

Note (April 1969): Mrs. Greenberg, a quite liberal lady from New York, was spending some time in Jackson and, among other things, was digging up material on Medgar Evers. She telephoned me in Raleigh, we talked extensively about Medgar, and this letter to her was additional information of an essentially anecdotal nature.

jrs

John R. Salter, Jr.  
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September 27, 1966

Miss Polly Greenberg  
4221 Forest Park Drive  
Jackson, Mississippi

Dear Miss Greenberg:

It was indeed good to talk with you on the phone. Your moral support is much appreciated, believe me.

I knew Medgar Evers very well from 1961 to his death. I was the Advisor to the Jackson Youth Council of the NAACP, a member of the board of directors of the Mississippi NAACP, and co-chairman of the strategy committee of the Jackson Movement. I worked with Medgar closely. And I always had tremendous respect for him.

Here are two or three of the many sketches that come to mind:

Medgar was a very stable, very cool person. The only time that I ever saw him break down came in the fall of 1961, at an evening dinner session of the annual convention of the Mississippi NAACP -- in the Masonic Temple on Lynch Street. The police were parked outside and, inside, the delegates from the scattered, and generally moribund NAACP units around the state, had finished giving their reports. Medgar got up and began to speak on the matter of Clyde Kennard of Forrest Co. who, a year or so before, had been spirited off to the penitentiary on the trumped-up charge of receiving stolen chicken-feed -- all of this stemming from Kennard's several attempts to enter all-white Mississippi Southern at Hattiesburg. As Medgar talked on about the Kennard case, his voice shook and, in what was obviously deep ~~sorry~~ sorrow and frustration, he wept openly. With one accord -- and with many others weeping by this time -- all arose and began singing "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." When the song was over, Medgar continued, outwardly calm.

The Evers family lived under constant threat of violence. I can recall that, in the days just preceding the Meredith-Oxford crisis in September, 1962 -- all sorts of legal maneuvers were going on in the Federal district and Fifth Circuit courts -- my wife and I went one Saturday night to the Evers home. We knew Medgar was probably in New Orleans where the Fifth Circuit was then grinding away, and we thought we should see his wife, Myrlie. We parked, went to the door, and knocked. Medgar's police dog was barking in the back yard (fenced up). There was no answer to our knock and I knocked again. Then the door opened, only a crack, and I could see a gun. I called my name and Medgar opened the door, instantly apologetic. He had come up to Jackson for the weekend. Inside the Evers home, furniture was piled in front of all of the windows. At least a half dozen firearms were in the living room and kitchen. The children were in bed and ~~knaw~~ Medgar and his wife and Eldri and myself visited for a good while. The barricaded nature of the Evers home was not uncommon for a civil rights person in Mississippi; what was uncommon was the fact that both Medgar and wife were mighty ~~knaw~~ calm. It was a very pleasant visit -- unusually so considering the fact that, next perhaps to Meredith, no one was any more prime a target in the Deep South at that time than was Medgar.

I can recall one occasion that Medgar conceded fear -- at least as he recounted the experience to me. He had gotten a new Oldsmobile, but up in the northern part of the state it had broken down. The only place he could get it fixed was at the garage owned by the county president of the Citizens' Council -- so the car was towed there. Apparently, the garage was, in the purest sense of the term, a cracker nest. The owner and his men recognized Medgar's name immediately, but began work on the car. He didn't want to stay in the garage for the day that it would take to fix it, but on the other hand he was afraid to leave for fear they'd somehow sabotage the car. He wound up staying the whole day, right by his car while the mechanics worked on it. Many people came to look at him, but he stuck it out until the car was fixed; then left just before sundown. But he was cool: I recall leaving Greenwood with him one night at midnight -- and we left at 90 mph -- with Medgar casually talking about a rumor he'd heard to the effect that a segregationist killer outfit in Leflore Co. had installed infra-red lights on the cars, which could allow them to see the highway, but which couldn't be spotted by whoever they were following. By the time he finished discussing this, we were going about 100 mph! But he was driving easily and well and his talk was calm in tone, if not in content. But Medgar did not take chances, and no one could seriously accuse him of consciously or unconsciously seeking martyrdom. In the spring of 1963, he and I and several members of the Jackson Youth Council began to try to pull together a little Movement in Canton -- the first efforts along these lines since the Citizens' Council had ~~kit~~ destroyed a tiny NAACP in Canton around 1955. Our first meetings, which had been preceded by promises from, say, 50 or so to attend, featured turnouts of around 5 and 6 people -- but the little group (we met in the Sunday school room of an old church) began to grow slowly. The whole town was filled with terror; Billy Noble was sheriff then -- I understand he's police chief now -- and there had been a number of killings of Negroes, none solved, in the fall of '62 and the winter of '62-'63. After we had had several meetings, cars of whites began to cruise around, up and down the streets, in front of the church when we were in there. Medgar always insisted on people not standing in the light; he, himself, stayed in the shadows -- took every safety precaution. He never left Canton at night unless I, or someone else, was in another car right behind him. He didn't want martyrdom; just wanted to keep on living and working.

