

Themes Covered by the film *From Swastika to Jim Crow*

The primary theme in *From Swastika to Jim Crow* is the development and impact of the relationship between the German-Jewish refugee scholars and their Black students and colleagues.

These two diverse peoples, both victims of mutual racial terror and oppression, managed to survive and attain a certain amount of success despite their circumstances. During the course of the film, three basic themes emerge:

- A Discrimination and Racism in Nazi Germany and the United States
- B The Relationship Between Blacks and Jews
- C Fighting Racism

Discrimination And Racism In Nazi Germany And The United States

The German-Jewish refugees who came to the American South in the 1930s and 1940s were in many ways condemned to a "double exile" experience. Many arrived in New York, having left everything they had known, under the most difficult experience of persecution to find anti-Semitism and an anti-foreigner sentiment quite prevalent in American society. They then left the Northeast, where refugee resources existed, to look for job security at Black colleges in the South. Upon arrival, they soon realized that their life would now be a balancing act where they would have to live in a White community that did not welcome them, while working in the Black community. For many of these refugee scholars, it was their intellectual skill and personal integrity that enabled them to survive in this difficult situation. The irony of their own situation in Nazi Germany, and what they encountered in the American South of the 1930s and '40s, was not lost on these scholars.

The students and faculty who attended and worked at the Black colleges and universities experienced a unique sense of freedom. Black colleges were exempt from Jim Crow laws. Because there were none of the restrictions that were common in the general community, the staff was often integrated and an atmosphere of mutual respect between the students and the faculty was fostered. The colleges provided opportunities for Black youth to receive higher education in a segregated society at a time when rural, Southern Blacks were denied equal K-12 educational opportunities. While these campuses often provided a "safe haven" where civilized discourse was encouraged and nurtured, off-campus students were still required to abide by the segregation laws of the United States.

Relationship Between Blacks and Jews

As depicted in the film, many close relationships developed between the refugee scholars and their students. Several anecdotes reveal how the scholars saw the obvious potential of many of their students and encouraged them to strive towards higher learning and to seek further opportunities. A unique relationship developed between these two groups. For both, it was the understanding that they had a shared history of persecution, which they believed resulted in a shared value system. In some cases, the scholars welcomed the chance to teach Black students, since they wanted, as Viktor Lowenfeld stated, "to cast their lots with those people who were fighting racism." John Herz recounts in the film, "that he assumed that his Black students would have more interest and a better understanding in Fascism, Nazism and Racism." Given the experiences of the Black students, he thought that it would be relatively easy to teach them these philosophies.

There was also the belief among some students that since the scholars had experienced such cruelty in Europe, they would be more empathetic to their plight and vice versa. Black students were often more trusting of their Jewish professors, as they were not seen as completely White. It was often the case that the students and the White community saw these refugees as "some kind of colored folk."

Fighting Racism Finally, many of the professors saw that working at the Black colleges provided them with a unique opportunity to lend their voice to a growing chorus demanding civil rights in the United States. In some cases, because of their unusual role on campus, the scholars were able to bring the campus community and the general community (which was often White) together to share ideas and to challenge the system. In one case - the denial of Fritz Pappenheim's tenure at Talladega College - the students were inspired to protest by his actions and moral convictions.

In the late 1960's, the Black Power Movement grew out of the Civil Rights Movement. The Black Power Movement espoused self-defense tactics, self-determination, political and economic power, and racial pride. It was a controversial split from Dr. Martin Luther King's ideology of nonviolence and racial integration. It was seen by moderate Blacks as detrimental to the civil rights cause and was viewed with apprehension by many Whites. While the Black Power Movement proved to be a difficult time for these refugee scholars, many remained committed to promoting integration and fighting racism and thus stayed at their institutions.