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AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Mississippi Incident

STANLEY R. BRAV

On August 21, 1947, Theodore Gilmore Bilbo was summoned to his eternal reward. Called by the *Saturday Evening Post*¹ "America's most notorious merchant of hatred," this twice governor and three-term senator of one of the poorest, least progressive states in the Union made his name a byword for bigotry throughout the land. His last years witnessed an encounter with a rabbi, the story of which is held by some to be of historical interest.

The rabbi of Vicksburg, Mississippi, was away on his vacation when he happened upon a newspaper report concerning his senior senator. The *New York PM* of June 29, 1945, carried an extensive account of Senator Bilbo's remarks in Congress the previous day,

¹In subtitle to "Will Bilbo Fool 'Em Again?" by Milton Lehman, June 29, 1946.

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comprising part of a filibuster against the Fair Employment Practices Bill. Bold headlines announced, "Bilbo Act Has Goebbels Squirming in Grave," and the following quotations were cited, among others: "If this bill passes it is so far-reaching they will be up there going into every office on Capitol Hill and saying you'll have to stick some Jews in your offices." "Some Catholics in this country are lined up with some rabbis trying to bring about racial equality. . . . You can't get away from the fact that some (Catholic priests) are rotten." "The niggers and the Jews of New York are working hand in hand. That's why you find Eugene Meyer — a Jew — (owner of the *Washington Post*) denouncing me and saying I'm bankrupt."

Then followed a closing sentence that was to set off an arresting chain of events. "The few Jews in Mississippi," said the senator, "are exemplary citizens. They all vote for Bilbo." This allegation, claiming association on the part of the state's entire Jewry with such an individual, evoked the rabbi's resentment. He immediately wrote the editor of *PM*:²

Today you quote Bilbo: "The few Jews in Mississippi are exemplary citizens. They all vote for Bilbo."

His first statement is correct. As to his second, I know personally nearly every Jew in the State and I have yet to discover a single one who would vote for Bilbo.

A week later, there were indications that the rabbi's note to the editor had been printed. The son of a former rector of Christ Church in Vicksburg wrote:³ "May I congratulate you on your letter to *PM* anent the slander on intelligent voters in Mississippi made by that blatherskite Bilbo. . . . May you continue to have at least some adherents of good government in Mississippi, and perhaps one day remove the tarnish from her fair name."

The same post also brought the following, unsigned:

Attack — Attack

Grind all gentiles into the dust.

Threaten them with your boycott, even with your votes.

That helps us to understand your screaming propaganda for tolerance.

How you would love to have a jew counterpart of Hitler that could keep me from teaching my sons "Hate a jew all of your life."

In any form of accomplishment you couldnt carry the water pail for the Hon. Theo. Bilbo.

²Postcard, written June 29, 1945, published with slight typographical changes in the *New York PM*, July 6, 1945.

³Letter to Rabbi Brav, New York, July 7, 1945.

The greatest wisdom my Father imparted to me before he died was allways hate a jew. Teach your sons to hate them. Jews like you substantiate him.

Another day brought this word from Connecticut:⁴ "As a Jew and a former resident of a small Mississippi city, I must correct your recent statement in *PM*. In the small town where I lived, many of the Jewish people voted for Bilbo, including my father."

Just about this time, the rabbi received a photostatic copy of a letter on the stationery of the United States Senate, written by Senator Bilbo to a New York accountant:⁵

I know many fine Jews in my State. They are high-class men and women with high ideals, square in all their dealings with their fellowman, but they are not negro-lovers like you are, and, by the way, practically all of them vote for Bilbo, notwithstanding the Jewish Rabbi down at Vicksburg denies this fact. Why is he so damnably ignorant of the Jews of Mississippi that he does not know that in many counties of the State, for a quarter of a century, outstanding Jews have been my campaign managers? I guess this poor Rabbi thought that he would please this New York bunch of Jews.

July vacation days were interrupted for the rabbi by a long-distance phone call from the president of his congregation. "Rabbi, have you received Mr. Bilbo's answer to your *PM* letter? It is printed in every newspaper in the state. Our local press is holding off as long as possible. When you see it, you'll want to write a crushing reply. Some of us have talked it over. We can't see anything to be gained by carrying the correspondence any farther. You cannot want to try to compete with such an old hand at billingsgate. We ask you not to take any further action without consulting us."

