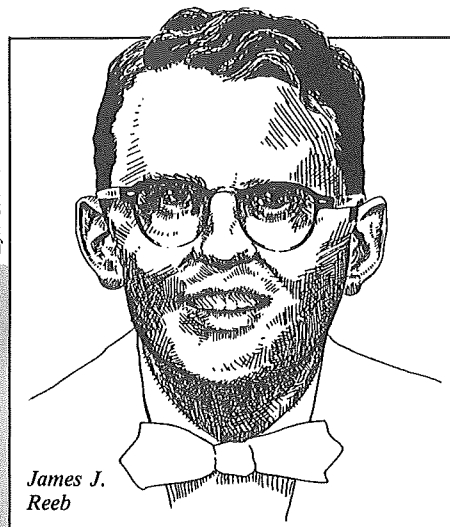


James Reeb: Civil Rights Martyr

by Homer A. Jack

Twenty-five years ago in March, James J. Reeb—American Friends Service Committee worker and Unitarian Universalist clergyman—became a civil rights martyr at Selma, Alabama. This one white activist became a catalyst for visible racial progress in the 1960s.

On March 7, 1965, television viewers on the ABC network watched the Sunday night movie, *Judgment at Nuremberg*. The show was interrupted for news scenes of “Bloody Sunday” as



