

An Appreciation of an American “Troublemaker”

BY RABBI ABRAHAM COOPER

In the days between Holocaust Memorial Day and Black History Month, Jewish and Black Americans will be giving specific thought to the alliance of another era. As we reflect upon that historic alliance, we should also (re)introduce a remarkable forgotten “American troublemaker,” Bayard Rustin, who mightily impacted Blacks and Jews during the tumultuous struggle for equal rights in America...

My first personal experiences with Rustin began on Purim in March 1979, when I accompanied my young boss, the founder and dean of the fledgling Simon Wiesenthal Center (SWC), Rabbi Marvin Hier, to the Jewish Memorial at the Dachau concentration camp. There, we were joined by the famous Nazi hunter himself, Simon Wiesenthal. At the memorial, I read from the Megillah the miraculous story of the thwarting of Haman’s diabolical plan to murder all the Jews more than two millennia ago. But for twentieth-century European Jewry, there would be no Mordecai or Queen Esther to stop Hitler. Simon Wiesenthal, a victim of the Holocaust, would become the unofficial ambassador of six million Jewish ghosts and would not let the world forget.

The mission of the SWC’s first foray on the world stage in 1979 was to convince West German lawmakers and Chancellor Schmidt to rescind the statute of limitations on prosecuting murder. Failure to rescind the law would have enabled every escaped Nazi war criminal, including Auschwitz’s infamous Angel of Death, Dr. Josef Mengele, to permanently escape the bar of justice.

Mr. Wiesenthal decided not to lead our delegation. “It is important that this be an American initiative,” he declared, as he left for his office in Vienna. So that evening, our American team convened our group for the first time. It consisted of Congressmen Chris Dodd (D-Conn) and Bob Doran (R-CA), Martin Rosen, Simon Wiesenthal’s lawyer, who fought across Europe as a GI during WWII, a Catholic theologian and Holocaust survivors.

But the person who would emerge as the spiritual (and strategic) leader of the SWC delegation entered the room a few minutes late. I recognized him immediately from Free Soviet Jewry rallies in New York and from his spirited defense of Israel after the June 1967 Six-Day War.

This man exuded a sense of fearlessness without an iota of arrogance. He was not a rabbi or even a Jew. But he knew why he had to be there, to act in solidarity with the victims of the Nazi Holocaust and to open another front in the pursuit of justice.

His name was Bayard Rustin, a Black civil rights organizer, conscientious objector turned anti-Nazi activist, former communist turned Free Soviet Jewry campaigner, a union organizer in the 1940s, a follower of Gandhi’s nonviolence mantras, a key advisor of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the unbridled energy behind organizing the 1963 March on Washington. And he was a gay man at a time when being gay was a crime.

So why did Bayard Rustin join us for a historic week of lobbying and cajoling Germans about Nazi war criminals?

The short answer: It was an act of teshuva, of repentance and reconciliation. Rustin told us that had he understood the full extent of the evil that was Nazi Germany during the war, he would have found a way to fight them, even as a pacifist. Nothing prepared him for Auschwitz.

A look at Rustin's own history helps explain his affinity for the cause. The grandson of slaves, Rustin was born in 1912 to a Quaker family in Pennsylvania. During the Depression Era, Rustin gravitated to New York City, and after the betrayal of the Hitler-Stalin pact, he left the communist youth movement but remained an independent leftist and antiwar crusader. After World War II, Rustin qualified his pacifism in one case: "If the Germans had begun to break laws when Hitler came to power, they would not have ended up putting Jews into furnaces."

A precocious champion of civil rights, Rustin served as the deputy to Black labor leader A. Philip Randolph, whose plan for a March on Washington in 1941 forced President Franklin Roosevelt to issue an executive order banning discrimination in defense hiring. In 1942, Rustin helped launch the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which organized the first "Freedom Ride" to integrate interstate transportation in 1946.

A continuous thread through Rustin's career was his commitment to working with Jews for human rights. He attributed this to the grandmother who raised him, who "was thoroughly convinced we had more to learn from the Jewish experience than we had to learn out of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John." Most important was Rustin's secular belief that no "progressive" alliance for social justice could succeed without African American and Jewish cooperation.

A CONTINUOUS THREAD THROUGH RUSTIN'S CAREER WAS HIS COMMITMENT TO WORKING WITH JEWS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS.

At the time of the 1955 Montgomery Bus Boycott and the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Rustin encouraged Reverend King "to accept pacifism as a way of life." He worked closely with MLK's Jewish associates, Stanley Levison and Rachel Horowitz.

After the Black Power Movement emerged in 1965, Rustin re-affirmed his commitment to coalition politics over some of the movement's **emphasis** on African roots, "identity politics" and even violence. MLK denounced the Vietnam War, and Rustin spoke up for the cause of anti-colonialism in Africa, but **neither embraced** the Black Power or Black Nationalist crusades.

Following Israel's victory in 1967, Black militants, like Rustin's protégé, Stokely Carmichael began denouncing the Jewish state. Carmichael said "**I'm against Zionism... The only good Zionist is a dead Zionist.**" Rustin and MLK condemned this rhetoric. MLK said just days before his assassination: "I see Israel, and never mind saying it, as one of the great outposts of democracy in the world, and a marvelous example of . . . how desert land can be transformed into an oasis of brotherhood and democracy."

To Rustin, anti-Semitism was history's "oldest and most shameful witch hunt." He insisted that "Zionism is not racism, but the legitimate expression of the Jewish people's self-determination."

In 1968, when predominately Jewish teachers clashed with Black advocates of "community control" of schools in New York, Rustin sought compromise, but he was almost alone among African American leaders in supporting the Teachers' Union because of his commitment to trade unionism.

During the 1970s, Rustin paid repeated visits to Israel, where he met Golda Meir, and he founded Black Americans in Support of Israel (BASIC). He visited Le Chambon sur Lignon, the French village that had harbored Jews from the Nazis during World War II. A year after President Carter appointed him to the Holocaust Memorial Council, he helped lead the SWC's Mission to Germany.

Rustin also worked closely with Senator Henry Jackson, whose Jackson-Vanik bill in Congress tied trade relations with Moscow to the fate of Soviet Jews. He chaired a commission to compile testimonies from Soviet Jews for a report that was delivered to the secretary general of the United Nations. He even visited the Soviet Union to lobby for freedom for Soviet Jews, a cause MLK had endorsed as early as 1966. Bayard Rustin passed away in 1987.

Bayard Rustin hoped that, in 1963, he had helped "plant a seed in the American conscience whose harvest may someday astonish us." In a deeply divided America, there is still time for new generations to fully reap that harvest.

Historian Dr. Harold Brackman contributed to this essay.

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