

## **Strangely Beautiful Land – Land of Injustice\***

Dagmar Schultz

Europeans who come to the United States can choose between two ways of life. The first join the larger part of American society, whose lives revolve around two-story homes, income tax, women's clubs, baseball, grilled steaks, Saturday evening parties, Sunday morning churchgoing, traveling to California or Puerto Rico, and problems with the housemaid or the family psychiatrist. The second, less popular option, brings with it involvement in the ugly problems of the United States.

For the first way of life, precise guidelines can be given: don't stop smiling while you shake one hundred fifty hands at your welcome cocktail party. Do not insist that European soccer is more intelligent than American football. Regularly read the comics in the Sunday newspaper. Build up your connections, join women's book clubs and choose the church with the highest membership. Do not let yourself be corrupted by magazines like *The Nation* or *Liberation*, but subscribe to *Time* or *Reader's Digest*. Work hard and adopt a nonpartisan political stance. The result of this recipe is a good job, two cars, friendly neighbors, and consequently, if you are shrewd, admission to an exclusive club.

For the second way of life, there are no rules, only a few warnings. Be aware that you possibly may always remain a "foreigner," or be called a "Communist" or "beatnik," that you may end up incarcerated, and many people will see you at least as an immature or undesirable individual.

When I arrived as a German student in the United States, I knew nothing of this choice. Before I had time to make a decision, I had stumbled into the second life. Judging by the above warnings, things went well for me, -- perhaps I merely had luck. I received my Master's degree, I did not become a drug addict, up to now I've only been called a "white nigger" and a "Socialist," and I still retain my immigration visa.

I left Berlin in 1963 with the keen awareness of the destructive role that Germany had played in world history. This fact, and perhaps my past in Berlin, the versatile city of unrest, which I call the "Third Germany," made it impossible for me to see one of America's most serious problems: the attitude toward minority groups. Apart from Native Americans, African Americans are the most persistently oppressed. When I arrived in the United States, the protest against this oppression had broken out across the country and was approaching a climax.

The notion I had of the position of the African Americans originated from a reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind*, from history lessons and from newspaper articles. It could be summarized in one sentence: the South treated Blacks poorly, the North treated them well. Although I lived in one of the northern states, this notion was quickly dispelled: I was compelled to see the world in a different way. The difference between a Black and White man had previously been

about as meaningful to me as the difference between someone who wears a blue suit and someone who wears a green suit. But now people seemed a kaleidoscope before my eyes keeping them filled with the confusing variety of shades and tints, shapes of noses, mouths, eyes, hair, and all shapes, all colors took on even more confusing value judgments. It took me about three months to come to know the subtleties of northern prejudice and discrimination. While I was initially surprised and curious, I ended up psychologically and physiologically ill. I felt ill when I saw the exclusively White fraternities; when I went through the ghetto of the city; when I observed how a waiter took particular trouble with a Black customer; when I walked with a Black friend who could not help but observe how people looked at us; when I felt that particular attention which had been paid to every single word of the Black students in a seminar. I was sick of the discussion of "the Negro Problem," and again and again hearing that I was not in the country long enough to understand.

At that point, I decided that America had, in large part, missed the opportunity to utilize the possibilities of a multicultural society. Instead, the terms "Negroes", "Indians", Jews, foreigners, Catholics, Communists were usually uttered with a negative connotation.

After having worked in the civil rights movement and come in close contact with a large number of Blacks - light and dark, "good citizens" and militants, rich and poor - I concluded that I could not understand the neuroses of many African Americans and the psychological disease of many Whites if I did not travel to the Deep South. So, I traveled by train in September 1965 towards my life as a lecturer at a historically Black college in Mississippi.

I watched the scenery go by with mixed feelings. Parched brown fields, dilapidated wooden huts, cows that were hanging their heads in the dusty heat of the day, - all made an impoverished but peaceful impression. And yet I felt similar to when I would cross Berlin from West to East - the only difference was that I knew the rules of the game there. Now, however, in Mississippi - the land behind the Magnolia Curtain; terrorist state of Mississippi; Mississippi the closed society - what would these headlines, which I had read so often in northern newspapers, really mean?

The work at the College proved both challenging as well as disappointing. The school was founded about a hundred years ago. It numbered about five hundred students and was affiliated with the Methodist Church. It was one of the few private historically Black colleges in the South, and had, in contrast to the state, an integrated international faculty. The administration tried desperately to gain recognition as a national university. This was perhaps one of the reasons for the conservative and stifling atmosphere that prevailed at the college. The school was similar in many ways to the typical American college. Fraternities and sororities and similar hallmarks of American colleges flourished, the role that the college could play in our time and in its particular position was of little interest.