James J.
Reeb

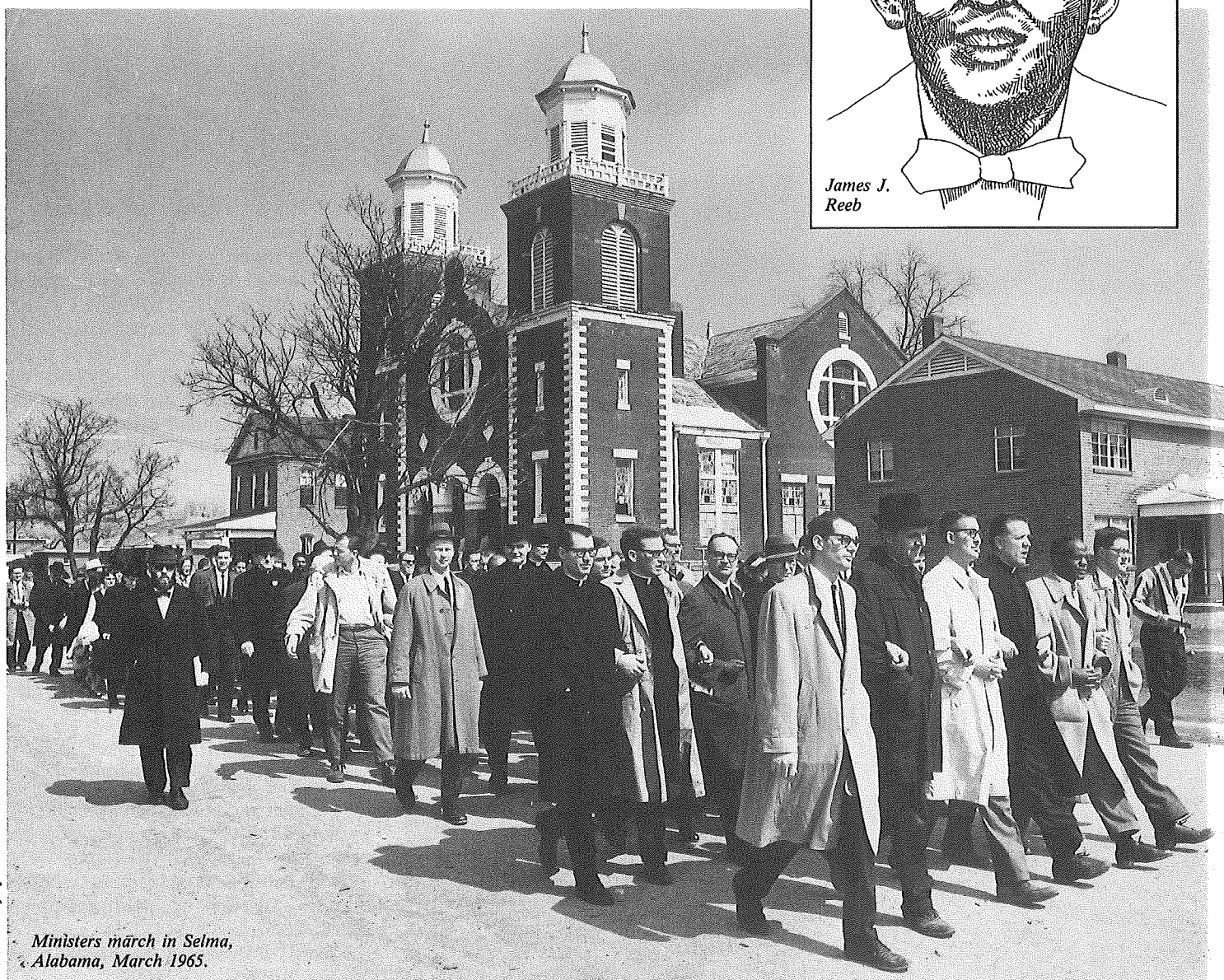


Photo courtesy of Unitarian Universalist Association

Ministers march in Selma,
Alabama, March 1965.

Alabama state troopers on horseback, armed with bullwhips, brutalized 500 black marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge outside Selma. Martin Luther King, Jr., immediately sent out telegrams calling on "clergy of all faiths . . . to join me in Selma for a ministers' march to Montgomery on Tuesday morning."

James Reeb on Monday morning received a telephone call, asking if he could join the march at Selma on Tuesday morning. Reeb, then community relations director of the Boston Metropolitan Housing Program of the AFSC, asked Unitarian Universalist headquarters in Boston if he were badly needed in Selma. "Badly," came the reply. Reeb asked his wife, Marie, about his going South. She preferred that he not go. Reeb declared that he "had to go." The next morning he was in Selma, along with hundreds of clergy from many denominations from all over the country.

There was a long wait through lunch at Brown A.M.E. Chapel, while Martin Luther King, Jr., and his associates negotiated with federal, state, and local authorities. Then King, followed by priests, ministers, and rabbis, led the delayed march. Reeb, as the other marchers, repeatedly sang, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round." Nobody did, and they got across Pettus Bridge and, in a compromise with officials, then returned to Selma.

The hundreds of marchers then went to whatever restaurants they could find for their postponed lunch. A number crowded into the black Walter's Cafe. When Reeb and two other Unitarian Universalist clergy left the restaurant, they were chased by white thugs and called "niggers." Reeb was hit by a pipe or club and soon became unconscious. He was taken to a nearby funeral home, where its ambulance took him to the distant University of Alabama Medical Center in Birmingham for a delicate operation.

For two days and nights, 38-year-old Reeb hovered between life and death. Marie Reeb was brought from Boston to Birmingham in a government jet on orders from President Johnson. She waited, as did Martin Luther King, Jr., and the escalating, irate civil rights movement. The restless president waited, as did much of the attentive world. On

Homer A. Jack, a Unitarian Universalist clergyman and in 1965 a denominational official, was the person who told James Reeb that he was badly needed in Selma.

Thursday night, March 11, death came. That long weekend, memorial services for Reeb alternated with demonstrations throughout the country. Civil rights workers in Selma prayed and then rallied, while 25,000 persons massed in front of the Unitarian Arlington Street Church near Boston Common as a Quaker official spoke inside.

The funeral of James Reeb on Monday, March 15, at Selma was a nationwide, televised event. National religious, labor, and political leaders participated in services both at Brown Chapel and, after a federal court order, on the steps of the Dallas County Courthouse. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered two eulogies.

That evening 70 million Americans watched President Johnson as he presented a carefully negotiated voting rights bill to a joint session of Congress. The president mentioned Reeb and then said the previous week in Selma was, like Lexington, Concord, and Appomattox, "a turning point in man's unending search for freedom." He declared that he wanted "to be the president who . . . protected the right of every citizen to vote in every election." Johnson then surprised everybody, perhaps even himself, and brought tears to many, by uttering the movement's slogan: "We shall overcome."

James Reeb's death made a difference. The movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., triumphed. By August, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, providing federal protection for all who wanted to register to vote.