The rabbi appeared to be the last person to see the letter addressed to him.⁶ Senator Bilbo had introduced it into the Congressional Record of July 24, 1945.

Your statement . . . notoriously and conspicuously lays you wide open to the charge that you are either one of the biggest, most consummate and deliberate liars in Mississippi or that you know nothing on earth about the Jews and Jewish race in Mississippi.

It has been my pleasure to enjoy the friendship and support of thousands of good Jews in Mississippi for the last 25 or 30 years. Many of the outstanding Jewish citizens have served in campaign after campaign as my county campaign managers. Many

⁴Letter to Rabbi Brav, New Haven, Conn., July 6, 1945.

⁵Benjamin Fischler, 401 Broadway, New York, dated July 11, 1945.

⁶Dated July 21, 1945.

of them have liberally contributed to my campaign funds. I have outstanding Jewish friends in Vicksburg who have always supported me.

Ordinarily, I would not give any publicity to a letter of this type addressed [by me] to [you] a prominent ecclesiastic of your sect or denomination but for the fact that your letter to *PM* contains such a brazen, uncalled for and pusillanimous falsehood, and for the further reason that you wrote it to *PM*, the dirtiest and most unreliable and low-class "negro" newspaper in New York, owned and controlled by Marshall Fields of Chicago, for the evident purpose of publically branding before the world as false a statement made by me in a speech on the floor of the Senate in opposition to the damnable un-American and unconstitutional FEPC.

I feel that I am thoroughly justified in giving widest publicity to this letter in order that the good Jews of Mississippi, who are fine citizens, many of whom were born and reared in Mississippi and are in thorough sympathy with the ideals and principles of the South and not negro-lovers — Jews who believe in the white race and white supremacy — Jews who are not Communists as many in New York are — will know what you are, and I express the hope that you will soon make arrangements to move to New York where you can live in an atmosphere better suited to your type.

In my speech against the FEPC I did not and I have never denounced the Jews as a race. They are white folks just like I am, but I have found occasion to denounce a Jew, as in your case, without reference to Jews as a nationality, just as I have been forced on occasion to denounce two or three Baptist preachers of my own denomination, but in doing this I was not denouncing all Baptists. In other words, I want you to understand that what I have said in this letter is directly aimed at your letter and your misrepresentation as published in that negro-baiting newspaper of New York, *PM*.

The rabbi consulted his attorney, Christian friends in Mississippi, and the Anti-Defamation League, deciding finally to drop the controversy for the time being. Meanwhile, a letter from the president of his congregation advised that the Board of Trustees had met, "condemned" the rabbi for his letter to *PM*, and "insisted" that no reply be made to the senator's answer. The rabbi wrote the president that he demanded a meeting of the Board immediately upon his return from his vacation. At this meeting,⁷ the Board voted to withdraw the president's letter and gave the rabbi a vote of confidence.

One day in September of the following year, the rabbi received a

⁷These meetings were held the last week of July, 1945, and the first week of September, 1945, respectively.

visit from two representatives of the Civil Rights Congress. They were seeking signatures in Vicksburg for a petition calling upon the United States Senate to investigate the 1946 primary campaign of Mr. Bilbo. It was proposed that public hearings be held in Mississippi to inquire into charges that the candidate had intimidated Negroes in the course of his campaign speeches, and thus prevented them from exercising their rights at the polls.

The rabbi had attended Mr. Bilbo's rally at the Court House in Warren County that spring and had listened for two hours to unbelievable demagoguery in action. He now agreed that he would sign the petition if he could secure the signatures of two or three local liberals in addition. A few weeks later, Hodding Carter, Pulitzer-Prize-winning editor of the Greenville (Miss.) *Delta Democrat-Times*, told him, "Rabbi, it is just as well you didn't sign it. The Civil Rights Congress is a Communist-Front organization, according to no less an authority than N.A.A.C.P. chief, Walter White, himself."

Nonetheless, from December 2nd to the 5th, hearings were held in Jackson, the state capital. The opening day found the rabbi of Vicksburg among those present in the Federal Court Room. He had come, together with his wife, to audit the session. Probably there would be no need for his testimony. He had very little to report. To any unbiased jury, the validity of the charges would be more than patent without adding his mite. But this was an occasion of precedent-establishing moment. Perhaps never before in American history had a candidate been subjected by his peers to a hearing in his own state upon charges of design to keep opposition voters from casting their ballots.