A majority of the students contributed to the superficial life as much as the faculty. Most had grown up in poverty. Often they came from so-called sharecropper families, people who lived on cotton plantations and for their work received a share of the harvest and a miserable hut. Many students came to college only with an eight-year school education. They had lived the life of Blacks in the South, and now the time had come for them where they wanted to start to forget it. Many attended college with the intention of finding a good job and recognition in the American society. What most wanted to be confronted with as little as possible was the "Negro problem." Only a few were active in the "Freedom Movement."

Still there were days on which woke the whole student community woke up and took a stand, for example, when one of their comrades was sent to prison because he had driven people who wanted to register to vote to the court house. A rally was called and money was collected for bail. (The mayor sets the sum for which the incarcerated person may be released.)

There were also students who were thinking creatively and individually, among them the theater group, with which I performed a controversial play, Jean-Paul Sartre's "The Respectable Prostitute." My expectation that the college would be a place from which the Black community could receive help and guidance was, however, not fulfilled. The administration had actively supported a few programs, such as the integration of schools and a kindergarten program that was part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty." But the college did not seize a role in the social revolution of the South.

Activities outside of school brought me into close contact with the struggle for a new world. On the first night of my stay, I went with several members of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to a county meeting. The red sand road took us through corn fields and forest into a blazing sunset. When we arrived at the wooden building that was also used as a church, trucks were parked in the area, and people were standing around in groups talking. The chairman, a local African American, opened the meeting. A woman stepped into the dim light, her full, clear voice rose with the song "*Oh Freedom, oh Freedom, oh Freedom over me...*" Everyone stood and joined "*...and before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free....*" I looked around me and saw the solemn expression on the young, strong women's faces, haggard men in work clothes, white-haired old men with wrinkled skin and small children of four or five years. How often had I sung this song at parties and meetings in the North, how different it sounded here! Mothers stood up and reported unsuccessful attempts to send their children to a white school, fathers told of anonymous bomb threats. Embarrassed silence prevailed, as the chairman asked why this or that woman still had not registered as voters. Plans were discussed, people encouraged not to be afraid to register as a voter, petitions to Washington were drafted. A thirteen-year-old girl reported a demonstration in Jackson, Mississippi, in which she had participated. The skinny child in a dress too small for her stood in front of the table that served as an altar on Sundays, and spoke in a high, determined voice. The report concluded with the words, "I spent

three days in prison. Demonstrations are not easy and prison is also not easy, but I will do it again. If you want your freedom, you cannot sit at home and wait for it. You have to go out and fight!"

The meeting ended with a second song. While I held the hands of my neighbors and we rocked in rhythm to the tune of "*We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday...*" I could not help observing the children who were standing over there hand in hand - boys with big faithful eyes, girls with stiff, thin braids on the side of the ears on the head. "*Black and White together, Black and White together someday...*" - what did their White peers in the North know of these children, of their daily struggle to be accepted by the world into which they were born? "*We shall live in peace, we shall live in peace someday...*" The White children in the North did not live in an atmosphere of constant danger, did not see their lives affected by words like 'nigger' and 'segregation,' were not threatened by church fires and police brutality, were not surrounded by poverty and deprivation of any kind. I realized how phony protests in the North were, especially in the intellectual discussions of primarily White civil rights groups, even in the fighting spirit of an association that calls itself Black Marxists. Even the misery of poor neighborhoods of color in Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles or New York appeared to me in a certain way as an abstract version of life down here. The crafty battle with social workers, the vicious circle of the welfare system, the tense atmosphere in a crowded ghetto, everything had a certain sophistication to it, which these people did not have here. Here the situation appeared in its crudest and most simple reality: it was about food or hunger, resignation or prison, hope or despair, life and death. During all my subsequent experiences, this impression never fully left me.