No matter how discouraged he might feel, Medgar was always able to communicate -- or at least made a hell of an effort to communicate -- enthusiasm to those with whom he was working. In the early days of the Jackson Movement, our "mass" meetings were tiny affairs, yet Medgar always functioned as though the meetings were the last crucial ones before the Revolution broke in Mississippi: he met each person on an equal to equal basis, smiled, joked, gave them the ~~mignity~~ recognition of human dignity that each human being warrants; by the time the meeting began even the little handful of faithful felt it was worth holding; never an orator, Medgar was a good firm speaker -- by the time the meeting was over, he'd given it all he had, and the handful went home determined to do what they could. Those early meetings in Canton were the most terror-stricken I'd ever seen -- but, even there, he communicated enthusiasm: talked about crops, then about voting.

But Medgar Evers could, privately, get discouraged. In his neighborhood, for example, lived many teachers. Most would scarcely talk to him -- they were scared to death to even see him. Many of the clergymen in Jackson were afraid to exchange words with him. One evening Medgar came out to our home at Tougaloo; he'd spent the day trying to draw some teachers into the NAACP. They had turned thumbs down on it; had even told him, in effect, that the state's Negro community would be better off without him. He had had it that day and, I recall, talked then -- as he always did when he got discouraged -- about giving up the NAACP field secretary job and getting into the Ole Miss law school in the fall. ~~at that time~~ I think he would have ultimately gone to law school, and most likely at the University of Mississippi -- but it would probably have been many years before he would have stopped his field work. He'd get discouraged, privately -- never publicly, but a day or so later, ~~he'd be back in form.~~ he'd be back in form.

Medgar was a great ~~fix~~ friend of kids and, having been a football player at Alcorn, he maintained quite an interest in the sport. He used to play -- when he had some free time -- with the neighborhood kids. He was also an avid fisherman and did some hunting.

In the late fall of 1962, our Youth Council began the boycott of downtown Jackson, and we did a tremendous amount of grassroots organizing to support the boycott -- which was successful. As the boycott went on into the spring, we broadened it into an all-out desegregation campaign -- picketing, sit-ins, massive marches. This was in May and June, 1963. It was the first widespread grassroots challenge to the system in Mississippi -- was the Jackson Movement -- and there was solid opposition from Barnett right on down. Mass arrests and much brutality occurred each day; lawmen from all over the state poured into Jackson to join the several hundred Jackson regulars, the Jackson police auxiliary, state police, etc. Hoodlums from all over the state -- Klan-types, although the KKK as an organization was just formally beginning in Mississippi -- poured into Jackson. The National Office of the NAACP, which had reluctantly agreed to support our Jackson campaign, became frightened -- because of the vicious repression, and because it was costing money -- and also the National Office was under ~~strick~~ heavy pressure from the Federal government to let Jackson cool off. A sharp ~~si~~ split occurred on the strategy committee. Several of us, the youth leaders, myself, Ed King and a few others, wanted to continue, even intensify the mass demonstrations; others, such as the National Office people and conservative clergy wanted to shift everything into a voter registration campaign (meaningless then, under the circumstances.) There was very sharp internecine warfare between our militant group and the conservatives. Medgar was caught in the middle. As a staff employee of the National Office, he was under their direct control; as a Mississippian, he knew that only massive demonstrations could crack Jackson. (And we knew if we cracked Jackson, we had begun to crack the state.) The stakes were high and everyone -- our militant faction on the strategy committee, the conservative group, the segregationists, ~~knocktix~~ Federal government -- knew it.

The NAACP National Office began to cut off the bail bond money; and also packed the strategy committee with conservative clergy. It was a hell of a situation. Despite everything that I and Ed and the youth leaders could do, the National Office was choking the Jackson Movement to death. It waned almost into nothing in the second week in June.