The courtroom was filled at an early hour. Segregated in the back of the public benches were several rows of Negroes — representing every stratum of their people in the state and hailing from several different counties. More awaited entry out in the hall. The front benches seated what appeared to be a cross-section of Bilbo followers: farmers with red-necks and hardened faces, little men from small towns and unpaved lanes, with their frustrations ill-concealed. At tables fronting the jury-box sat the Investigating Committee, presided over by Senator Allen J. Ellender of Louisiana, and including Senators Thomas of Oklahoma, Maybank of South Carolina, Bridges of New Hampshire, and Hickenlooper of Iowa. Their counsel used the judge's bench as his base of operations, while the senator under investigation, and his attorneys, occupied tables centered before the judicial dais.

There were customary preliminaries, the presentation of the complaint, the investigator's report, and other data for the record. First witnesses were leaders of the Jackson Negro community, who forthrightly resisted efforts of the Committee Chairman to minimize their

evidence. Then followed the testimony of a young Negro ex-serviceman who described his experiences when he tried to register for voting. He was refused by the courthouse authorities in Brandon, and when he left the building, was apprehended by six or seven white men who forced him into an automobile, drove with him to a nearby wood and whipped him with a cable taken from the car. He was told by these men that if he attempted to register again he would be killed. The chairman now sought to discredit the witness's allegations. Levity entered into the proceedings. Tittering was heard through the courtroom when the witness told the details of his grim adventure.

At the noon recess, the rabbi volunteered to testify. Early in the afternoon he was called to the stand. He said⁸ he was a minister who had resided in the state for ten years. He recalled the speech he had heard the candidate make that spring at the county courthouse. There had been words to the effect that "We don't believe in Negroes taking part in a white primary. . . . We know how to handle them. . . . Nobody present needs to be told what we will do the night before election." He said the impact of such words upon the Negroes he had come to know would keep many from the polls. He cited the cook in his family service, who declared, "I want to live a little longer, I'm not going to bother to vote." He had no direct knowledge of any violence that had occurred, but felt that the speech of the candidate was definitely inflammatory.

During this testimony, Senator Bilbo was in whispered conference with his principal counselor. They now presented the Committee Chairman with written questions they desired to be asked of the witness. The first question was: "Of what church are you a minister?" The rabbi inquired as to the purpose of the question, asserting that he could not understand how his particular religious affiliation could be conceived as having a bearing on his statement as a citizen before a Senate investigating committee. He was then asked where he was reared, in order to establish, beyond his being Jewish, that he was born and raised outside of the South. There followed an attempt to cast doubt on the accuracy of the rabbi's quotation from the campaign speech. A purported copy of the senator's words was read, "The best time to talk to the Negro about not voting is the night before the election." The rabbi pointed out that the candidate rarely referred to his manuscript when he spoke. Moreover, the audience was left with the definite impression that not "talking" but "handling" a possible voter prior to election was to be planned, an altogether different matter, and particularly pertinent in the present inquiry.

After a little while the rabbi left the stand. On the last day of the

⁸Hearings Before the Special Committee to Investigate Senatorial Campaign Expenditures, U. S. Senate, 79th Congress, 2nd Session, Washington, 1947, pp. 59-63.

hearings, a Catholic priest⁹ was the only other white man to testify against Bilbo. The fortitude of the Negro witnesses all four of the days set a new high in morale for the state's underprivileged. The Committee's minority report was an uncompromising denunciation of Mississippi's senior senator-elect. He was ultimately refused his seat in the Senate. The angel of death was hovering nearby.

A well-known Vicksburg woman¹⁰ wrote the rabbi: "For your testimony . . . thanks! In doing what you knew was right regardless of public opinion, you have taken the course recommended by Jesus." "In line with the high tradition of Amos and Isaiah," claimed a Fisk University professor.¹¹ He continued: "Our respectable white Protestant fellow-Mississippians must be mighty glad to have you serve as the surrogate for their collective conscience." The rabbi knew there was neither heroism nor heroics involved. Perhaps what satisfied him most was his congregation. This time there was not a word of protest.

⁹Father George T. J. Strype, missionary, St. Philomena Church, Pass Christian, Miss.

¹⁰Mrs. Eva W. Davis, Route 2, Box 86-A, Vicksburg, Miss., dated Dec. 5, 1946.

¹¹Charles R. Lawrence, Jr., dated Dec. 10, 1946.

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