On the deserted country road, several police officers and the sheriff stopped us. Obviously they had expected us. Two cars had only one headlight - the driver had to pay a fine. As someone told me, it was extraordinary that no one was arrested. I soon learned that arrests were part of everyday life for the southern Blacks and civil rights defenders. It is impossible to describe the absurdity of southern "law" with the intent to make it understandable. There is nothing intelligible in this "judiciary"; if it didn't have such a dramatic an impact on people's lives, one could write off as ridiculous. The police are everywhere, not as your friend, but as your enemy. Since the smallest offense entails not a criminal charge, but usually arrest, one is overly conscious of one's behavior. It is advisable to adopt a very upright posture, as you can also be arrested for "public intoxication" even if you have stomach ulcers and never touch a drop of alcohol. If you want to ask a state official questions, which he might find disagreeable, you must know that one can also be arrested for disturbing the peace. When driving, one should constantly look for police cars and watch the speedometer, because you can be arrested if you do not go fast enough. Once you are in jail, there is no way to defend yourself; one is rarely allowed to call a lawyer. The only chance to win a case is to get it transferred to federal court, and wait for friends to pay the bail bond (and thus pad the wallets of the "guardians of the law").

Two weeks after I arrived, I experienced a concentrated wave of harassment. The Freedom House, the office of the MFDP, had been under constant surveillance by the police for days. It was a hot afternoon; we were waiting for the hour when it would cool off when two police cars stopped in front of the house. A minute later, three policemen and a man in plain clothes entered through the front door, while one policeman came through the back door. The atmosphere changed immediately, everyone was now fully awake. But I could not move and I saw that the others also sat paralyzed in their chairs, following the men with only their eyes. The sheriff, droopy eyelids over an incessantly nasty look, pulled a search warrant from his pocket, an unnecessary gesture, since no one would have dared to ask him. "We want to see if you have alcohol in the house."

Mississippi is a dry state. The sheriff told the chairman, a local African American, to open the filing cabinets. When he quietly replied that his wife had the keys and was not present, a policeman broke the locks. While they looked through documents and letters, the policeman who had come through the back door appeared with a liter bottle, which was filled with what looked like water. With a triumphant smile, he announced, "Here's the whiskey." We all knew that someone must have planted the bottle in the house, but no one would even think of contradicting the police when the head of the office was arrested for unlawful possession of whiskey. Only after the policemen surrounding the house had left did we move again.

We asked the mayor how high the bail was, then received the money received from the Black credit company, and that evening went again to the prison. I saw the policemen casually standing around the entrance and I noticed the cynical smile on the face of the sheriff when our lawyer put a \$100 bill in his hand. While the sheriff went in slow motion to the cell, I felt the shameless looks of the policemen glide over my body and thought for the first time that I might be able to hate.

Then a strange thing happened. Our office chairman walked over to us smiling and tired looking and we could have left. A professor at the college, who had been thrown in prison twice for his activities in the civil rights movement, asked the sheriff to show me around because I was new. The distorted features of the officers broke into a wide happy smile. "Come with me," he said. He eagerly told me in which cells he had locked up the drunks, and in which cells the women, and criminals and so on. He added apologetically, "At the moment, I have no prisoner here." He laughed, and his face lit up. It brought to mind the staff of German concentration camps. It was clear to me that these people are not only moved by hatred of Black people, but are poisoned by a deeper sadism.

The next morning we all stood in the mayor's office, waiting to find out whether the trial would take place on the same day. A policeman came and asked us for our names. When our lawyer informed us that we need not answer any questions before the legal proceeding started, *he* was - for resisting the law - declared under arrest. One of the girls was thereupon asked for her name, and since she did not answer, the mayor issued an arrest warrant for her. The police led her off to prison, the

lawyer asked to be taken there also. The response of the sheriff was, "I know that you want to go jail. But you cannot force us to take you there." All the while the mayor rocked back and forth in his chair, his hands clasped behind his head, and took time before also setting the bail for the girl at \$100.

On the same day a professor from the college was arrested twice, because he did not have a Mississippi license plate on his car. Towards evening, a pregnant Black woman was beaten by the police because she was driving without a license and refused to go to jail.

That evening the blinds were left down in the Freedom House, a precaution, which was strictly followed, as the residents had been targets for armed people who drove by in cars. We all sat outside on the patio, waiting for the next baleful message. Nobody was allowed to go into town. I felt like I was on a battlefield. The rest of the world was far, far away.

During the next few days further arrests took place, and the Ku Klux Klan burned crosses in front of the houses several Blacks. At that point, the office manager of the party called the Mayor and told him five hundred Deacons [Deacons for Defense and Justice], a militant Black group which was founded in Louisiana to defend Blacks against violence, threatened to come into the city if the harassment did not end. Then it was quiet for a while.

