

John Howard Griffin: Remembering a Fighter of Jewish Oppression

Before he gained fame for posing as an African-American in order to expose racism, journalist John Howard Griffin secretly helped rescue Jewish children from the Nazis. With race relations in America now at the center of a national debate, this summer's 75th anniversary of Griffin's rescue work in Nazi-occupied France takes on special meaning.

Griffin, author of the best-selling book *Black Like Me*, grew up Texas in the 1920s in an era when racial segregation was strictly enforced and bigotry was the norm. He began reconsidering his assumptions about race after his casual use of an anti-black slur earned him a memorable slap across the face from his grandfather.

Frustrated by the limited educational opportunities in Texas, the precocious Griffin responded to a newspaper ad for a high school in France in 1935 and, to his surprise, won a full scholarship. After graduating from the Lycee Descartes school, Griffin stayed in France, studying psychiatry at the University of Poitiers and working as assistant director of an asylum, where he helped introduce the therapeutic use of music.

What happened next was a chapter in Griffin's life that he never wrote about, but he described it in later interviews with his biographer, Robert Bonazzi, and with famed journalist Studs Terkel.

In May 1940, the Nazis invaded France. Griffin's American passport was his ticket to escape—yet he refused. “France had helped to form me,” he recalled. “I could not see deserting my friends there in a time of crisis.” The director of the asylum

was soon drafted into the French army, leaving 20-year-old Griffin in charge of the 120 patients.

But that was only his day job. Together with former classmate Jean Hussar, Griffin surreptitiously joined the French Underground. Recognizing the acute danger facing France's Jews under the Nazis, Griffin and Hussar devised a unique plan to smuggle Jews out of the country. They disguised Jewish children as mental patients, dressing them in straitjackets and driving them out of town in the asylum's ambulance.

The children were brought to French Underground cells in the countryside, and then smuggled to Saint Nazaire, a port city. From there, they were taken to England. The United States was not an option for the children. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration imposed harsh restrictions to keep Jewish refugee immigration to a minimum, far below what U.S. law permitted. England, by contrast, had agreed to accept 10,000 Jewish children in what became known as the Kindertransports.

Griffin and Hussar saved several dozen children. But a single inadvertent misstep led to disaster. After getting two particular children out of the country, Griffin asked an ostensibly sympathetic French politician for helping in acquiring the paperwork needed to smuggle the children's parents, an Austrian Jewish judge and his wife, out of France. The politician turned out to be an informer for the Germans. The judge and his wife were arrested by the Gestapo. Griffin and Hussar fled to England, and their rescue operation came to an end.

At about the same time, another rescue operation in France was also halted—but for a very different reason. Unknown to Griffin, another young American, Varian Fry, arrived in Marseilles in the autumn of 1940 with a plan to rescue Jewish refugees. Fry's network smuggled more than 2,000 refugees out of France, until the Nazis and their French collaborators

learned of the operation and complained to Washington. Since the U.S. had not yet entered the war, and still maintained friendly relations with Nazi Germany, the Roosevelt administration responded to the Nazis' protest by canceling Fry's passport, forcing him to leave France.

Griffin returned home and, in the 1950s, became increasingly interested in the problem of racial segregation. He began to see a connection between what happened to the Jews in Europe and the mistreatment of African-Americans. "In Nazi Germany, the fear of destroying purity through mongrelization was based on the false premise that the Jew was inferior to the Gentile," he later wrote. "In the South we segregate the Negro from the white to prevent mongrelization. The core of the matter is the same in both cases since both 'solutions' proceed from the same false premise of racial superiority."

In 1959, Griffin undertook an experiment that would help shake the foundations of assumptions about race in America. With the aid of a dermatologist, he used a combination of medications and intense exposure to sun lamps to darken his skin tone. He then spent three weeks traveling through the Deep South, posing as an African-American.

Griffin's subsequent memoir, *Black Like Me*, recounted firsthand the viciousness of the racism he encountered, the countless daily humiliations such as being forced to sit in the back of the bus, and the dilapidated housing and schools that blacks endured. The publication of Griffin's expose ignited a backlash. After being hanged in effigy in his hometown, Griffin and his family were forced to flee to Mexico for nearly a year.

Black Like Me, however, was an overnight sensation. It sold more than 5 million copies. Griffin was invited to brief members of Congress, give lectures for the Department of Justice, and speak about his experience in countless interviews with the news media. Griffin's efforts played a

major role in discrediting segregation and sensitizing the American public to the injustice of racism.

John Howard Griffin's fight for justice began not in Texas but in German-occupied France, 75 years ago this summer, where he first risked his life in the fight against racist oppression.

***Dr. Rafael Medoff** is director of The David S. Wyman Institute for Holocaust Studies, .*