

Black, Jews And Gentiles; Part II

By Prof. McKinley Burt

As I commented at the close of last week's article, the relationships between diverse cultures often can grow "rancorous -- to close for comfort." You will note that I have added "Blacks" to the title, perhaps, is a recognition of the real nature of this dialogue. Then, too, there was the reader who said, "I don't care what Webster says. There wasn't any category 'Gentile' on my Civil Service application."

"Too close for comfort" is exactly how I found those situations of employment as a school vacation, live-in employee in the households of both Jews and non-Jews. After two summers of this type of late-teenage employment I opted for the less-condescending relationships of railroad construction gangs. But there is certainly something to be said for those 'same-domicile' living ar-

rangements when it comes down to really knowing and understanding people of another culture.

It is more than a matter of being exposed to unguarded conversations or special confidences to be hidden from some mistrusted member of the family -- or even marveling at some of the esoteric sexual behaviors of the rich and almost famous, or retrieving inebriated blondes from swimming pools. But what can be most unsettling are some of the more bitter, unkind and even virulent opinions that Jew and Gentile may have of each other. Not all by any means but a sufficient number to provoke the comment that many real human emotions are masked by a facade of civility, gentility and urbanity. Especially among the wealthy middle class, while the poor are more honest.

No such civility was found in the black or white urban ghettos

of pre-world War II America (at the time my family lived in a mixed neighborhood of Blacks, Jews, Irish, Italians and Germans). Lipschitz's '(confectionery and K kosher Delicatessen' was the social center for much of the neighborhood and the only place I knew of in the entire city of St. Louis in the 1930's where a black could sit at the soda fountain and sip sodas (N. Bayard Avenue).

This state of affairs brought out the very worst in the youth of the non-Jewish European cultural groups. From their end of the Soda fountain or their group of checkered oil cloth table would come the mumbled racial epithets, "nigger-serving kikes, Jew bastards own everything now they're wiping our face in it." This would happen almost every day until the owner ushered them out. But the youth were simply reflecting the adult conversations of their home

environment. I was the only black kid in a 30 square block area (at ages 5 through 12) and the only possible playmates in the neighborhood were four brothers of an "Emaus" family, Willie, Sol, Leon and Eli. I even tagged along to the basement of the confectionery when the Rabbi came to kill the chickens. Though I had toys galore the children of the non-Jewish European groups were not allowed to come near us -- on pain of being beaten within an inch of their lives.

So in a pattern to continue for decades, the diverse cultural groups hurled insults (and sometimes rocks) back and forth across the street. The school system was absolutely segregated and from my black schoolmates I gained yet another viewpoint of Jewish people. Many of their parents worked for Jewish merchants, clothing manufacturers and wholesalers or were in domestic

service with Jewish families.

There was both truth and folklore in the consensus that "The Jewish employer will give you a position and authority that 'ol whitey' never will." As I wrote several months ago, this is now interpreted as follows: "Some groups will hire, promote and teach blacks sophisticated commercial systems because they know perfectly well that, unlike whites, they can never be competitors -- can't get Commercial bank loans, competitive leaseholds, etc.

Inmate Escapes During Transfer

At approximately 7:15 on November 12, 1995, an inmate in the process of being transferred from the Detention Center to the Courthouse Jail fled from custody as the transport van was being unloaded. The inmate is identified as Juan Mercadorivera, DOB 11/22/73, 221 N. Hardcastle, Woodburn, OR. Mercadorivera was captured underneath the Morrison Bridge approximately one half hour after he ran from the transport van. He was still handcuffed when apprehended by Portland Police.

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Who is Jerome Washington?

Jerome Washington is an award-winning writer, journalist, editor, teacher and a devout buddhist. He served as a medic in Vietnam from 1960 to 1962. After returning to the United States he earned a Master's degree in Journalism from Columbia University. He later worked with Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement and helped to organize the first group of veterans opposed to the war in Southeast Asia. Known as the first black Yippee, he, along with Abbie Hoffman, Paul Krassner, Phil Ochs, and Ed Sanders, brought the Yippies into political prominence by disturbing the Democratic National Convention in 1968.

In 1971, Washington was charged with shooting one man and wounding another at an unlicensed after-hours club in Manhattan's Bowery. He was jailed for charges of murder and attempted murder, that were ultimately dropped sixteen years later. Imprisoned from 1972 to 1989, Washington was incarcerated in a number of New York State prisons, until he ultimately

ended up in Attica, where he continued his political activities and his writing.

While in prison, Washington founded and edited The Auburn Collective, an inmate produced newspaper which merited more than 25 national awards for journalistic excellence, and was quickly named one of the top three prison publications in the U.S. Washington also wrote a number of articles critical of guards, wardens and prison life for newspapers outside of prison including the New York Times Op-Ed page. Washington's writing, which challenged the establishment and incurred the wrath of wardens and guards, was called "venom" by prison officials. Singled out as a subversive, he was moved from Auburn to Attica prison and his typewriter and writing were confiscated for two years. Washington sued prison officials and he was awarded \$5,000 in damages for the typewriter and manuscripts that were destroyed.

While in Attica, Washington filed and won a historic First Amendment lawsuit against prison censor-



Jerome Washington

In 1986, he also became the first prisoner to receive a fellowship in the arts from the New York Foundation for the Arts for his play The Boys in Cellblock "C," which has since been produced by stage companies across the country. In all he has written four plays, two novels and a film script, in addition to several books of poetry - most while incarcerated. His works include One Crow, One Buddha (1989), A Bright Spot in the Yard (1981), and Notes From a Prison Journal (1979). In 1995 he received the Western States Arts Federation Book Award for Creative Nonfiction for Iron House.

Washington is currently a writing workshop instructor for Poets & Writers, Inc. and Alternative Literary Programs. He is a member of the PEN American Center's Prison Writing Committee, and is on the Board of Directors of the Coalition for the Creative Arts and the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors (Western Region). He lives on the Mendocino Coast of California.

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