Prior to the new election law in Mississippi, only five percent of Blacks could vote; since then, the number of enrolled voters has significantly increased, especially in rural districts, which have a federal registrar sent from Washington. But it is still risky to register to vote. Too many have lost their jobs on plantations, too many have suffered the bombing of their homes.

The integration of cinemas, restaurants, and motels sparked the civil rights movement a few years ago; this fight is now regarded as less important. You often hear White southerners say, "Push through as many laws as you want. The Blacks don't have enough money to go to the better hotels and restaurants anyway." But for those who have the money, entry is denied by declaring such places "private clubs" and restricting membership to whomever they desire. Even at gas station restrooms you will find the sign "private." Therefore, all efforts now focus on achieving economic progress and political participation through voter registration. President Johnson's "War on Poverty" was the great hope of many people. Unfortunately, the program proved largely inapplicable in the South, -- many Blacks are wondering who the enemy is in this crisis.

The anti-poverty programs are emerging as "community action" initiatives. This means that a representative group of community members comes together to decide what the needs of the population are. President Johnson and the Office of Economy Opportunity, which was established to run the new government program, envision Black and White people sitting together at a table working out proposals to

combat poverty, disease, and substandard education. However, the powers that be in the South are not interested in changing the social and economic circumstances, rather they refuse to accept money from Washington, as it allows the position of the Black -- and the poor White population -- to improve. The community action programs look like this in reality: Blacks and Whites first hold separate meetings to decide whether and under what conditions they should come together. In a joint meeting, they then begin the long struggle over the definition of a "representative committee of community action." In many counties, the percentage of the Black population is higher than that of Whites. Therefore, the present leadership will not agree to representation based on population. On the other hand, the Blacks cannot accept 50:50 representation, since it would mean that the Whites would run the program and therefore the forces which oppress Blacks would be strengthened.

Because the Black population needs the help of Washington, they usually agree to choose their own representatives in a separate election. I attended several such elections, - they are among my unpleasant memories of Mississippi. The Black community gathered in a school auditorium. A so-called "Uncle Tom," that is, a Black man who is manipulated by the Whites, takes the lead. Positioned in front of the audience, he points to a number of Blacks who, like him, were chosen by the Whites, and shouts, "District 1. These here are the men who are responsible. These are the men who we trust and who we want to have, all who are for these men, stand up!" The question of an opposition party, made up of people who are not afraid of the "rednecks," who stand at the door and watch the proceedings, is ignored. The distraught people, who are inexperienced in political practices and also know that they can be easily identified if they remain seated, stand up slowly. The chairman does not bother to count them, but declares "Many thanks, that's the majority. -- District 2. Over there are the men who..." The result is a *de facto* one hundred percent "white" dominated committee. It happens that it breaks down after a few weeks following a protest of more radical Blacks. Until April, 1966, there has been no effective community action program in the South. One can only hope that the comprehensive project that was recently started in Mississippi will still be successful.

One solution is for Blacks to request "single-purpose programs." Such programs will be granted if African Americans demonstrate that they have tried everything to include the White community. However, such projects are financially limited, and the OEO (Office of Economic Opportunity) tries to avoid them, because they can easily be construed as promoting racial segregation. The application questions are so complicated that they are hard to fill without an expert and Mississippi lacks a sufficient number of employees of the OEO. It is too much to ask for people to come together after a hard day's work to create a program plan that requires filling out pages and pages of bureaucratic details, send them to some officials in Washington, and wait months for an answer. During my stay in Mississippi, none of the requests that had been generated through hours of indefatigable work had been evaluated or approved.

Mississippi is a land of widespread suffering. Many people live in inhumane conditions. Someone once said at an anti-poverty meeting, "Mississippi is the poorest state in the richest country in the world. It is in fiftieth place in the USA, and that's just because we do not have fifty-one states." The situation can only be relieved by well-considered plans with a lot of money from the federal government. In 1964, 80 percent of the cotton was picked by machine and, in 1965, an even higher percentage. It will not be long before the cotton crop in Mississippi will be completely mechanized. As long as no progress is made in education, housing, health and work, technological progress will only hurt African Americans. The fact is that more and more of them will be asked to leave the plantations on which they stay, increasing the number of unemployed unskilled workers.

