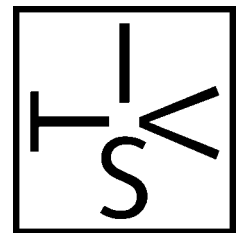


# From Swastika to Jim Crow

## Discussion Guide

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# FROM SWASTIKA TO JIM CROW

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### INTRODUCTION

Based on a book by the late Gabrielle Simon Edgcomb, the film *From Swastika to Jim Crow* tells the little-known story of two different cultures that share elements of a common burden of oppression. Jewish refugee scholars who fled Nazi Germany and arrived in the United States were often excluded from mainstream American universities due to anti-Semitism and anti-foreigner sentiment. Some found employment in an unusual place – Black colleges in the segregated South.

Through interviews and anecdotes, viewers learn how two very different peoples adapted and even flourished in difficult and harsh circumstances. While it specifically focuses on Black-Jewish relations, *From Swastika to Jim Crow* provides an opportunity for dialogue for all people who seek ways of fighting injustice and securing dignity for all. This discussion guide was designed with that goal in mind. It is our hope that this film will be used as a springboard for dialogue in communities where racial tensions have existed, in places where people are unaware of this unique chapter of American history and in communities that work to maintain communication and dialogue among their diverse members.

### A NOTE TO DISCUSSION LEADERS

Discussion leaders will be leading a discussion for community members who have all viewed the film *From Swastika to Jim Crow*. The discussion leader should consider the following recommendations:

- 1 Preview the film and read the discussion guide prior to the program.
- 2 In most situations you will have three hours for the program which will include both the viewing of *From Swastika to Jim Crow* (1 hour), as well as the discussion. Plan to provide introductory remarks (20 minutes) as well as time for thoughtful discussion and dialogue after the film (1 1/2 hours).

- 3 In some situations participants may feel more comfortable speaking in a smaller group. You may want to divide the audience into groups of three or four and have them discuss certain issues that may prove more sensitive before having them discuss them as a full group. This will enable more people to participate comfortably in the discussion.
- 4 Suggested Discussion Guidelines should be shared with the participants during your introduction. Discussion leaders should understand that participants will bring different experiences to the program. Therefore, it is important to create an environment that is open and safe for all to share their viewpoints, experiences, insights and ideas.

*Suggested Ground Rules:*

- a Mutual respect is very important. Participants should be respectful of one another's opinions and assume responsibility for their own learning.
- b Everyone is encouraged to actively participate in the discussion, but only one at a time.
- c Participants should be open to new ideas and to each other. Request that participants use statements that signify that they are talking only about and for themselves.
- d The topics for discussion that the film will elicit may be more difficult for some people to talk about than others. Participants should be sensitive to each other's needs and privacy, including confidentiality.

## **BACKGROUND**

In January of 1933, Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party legally and democratically rose to power in Germany. Almost immediately, Hitler began a systematic campaign of oppression and terror against Jews, who up until that point had been an integral part of German culture, commerce, and education. Jewish businesses were boycotted on April 1, 1933, but following an international outcry that boycott was limited to one day. Soon after, Hitler placed economic sanctions on Jews and limited their right to practice their trades. On April 25, 1933, the Law for Preventing Overcrowding in German Schools and Schools of Higher Education took effect. This law restricted enrollment of Jews and soon thereafter Jewish professors began to be dismissed from universities. While few, if any, could imagine that by 1941 the Germans would begin the systematic slaughter of Jews – a slaughter that over the next four years would take the lives of close to six million souls – many of these scholars realized in the early 1930s

that Jews had no future in Germany and fled to the United States. Most of the 1,200 refugee scholars who arrived in this country could not find work in their fields. A small number, however, would end up in the historically Black colleges of the American South.

