

I was a SNCC organizer off and on between 1961 and '65, first in Georgia and then in Mississippi. It never occurred to me not to go South. My parents transmitted to me their belief that a better, more just world was possible. This belief lasted longer than their membership in the Communist Party. It was rooted in their Jewishness. I grew up with *Jewish Life* and JEWISH CURRENTS. I went to an IWO (International Workers Order) Yiddish *shule*.

When I told my parents I was going to work for SNCC, I repeated all the things they'd taught me: what a *mentsh* does is fight for justice; the Jewish people will never be safe from disaster unless discrimination against *any* group is impossible; if African Americans in the South could vote, they would vote out of office the Southern racist reactionaries who dominated the government.

My parents agreed with everything I said, but told me that actually doing something wasn't worth the risk. The theories, the talk, the political songs I grew up with were beautiful and correct, but they were meant to be just that: theories, talk and songs. Talking the talk was great, walking the walk, not so much.

But South I went.

Voices of the

Volunteers:

Larry Rubin

SNCC work was tedious. We canvassed from house to house in groups, preferably with both black and white canvassers. At first, we generally made small-talk: The weather's been hot, the church picnic is coming up. The second time, if trust had developed, we spoke about registering to vote, or joining the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. We encouraged black tenant farmers

get together to vote in elections for members of their county Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Committee. Among other things, these committees determined who would get how much subsidies for planting — or not planting — cotton.

Through canvassing, I learned I was white. Growing up, I'd always been encouraged to discover my own individuality. But in Mississippi, most everybody had to fit into a category developed in the Master-Slave culture, and my category was "white" — even though, if anything, I thought of myself as "Jewish."

Local African-American leaders were very generous in helping people of diverse backgrounds work together despite cultural differences, but to the average person we visited while canvassing, I was . . . well, white. I lacked the skills that might have helped me better overcome what my whiteness meant to local people. The best I could do was stay mostly silent while a black canvasser did the talking. This demonstrated that white and black people could work together without the white person being in charge. I never had a problem with this, because I was never in charge. I was strictly a foot soldier the entire time I was in the South.

The racist segregationists called us "outside agitators." We might have been outsiders, but we did no agitation. Local community leaders at mass meetings did. A large part of our work was to arrange for cars to carry people to these meetings.

I'm proud of the fact that I helped workers at a brick-making factory take the steps to form a union. During the campaign, one of the Marshall County deputy sheriffs who had arrested me several times told me that his brother worked at the plant and needed the union. He said the twenty or so whites would vote with the eighty black workers for a union.

Still, in retrospect, I realize that for most of the time I worked in the South, I didn't have the skills, wisdom or knowledge to do much good as an organizer.

On the other hand, the African Americans with whom I worked showed me what real courage and persistence in the face of terror and violence looked like. If a family lost their home as a result of trying to register to vote, someone in the community would give them a place to live, although it was very dangerous to do so. Local people shared their homes with SNCC organizers, and if "night riders" threatened to attack, they

protected us with rifles. They proved that if people stick together, they could make change. I was inspired by their example to spend most of the last fifty years working for a better society through the labor movement.

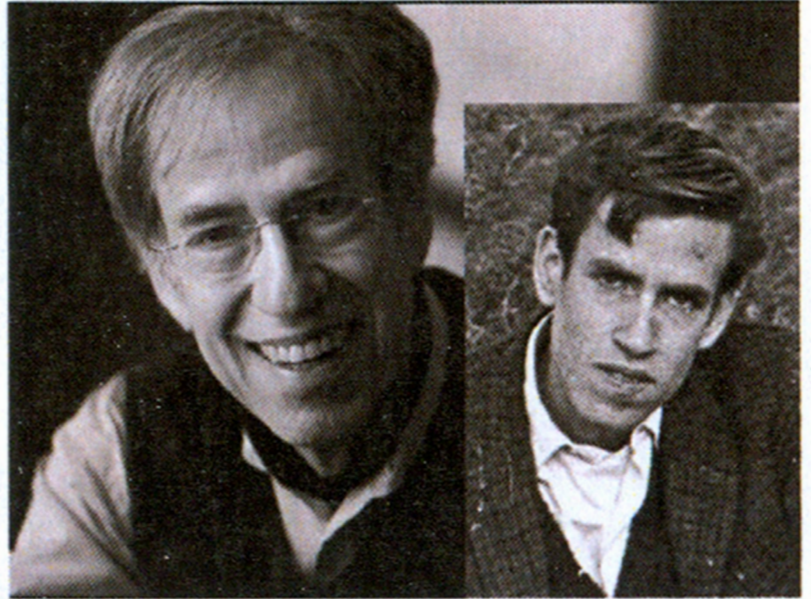
Day-to-day life in Mississippi was controlled by taboos. If you were a black man and did not doff your hat to whites, you could be beaten. If you were black and tried to register to vote or participate in any of the activities we canvassed for, you could lose your job, be put off the land you sharecropped, or be beaten, burned out, or killed. Yet over the years, black people — sometimes whole families — fought against oppression. They tried to register to vote again and again. SNCC did not create the struggle for the right to vote, we merely supported it.

The authorities continually harassed us. I was beaten on the street, run off a plantation at shotgun point, arrested any number of times on charges like “suspicion” of stealing the shirt I was wearing or the car I was driving. In Belzoni, Mississippi, I was put in a room where deputies and cops threatened to hang me. They said “we haven’t killed us a Hebe in a long time.”

Many of the volunteers that came for Freedom Summer did not, at least at first, fully understand the danger we were in. They had courage that comes only from youth and inexperience. Not me. I knew from growing up in a leftwing family during the McCarthy period that “they” were out to get us. I stayed scared the entire time I worked in the South. It felt like a tight knot in my stomach that would not go away.

The local people with whom we worked had a deep religious faith that helped keep them going and helped them sleep at night. I had political analysis. It kept me awake.

I never spoke about my leftist, non-religious Jewishness. I believed that if I did, black folks might marginalize me. As it turned out, I was wrong. When Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland gave a speech on the Senate floor presenting “evidence” that Communists were behind “the so-called Civil Rights Movement,” he mentioned me at some length. Soon after, the newspaper in Marshall County, where I worked, carried my photo under a headline “Local Civil Rights Worker has Communist Background.” I thought for sure that I would be ostracized by the black community. But to them, Eastland was just spouting words. They really did not care what I was, as long as I was working in the freedom fight. In fact, some people found it easier to look beyond my white skin when they saw that Eastland had attacked me. Eastland, they knew, was just talking the talk. Despite all my weaknesses as an organizer, I was walking the walk.



Larry Rubin, then and now.

For 45 years, **Larry Rubin** has worked in the labor movement as an organizer, media and public relations specialist, speechwriter, publications editor, and political advocate. He was also a reporter for the *Dayton Daily News* and served four terms on the Takoma Park, Maryland, City Council. He was a speechwriter for the National Education Association and the U.S. Department of Education. He also served as a staff member of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council and was part of a Philadelphia, Pennsylvania project preparing neighborhood communities for school busing. Rubin has been active in Machar, a secular humanist Jewish group, and was its Sunday school principal.