A journey through the Delta area of Mississippi confirmed all the impressions I had gained in the northern part of the state. However, terror and harassment were more common in this region. In Indianola, I stopped in front of a burned-down house. An old woman stood in the charred remains of the house with a pile of fresh wood in the background. A refrigerator was still standing between wide holes in the floor and the walls, the remains of a lamp hung from a wooden plank, a rafter pointed in the sky like a plaintive finger. The woman said, "I had freedom fighters living in my house. One night, the Whites came. Fortunately, no one was injured, but the house burned down. Now my son is building a new one. My son said, 'I'm trying to get insurance for the new home, but no company will sell me a policy. And we cannot afford to build a stone house. Things don't look good for us.'"

In Ruleville, the scene of many demonstrations and violence and the hometown of Fannie Lou Hamer, probably the most politically active Black woman, we visited a new church in the Black section. The people assured us that they were all too willing to start a school program for adults as soon as they relocated the new church to a place further away from the old. One woman said, "We will be able to use the old church as a community center. But since the new church is too close to the old, it would be too easy a target to bomb once this is our school."

Around midnight, we sat in the house of a well-known church leader in a different city. We were talking about the difficulties of establishing cooperatives and unions when the phone rang. The man picked up the phone, listened for a moment, and put the phone down again. He stared straight ahead and then said casually, "That was another one of the calls. Someone said, 'Man, you are dead.' Last Sunday, I was not at home. So they called my wife. She told them that she did not know when I would return. They replied that they did not need to bother waiting since an accident was already prepared for me." Before we said goodbye, he showed us the holes shot through the door and into the walls. I counted twenty-one.

Although the killings and violence have decreased and it is officially considered a crime to kill a Black person in the South, the Black and White freedom fighters can never feel safe. Weeks may pass quietly and make this subconscious fear seem ridiculous, until suddenly someone is chased in his car and forced off the road and



into a ditch, until one evening, a gas station attendant fires his gun at a Black student who refuses to leave, until three freedom fighters disappear in the swamps or a children's freedom school is burned. The burning crosses, which the Ku Klux Klan leaves in the cover of night in front of selected houses, are the symbol of a constantly tense atmosphere.

It has always amazed me how the Blacks accept these circumstances and how much they are, in a certain sense, their own oppressors. That is, many of the older southern Blacks, have developed patience and humility, without which they would probably be better off. They are charming, hospitable and almost incapable of criticizing anyone. The younger generation is different. It is the main driving force in the social revolution that is taking place in the South. The extent of these changes will only be understood when they have become history. The young people have a more desperate hope, more drive and more impatience, especially those who feel attached to the freedom movement. Among them, you can find more hatred and more bitterness about the years that were lost in deprivation, fear and helplessness.

Tremendous social and economic injustice still fills the scene. Sheriffs and plantation owners, who behave like feudal barons, still try "to keep the Negro in his place." Mississippi is a society consisting of two classes: a few who own everything, control everything, and many who have nothing, are not allowed to determine their own life situation. These include the poor Whites, who are hostile to the social movement because they fear competition from Blacks and believe they have more to gain if they help to suppress it.

But the Black have-nots have begun to think, to express their thoughts and to take their lives into their own hands, no matter the cost.

I came to Mississippi with a head full of newspaper articles and arguments for discussion. I left with a heavy heart and painful memories. I was an outsider when I arrived and I became immersed to the extent a White visitor can by the time I drove away. There is prejudice everywhere in the world, but one can only appreciate its full effect after one has lived in a system based on prejudicial discrimination. The similarities and differences between Hitler's Germany and Mississippi have often been debated, but they share a common outcome: the pursuit of a system based on racial domination devastates both individuals and mankind. I did not take part in Hitler's regime; I was too young. The first few months that I spent in America and my encounter with many Americans affected my feelings about past misdeeds and the question of collective guilt. Although I believe that every person should be judged as an individual, I still dwell on this question. I hope that Americans don't have to find themselves similarly tortured.\*\*

**\* Original version:** "Seltsam schönes Land – Land der Ungerechtigkeit". Frankfurter Hefte, vol. 21 (Sept. 1966), 628-634.

Translated from the German by Jared Leighton and Andrew Timm; translation reviewed by Dagmar Schultz

**A comment on the language used:** This article was written at a time when the term “Negro” had not yet been replaced by “Black” or “African American.” Since this is a translation of my article I decided to replace the use of the “N” word. (Dagmar Schultz)

\*\*A more precise statement here is that I hoped US-Americans as well as Germans confront and accept the responsibilities arising from the crimes committed in their societies. (Dagmar Schultz)