In many ways, these scholars discovered that the American South was not unlike Germany in the mid 1930s before mass murder became the policy of the German state. Southern Blacks lived under the oppression of the Jim Crow laws, which legislated the strict segregation of Blacks from Whites. Forbidden from attending the same schools, eating in the same restaurants, playing in the same parks, Blacks were considered second-class citizens.

The historically Black private colleges represented a rare opportunity for educational advancement and were havens for aspiring young Blacks. Exempt from local segregation laws, they were one of the few places where Blacks could freely associate with Whites without being arrested under the myriad of ordinances enforcing segregation. Many of these colleges needed qualified teachers and saw in these refugees prominent scholars to attract to their campuses, and who, having fled oppression themselves, might have special sensitivity to the experience of the Black students they would teach. For the scholars, employment at the Black colleges offered an invaluable opportunity to continue their professional work at a time when work in their fields was scarce.

Fifty-one refugee scholars would end up taking positions in 19 different institutions. Shunned by the White community for being both Jewish and foreign, unable to fully integrate with the Black community due to segregation laws, the experience of the refugee scholars would prove to be very difficult but, in many cases, very rewarding.

As Gabrielle Edgcomb writes in her book, *From Swastika to Jim Crow*, “The significance of this historical episode lies in the encounter between two diverse groups of people, both victims of extreme manifestations of racist oppression and persecution, albeit under vastly different historical conditions. The Europeans came out of a middle class intellectual environment... African Americans at the time were two and three generations removed from slavery, under which even learning to read had been generally forbidden.”

This film is the story of that historic encounter.

## COMMON LANGUAGE/VOCABULARY

Stereotype, Prejudice, Discrimination, Racism, Refugee, Anti-Semitism, Religious Bigotry, Segregation, Tenure, Jim Crow laws, Holocaust, and Black Power

## THE SCHOLARS

The following scholars are highlighted in the film:

### ERNST MANASSE

Professor of German, Latin and Philosophy  
North Carolina Central University (previously known as North Carolina College for Negroes)  
Durham, North Carolina  
1939 – 1973

### LORE RASMUSSEN

Elementary Education instructor  
Talladega College  
Talladega, Alabama  
1949 – 1955

### JOHN HERZ

Professor of Political Science  
Howard University  
Washington, D.C.  
1941 – 1943, 1948 – 1952

### VIKTOR LOWENFELD

Professor of Art  
Hampton Institute  
Hampton, Virginia  
1939 – 1946

### FRITZ PAPPENHEIM

Professor of German and Economics  
Talladega College  
Talladega, Alabama  
1944 – 1952

### ERNST BORINSKI

Professor of Sociology, German and Russian  
Tougaloo College  
Tougaloo, Mississippi  
1947 – 1983

## THEMES

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 RASCISM 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.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The following discussion questions have all been categorized by the specific themes, as noted. Discussion leaders may want to ask the questions in the order listed below or thematically.

- 1 Discuss and contrast the ways in which Jews were discriminated against and oppressed in Nazi Germany with how Blacks were discriminated against and oppressed in the American South of the 1930s and 1940s. (DISCRIMINATION/RACISM)
- 2 In the book *From Swastika to Jim Crow*, the President of Fisk University writes in a letter, “We do not recommend the placement of refugees in [Black Colleges] because of the double handicap it places them under.” What do you think he means by “double handicap?” How were the German-Jewish scholars able to balance their role of working in the Black community with living in an often hostile White community? How were the students able to balance their lives of relative freedom at the Black colleges as opposed to their restricted life of segregation and discrimination? (DISCRIMINATION/RACISM)
- 3 Ernst Manasse said, “I came from a situation of forced segregation (in Germany) where we were victims and now suddenly I was on the other side. I belonged not to the oppressed, but to the oppressor. And that was very, very uncomfortable for me.” How did he (and the other scholars) deal with this situation? Were they effective? Describe similar situations to this dynamic that may exist today? What are they? Discuss what you would do if you were placed in a similar situation? (DISCRIMINATION/RACISM)
- 4 What factors existed in America of the 1930s and '40s that allowed racism and segregation to flourish? Why do you think the racial policies in America were not condemned? What factors exist today that allow racism to continue? Have these factors changed from the ones that existed in the 1930s and '40s?  
(DISCRIMINATION/RACISM)
- 5 What do you think these refugee scholars thought when they saw a “White Only” water fountain or restaurant, or saw a Black person relegated to the back of a bus? How might they have responded? What would you do if you were placed in a similar situation? How would you respond? (DISCRIMINATION/RACISM – FIGHTING RACISM)