Who was James Joseph Reeb? Born on January 1, 1927, in Wichita, Kansas, he moved to Casper, Wyoming, then graduated from St. Olaf's College in Minnesota. He finished Princeton Theological Seminary in 1950 and then became a Presbyterian chaplain at Philadelphia General Hospital. Reeb left Presbyterianism to become a Unitarian Universalist clergyman and worked as assistant minister of All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. There he founded the University Neighborhood Council, bringing together representatives from All Souls Church and Howard University. Reeb wanted to establish an inner city ministry of his own, but the Unitarian Universalists at the time had neither the imagination nor the money. The Quakers did, and in September 1964 Reeb and his wife and four children moved to the run-down Dorchester sec-

tion of Boston, while his Quaker office was a store-front on Blue Hill Avenue in all-black Roxbury.

Reeb's death energized the Unitarian Universalist denomination to give race relations higher priority and hire additional staff for this purpose. It may even have led to the formation subsequently of the Black Caucus in that denomination. Reeb's selfless life and death inspired a whole generation of laypersons and clergy—Unitarian Universalist, Quaker, and beyond. Reeb became one of the post-1960 models for the development of clergy who unapologetically work outside traditional church structures for social justice.

Immediately after Reeb's death, his friends tried to answer the recurring question: why the public focuses on the white martyr, Reeb, when black martyrs

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have been neglected for centuries? At the time, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a black man killed in Marion, Alabama, never received the recognition given Reeb. Racism, ironically, is one explanation. Reeb was white, yet he identified with the black poor, as well as trying—with great difficulty—to prod his fellow whites, including white clergy.

In September 1962, James Reeb said that "we must all be surprised from time to time by those who have suffered from the greatest inequities bringing forth a faith and an energy into life for which one can find no reasonable explanation." Jim Reeb suffered martyrdom "for which one can find no reasonable explanation." Yet a quarter century later, his story and his memory still bring forth "a faith and an energy" into the life of many U.S. citizens. However, they find racial justice in inner city or outer suburb just as elusive today as in the brief years of James Reeb. □

Keep

Inds - Reeb, James

March 1965

American Friends Service Committee
160 North 15th Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102
Margaret H. Bacon LO 3-9372
March 12, 1965

OFFICIAL STATEMENT
OF THE AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE
ON THE DEATH OF JAMES REEB

dictated by John Sullivan over the phone from Birmingham, Alabama

James E. Reeb, director of the Metropolitan Boston Housing Program of the American Friends Service Committee, has lost his life in the struggle for human rights in Alabama. He had gone to Selma to participate there with clergy and lay people, white and Negro, in the nonviolent witness for divine love and human equality.

The AFSC does not, in this statement, single out James Reeb's sacrifice from the many made in the civil rights struggle by Negro and white men -- and even children -- as being more significant than any other. We are moved to record the passing of a beloved colleague, a personal friend of many of us, one whose name is now on the list of American martyrs in the cause of democracy and human rights.

In Boston, where James Reeb came to work with us a little more than six months ago, we saw a major job to be done that might help to set a pattern for advancing human rights and democracy in the urban centers of the North -- where Negro and white poor suffer deprivation and discrimination in housing, education, and employment.

We wanted a creative man, aided by a competent staff, to work first with Negroes, then with whites, and always with both, at the complex task of helping the poor to become their own spokesmen, leaders, and representatives, with a special regard for housing for the very poor.

We wanted someone to lead an attempt to win for the poor a sense of dignity and of their own human value by themselves doing the job of discovering and developing their own responses to the problems that beset them. There are many people who would like to do something for the poor; James Reeb fully shared our dream of helping the Northern urban poor to do something for themselves.

What fitted him for this important leadership role was his deep love of human beings, his wish to live among the people he wanted to help, his willingness to place himself under the heaviest burdens of responsibility, and his knowledge and experience of housing in his previous ministerial role in Washington, D.C.

In his far-too-short span of time in Boston, he astonished us by the accumulation of significant knowledge which he achieved, by the number of public and private agency officials he dealt with, by the seemingly endless flow of new ideas about how to deal with his responsibilities, and by the thoroughness, breadth, and resourcefulness of his surveys of the low-income situation in Boston.

James Reeb brought his family to live among the people he was working with.

He consulted his family when he decided to witness in Selma. They did not want him to go, but they knew he had to, because his conscience would not permit otherwise.