I saw Medgar late one afternoon, Tuesday, June 11. He was dead tired and really discouraged -- sick at what was happening to the Jackson Movement, but too much a staff man to openly challenge it. (Back in January, 1963, he had openly challenged the National Office; told New York to speed up the Jackson school desegregation suit -- of which ~~his~~ two of his own children were plaintiffs -- ~~and~~ and hinted if they didn't, he might resign his job. The National Office had speeded it up -- a little.) But in this situation, although he was with us intellectually and emotionally, he didn't really buck the National Office. We had a long talk and, despite the internal situation, an extremely cordial one. But he was more disheartened than I had ever known him to be. Later that evening, we were all at a ~~lit~~ little mass meeting (the size of the meetings had grown as the Movement had grown, from a handful to 1500 or 2,000 a night, but now, as the Movement waned, they were waning in size) and at this meeting it was announced by the National Office people that the focus of the Jackson Movement was now officially voter registration -- no more demonstrations. The boycott, out of which it had all grown, would continue -- but no more demonstrations. NAACP T-shirts were being sold. It was a sorry mess. Medgar had no enthusiasm at all; said virtually nothing at the meeting; looked, indeed, as though he was ready to die. A few hours later, just after midnight of June 12, he was shot to death in front of his home.

His death was the resurrection of the Jackson Movement. Within hours, we had organized huge demonstrations which poured out onto the streets; the National Office had no alternative, under the circumstances, but to ~~ga~~ let us go ahead. Police brutality and terror mounted steadily -- it was in a much grimmer dimension than it had ever been. Around 6500 people, from all over Mississippi -- from places in which no civil rights worker had ever set foot yet -- came into Jackson for Medgar's funeral. ~~There~~ A number of nationally prominent people were there. At the funeral, little was said about Medgar the man -- a lot was said about the glorious career of the NAACP. Most in attendance at the funeral marched the 3 miles or so from the Masonic Temple to Mrs. Harvey's funera l ~~parlor~~ parlor (Collins Funeral Home) on Farish Street. This was the first "legal" mass civil rights-type march ever held in Mississippi's history -- and it was held only because we had let the power structure know we'd march anyway. (National Office had really been aga inst it; two days or so after Medgar's death the National Office was once again trying to ~~x~~ stop the mass demonstrations). Once at the funeral home, the nationally prominent folk -- including the top NAACP leaders and others -- left the area. The thousands of Negro Miss sippians stayed there, in front of the funeral parlor that ~~was~~ into which Medgar had been taken following the funeral. Then we had the second huge demonstration of the day -- this one "illegal" -- several thousand of us pressing back down Farish St. toward Capitol Street. There must have been 2,000 law officers massed in and around the whole area -- and several hundred blocking N. Farish St. where it enters Capitol St. About 30 of us that the police recognized, including Ed King and myself, were arrested; the cops clubbed ~~every~~ the others back down Farish Street, fired over their heads, shot out windows etc. Those of us who had been arrested were carried to the fairgrounds. John Doar of the Justice Dept., assisted by several National Office people, finally persuaded the remaining demonstrators to go home. That was the largest demonstration of an "illegal" nature that has ever occurred in Mississippi; it lasted about 2 hours. Shortly after that, the Kennedys got on the phone, the National Office cut off the bail bond, Ed King and myself were nearly killed in a rigged auto wreck and my car in which we were riding was completely destroyed. Ten days after Medgar's death, the Jackson Movement was essentially dead -- sold out.

This is an extremely bitter story and I have not done it justice, as far as detail, in this letter. I have written a book about it which will be published sometime.

When I first came into Mississippi, in 1961, it was a lonely place for a civil rights worker -- and it must have been even lonlier back in 1954 when Medgar went to work full-time for the NAACP. No one really gave a damn about Mississippi -- it was the tail end of the world. In 1961 and 1962, there was only a handful of civil rights activists in the state. Medgar belonged to that early era. He wasn't really an organizer; was sort of a lone wolf who traveled lonely and mighty dangerous trails. He kept the few dissidents that existed in the state together in little groups that did as much as they felt they could do; persuaded people to attach their names to pioneer civil rights lawsuits etc; investigated and tried to publicize the many atrocities which occurred each week. And, on orders from the National Office, he sold NAACP membership cards. Cliche it may be, but he was, simply and in every sense of the word, a hell of a brave pioneer deep in the wildn~~e~~ness. His death ended one era in Mississippi, and began another: he had hardly been buried in faraway Arlington cemetery when dozens, and then hundreds, of activists began to pour into Mississippi from all over. And then, thank God, the wilderness began to recede.

I hope this has all been of some help. Give me a call, or drop me a line, if there is a nything else you need -- or anything that needs elaboration. Keep the Ebony article as long as you wish; but please return it when you are finished.

Aga in, good talking with you.

As Ever,