best seats had been taken by the time the visitors from the SPCA arrived. Gov. Barnett quickly recognized this group as a front for the FBI, the Justice Department, and the Kennedys. He was so pleased when they took top balcony seats, real cheap, facing the sun. From that distance the SPCA could always tell the New York reporters they had observers on hand, but would be sure to notice nothing unpleasant.

The news article accompanying the first box score was titled, "Motel Houses 421 Negroes, Awaits more." 8

(The box score was never printed again after the death of Medgar Evers. Perhaps even the

Jackson press had no category for "martyrs" in its sporting vocabulary.)

In a feeble attempt to match the mirth of the Daily News one TV weatherman gave a late evening forecast, "Tomorrow will be hot and cloudy with demonstrators." 9

Gov. Ross Barnett responded to the mass arrests of the children and others by offering the Mayor the full cooperation of the State of Mississippi, especially the use of the facilities of the state prison at Parchman in the Delta. The Governor had opened Parchman to house the Freedom Riders of 1961 and now proposed placing "approximately 300 of the agitators and hoodlums" 10 from Jackson in the maximum security unit there.

A s

reported by the Clarion-Ledger's Charles Hill:

line up

Governor Barnett extended congratulations to Mayor Thompson...all members of the Jackson Police... to General T.B. Birdsong, Commissioner of the Highway Patrol... and the Goon Squad, sixtyfive members of the Highway Patrol, who are specially and technically trained for riot duty, and other members of the Patrol, the Sheriff, and many others too numerous to name for their splendid work. 11

Some of us in the Movement were angry when we heard that Barnett had "congratulated" his near fascist police for their "splendid" work in capturing some 500 unarmed protestors, mostly children, but we still had cause to appreciate the Governor's message; it was good to know that he called his own lawmen the "Goon Squad." That was a much nicer term than any ever used to describe them by any of their victims.