It is ironic and significant that James Reeb lost his life over the issue of the right of Americans to vote -- so simple and so basic a right. James Reeb recognized the basic importance of the vote and the deep deceit in the denial of it to some Americans.

It is ironic and tragic that when the attackers rushed upon the three Unitarian ministers, James Reeb did not hasten and did not even turn his head.

He was struck one blow from behind by a man filled with hate. In this instance, as in so many, he had not faltered.

As he lay dying in University Hospital in Birmingham, telegrams came from all over the country. A personal representative of the Attorney General, the head of the Federal Community Relations Service, and the junior United States Senator from Massachusetts, placed themselves at the service of James Reeb's wife and father. When he died, the President of the United States sent a plan to carry them back to Boston.

Thus, we recognize that James Reeb stirred the consciences and the moral responsiveness of the highest officials in our land -- of the clergy and church people of America -- and of simple Negro and white men and women who wired, prayed, marched, and wept because of his sacrifice in the human struggle that now goes on without him -- but not without his spirit, his memory, and his unfailing determination that justice and right will overcome.

John Sullivan
Executive Secretary
New England Regional Office
American Friends Service Committee

EULOGY FOR JAMES REEB - *AFSC 51 off member,*
Arlington Street Church, Boston
March 18, 1965

We are united today by grief and by hope. Some of us grieve for a husband or a father, a son, a friend, a colleague, or more distantly, for a symbol of honor, righteousness and sacrifice. All of us grieve for a good man with rich potential, cut off too soon.

We are united by hope. By hope that this death... this eighth civil rights death in Alabama... will be a prelude to victory for the voteless and that it will not be mocked by our forgetfulness, by our readiness to be justifiably emotional about this tragedy without translating that honest sentiment into involvement and commitment to a struggle, a struggle that can be won by us but, since it is a struggle that has to do with democracy, cannot be won for us by someone else.

The list of martyrs in the cause of civil rights who have fallen in Alabama now reads:

Cynthia Wesley, Denise McNair, Addie May Collins, Carol Robinson, Virgil Ware -- all in Birmingham; William Moore, at Anniston; Jimmie Lee Jackson, at Marion; James J. Reeb at Selma.

This is a precious company of Negro and white men and of children. We meet here today and we honor them all, but because he was ours in a special way in Boston, we especially honor James Reeb. In the memorial meeting on the Boston Common Sunday, one of the speakers said: "We are mourning Jim Reeb's death in Alabama, but let us also honor his life in Boston." So let us spend a few brief loving moments remembering that life. What sort of man was James Reeb? He was a gentle but strong man. He was a good husband and father, a faithful minister. He was also a man with a special quality. The 19th century Irish historian and poet, W. E. Lecky, has captured a thought that

makes me think of James Reeb. Lecky wrote:

In our dream some glimpse appears,
Though soon it fades again,
How other lands or times or spheres
Might make us other men;

How half our being lies in trance,
Nor joy nor sorrow brings,
Unless the hand of circumstance
Can touch the latent strings,

We know not fully what we are,
Still less what we might be;
But hear faint voices from the far
Dim lands beyond the sea.

It seems to me that James Reeb was one of the unusual few who could touch the latent strings and who could hear the faint voices from afar. He saw in people not only the disadvantages they may have suffered... not only the psychic or physical neglect they might display... but the potential and the hope that lay in them... and the precious opportunities they had or must discover.

Jim wrote us at the American Friends Service Committee, when he was first considering our program in Boston, that he "considered people to be more important than anything else in life" and that "whatever relates to the improvement of the conditions under which people live and therefore creates greater opportunity for fruitful human relations" was important to him. And, in a moment of the kind of flashing insight that sometimes surprised us who worked with him, he wrote: "I am oriented around my own inner sense of rightness." In trying to describe him, should I list his virtues? Far better to let his life speak. He was thorough. When fire broke out on Hammond Street in Roxbury and caused several deaths, Jim and his staff went all through the building, visited every resident they could find, made photographs, interviewed the landlord, the fire department, the welfare department, the Red Cross, the code enforcement ...

and inspection officials of the city and state. Jim checked their findings with experts, officials, lawyers. He was still working on the report when he left for Selma. He had been disturbed by code violations in Boston and wanted to talk to the highest city officials about this. When he was asked what he wanted to talk to them about, he said in astonishment: Why; I want to talk about obeying the law.

