

RABBI RAV A. SOLOFF ARRESTED IN MISSISSIPPI

The Canton, Mississippi jail was certainly not my intended destination when I volunteered to spend two weeks as a Minister-counsellor to the Council of Federated Organizations staff and volunteers working on the Mississippi Freedom Summer project of 1964. Yet, that is where I spent the first three days of August, and I think you may be interested to know how it happened.

The Council of Federated Organizations, known for short as COFO, is made up of all the Civil Rights and Local Citizenship groups in Mississippi, which decided they must work together to improve conditions in that State. CORE, NAACP, SNCC, and SLC are all cooperating in this Council, which is dedicated to three major projects: Freedom schools, voter registration and community centers. The National Council of Churches has been serving COFO sponsoring some of the orientation program and recruiting, training and directing Minister-counsellors to serve the various COFO groups scattered around the State. Now many of the COFO people who come from every part of the country are Jews and so the National Council of Churches appealed for Rabbinic participation in its clergy programs and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, in turn appealed to its members. I was particularly motivated to respond to the appeal of my Conference because of the shocking news that one of our members, Rabbi Arthur Lelyvald, had been brutally beaten without provocation, when he was serving as a Counsellor in Mississippi.

On July 26th, I flew to Jackson where I met the Reverend Warren McKenna, who guided us through a full day's orientation and on Tuesday morning asked me to work with the group in Canton, Mississippi. I arrived in Canton by car at the COFO headquarters, a building called Freedom House, where I was cordially received. I met the local National Council of Churches' representative, the Reverend James McFree, and began to participate with the COFO organization in a community education project, which involved calling on Negro families in their homes and setting up meetings to discuss voter registration and political organization.

The evening before my arrival in Canton, five ministers had come up from Jackson on a bus, they were verbally assaulted by a group of hostile whites and, when they entered a car, the car was trapped between two other stalled or supposed disabled vehicles for something close to an hour and a half, while crowds of whites and Negroes began to form in the area. Fortunately, no violence took place, the FBI was informed of the threatening situation and finally a local police officer convinced one of the blocking cars to move and let the ministers proceed. When I heard of this incident I thanked God that I had been spared the excitement and prayed fervently that no such incident might mar my stay.

On Tuesday morning before our arrival in Canton the group of ministers that had arrived the night before registered with the local police and with the local sheriff as these officials requested, they were treated to a lecture over two hours in length and again I was grateful to be spared that ordeal.

I proceeded to meet and talk with members of the Negro community; I also visited two of the Freedom schools being taught by college students to help upgrade the education of local Negro children and give them added incentive to study; I visited the local community center and generally

managed to contact a satisfying number of COFO workers as well as becoming acquainted with many local Negro families.

Saturday afternoon, August 1, I planned to visit another area in which COFO workers were concentrated, but Saturday morning five of the young people who were interested in the "registration" of Negro would-be voters in the Freedom Democratic Party of Mississippi, asked me to join them in soliciting such registrations in the city of Canton. We carried no leaflets but only the "Freedom Registration form" and I was told that this same activity had been carried out very successfully on the previous Saturday with the knowledge of the local police, so that there was no question in my mind of staging a demonstration or testing an ordinance or in any way of risking the special antagonism of the local authorities. When we had been downtown for only a few minutes and I was inside a bar and grill talking to some of the patrons, I noticed a police car stop on the street and soon one of the young people came in to tell me that the police had arrested some of our friends who were working on the same voter "registration" project. We then returned to the Freedom House and soon were followed by two police officers who demanded that the three who had returned in James car now come with them to police headquarters for investigation.

At police headquarters we were asked if we were all together and we affirmed that we were. The young volunteers were asked if they would promise never to do this type of solicitation again and they said they could not promise. The city attorney and the chief of police had a conference, at which they decided that all six of us should be booked. We were then formally booked and placed in the jail.

The first few hours were most uncomfortable, the girls were kept in a separate jail and there was no toilet paper in the cells the boys occupied. A little later when our attorneys were expected the two girls were brought and placed in a cell next to the small cell I shared with two volunteers, which in turn adjoined the large cell in which negro men were kept and into which our one Negro volunteer had been placed. Saturday afternoon we saw our lawyers but for some reason bail could not be arranged for all members of the group at that time and, therefore we decided not to separate. Finally, on Monday afternoon we were brought to the Municipal Court where bail of \$200. each was posted and we were released. The case had been removed to a Federal Court, but the question of possible remand is not yet settled.

Upon release from jail I contacted my family who had been suffering agonies of worry and confusion. I learned that a member of my Congregation had died and so it was necessary after consulting with lawyers on Monday evening, for me to fly back to New York by Tuesday morning.

This account omits all the interesting details about the people I met, the jail floor I slept on, the FBI interview, and so on, but I hope it conveys some sense of disbelief which I still feel at having been arrested for no cause on the basis of an unconstitutional local ordinance in a city in the United States of America. Truly, the State of Mississippi is an amazing place and I only pray that my case may make some small dent in the sense of isolation which permits local authorities there to act as if they were not integrally connected to the other 49 States, and subject to Federal law and the protection of the Constitution for all men.