He was a direct man. If he was going to work with the people of Roxbury, Dorchester or the South End, he was going to live with them. His children were going to go to their schools. When the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People decided to bring suit against the Boston School Committee over de facto segregation, Jim said: I'm one of the parents whose children go to these schools; I want the NAACP to represent me against the School Committee.

He was a man who trusted experience. He wanted to be in the middle of things. He knew that when one lives through an experience, he really understands it and will not fall prey to his own rationalizations.

He was a law-abiding man. It wasn't just that he obeyed the laws. He believed in them and wanted them to be right and he made a study of new legislation dealing with housing in this city and this commonwealth.

He was an intelligent man. He had a flow of ideas which constantly stimulated and challenged those with whom he planned and worked.

He was a good man. When some small child walked in the door of our Blue Hill Avenue program office, Jim welcomed him as if he had been the most eagerly awaited visitor.

He was a fearless man. A day or two before he went to Selma he wrote his weekly activity report about a meeting with a city official who

was enraged by Jim's refusal to bend and to pull the teeth from his report on the Hammond Street Fire. The man said again and again, "If you are wrong, I will murder you," meaning, to denounce him in the press, and Jim commented in his report that he was taking extra steps to ensure accuracy. "I felt these precautions were necessary," he wrote, "so long as I may be 'murdered'." And he put that word in quotes, with an implicit chuckle.

To what had this exceptional man given his last six months of life in Boston? Many of us who worked with him toured the racked and broken streets of Roxbury and Dorchester with him, gazed at the houses with broken windows, peeling paint, falling porches, and, invisible from the outside, the lack of heat, of hot water, of rubbish removal, of decent sanitation and who knows how many infractions of the codes. We met the bruised and damaged people, Negro and white, who lived in these places. Jim did not want to be elected to office by them. And he did not want to provide some magic new place for them to live by some stroke of genius. What he wanted to do was to find the way through complex social and psychological relationships to the discovery of how to help these people, by working with them, to become their own leaders, their own representatives, their own-problem-solvers. He believed, as we believe, that the solutions that Negroes of low and lowest income find and are helped to find to deal with their housing problems would be solutions that would have value for the whites of low and lowest income and that when these poor, so invisible to so many of us, found their voices and their stature, new ways would be learned in Boston to make housing fit for people instead of the other way around.

This was the momentous task on which he was embarked and in which he was our first program director. This is the potential that was cut off so wantonly in Alabama.

The final act in his life was characteristically generous and outgoing. He need not have gone to Selma. He had home and family here and much work. But we agreed with him when he said he had to go and we named him one of our representatives in Selma. Then the embodiment of hate encountered on a dark and brooding street the embodiment of love and James Reeb was struck down in all his promise.

No need now to speak of the sorrowful vigil in the hospital in Birmingham, of the gentleness and goodness of the wife and father who visited him on his deathbed, of the lonely journey home to Boston. Instead, can we not honor the life rather than remember the death? Can we not also orient ourselves around our inner sense of rightness? Can we not also touch the latent strings?

If Jim Reeb were writing these words, I think he might now say: "well, what's the next step?"

Once again, his life can speak to us. It says: come in out of the suburbs and revive the dying city. It says: don't flee from the sinking schools -- get in them and work on them. It says: don't shrug at the barren School Committee -- get out the vote. It says: don't hide from the poor -- embrace them. It says: don't settle for nice houses in the suburbs and rotten houses in the ghetto -- change it through every appropriate way: community organization, legislation, code enforcement, and I think he might say, if he were here: There is a killer in the dark and racist streets of the south.

But there is a killer in the North too, one which strikes Negro and white in the bright light of day, every day and the killer's name is non-involvement; it is apathy and lack of interest; it is self-concern. This is the killer James Reeb was stalking and when he found him, he was going to wrap him around with righteousness and justice and love.

There is now an awakening in our nation. Let it be a real awakening and let there be an end to complacent sleep.

For in the poet Lecky's words we do not want in our dream just to have the glimpse appear,

Though soon it fades again,
How other lands or times or spheres
Might make us other men.

John A. Sullivan
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