- 6** In Nazi Germany, the Nuremberg laws of 1935 formally defined a Jew based upon the religion of their grandparents. In the South, anyone of ascertainable or strongly suspected Black ancestry was considered a “person of color” according to the Jim Crow laws. What do you think are the ramifications of defining people, not by their actions or beliefs, but by their race? (DISCRIMINATION/RACISM)
- 7** Lore Rasmussen speaks of an occasion when she and her husband ate in a Black restaurant and were promptly arrested for “violating sanitary codes, interrogated, and accused of being German spies.” The arresting officers wondered “how they (Rasmussen and her husband) got that way.” What did they mean by that? What makes some people feel ready to fight injustice whenever it rears its head and what keeps others from responding? Is it possible that not acting is a response to fighting racism? Explain. (DISCRIMINATION/RACISM – FIGHTING RACISM)
- 8** In the above situation with the Rasmussens, when law enforcement officials found out she was a refugee who had escaped Nazi Germany, she was told, “You should be glad to be in a place where there is democracy and freedom.” Comment on the irony of that statement. (DISCRIMINATION/RACISM)
- 9** Why do you suspect their Black students often saw the refugee scholars as “mentors”? What kinds of lessons do you think the scholars learned from their students? With the emergence of the Black Power movement in the late 1960s, was this relationship still possible? Can this dynamic still exist today? Explain. (BLACKS AND JEWS)
- 10** One of the reasons why Germans forced the Jews to wear yellow stars was because their identity was not apparent. Both Jews and Blacks had a common word for this phenomenon, “passing” – the Jew as non-Jew, the Black as White. What else do you think the refugee scholars shared in common with their students that may not have been articulated in the film? (BLACKS AND JEWS)
- 11** Donald Cunnigen relates in the film how several of his friends thought Jews, by the virtue of their long history of being oppressed, were Black. Oftentimes, the White community also did not see the Jews as completely White. How do you think the climate has changed for both Jews and Blacks since the the 1930s and 40s? What did Blacks and Jews have in common during the time depicted in the film? Explain whether or not these commonalities still exist today. (BLACKS AND JEWS)

- 12** Ernst Borinski would organize evenings in which Blacks and Whites would have to sit next to each other for dinner. This was revolutionary in the segregated South. How have you felt in situations where you spent time with people whose appearance, way of life, or religion was very different from yours? How did these people differ or meet your expectations? Do you believe that providing opportunities for people who are considered “different from each other” to interact has a role in race relations today? How has this role changed since the time depicted in the film? (FIGHTING RACISM)
- 13** Ernst Manasse designed and taught a class entitled “The Black Problem,” during the late 1960s. It was attended by both students and faculty and initially fostered much discourse and dialogue. But as time went on, he was asked to no longer teach this course because of his perspective as a White man. Have you ever had a teacher who taught about a subject that they were not directly a part of? Were they able to teach effectively? Have you ever had a teacher who was part of an experience and could not teach effectively? Is it possible for non-Gays to teach Gay literature or for men to teach Women’s Studies? How do we understand an experience that is not our own? (FIGHTING RACISM)
- 14** For some, their understanding of the Black Power Movement was the idea that Blacks should only identify with Blacks. What do you think of this? What are the pros and cons of the members of a group segregating themselves from other members of their community? How was the experience of these professors and their students antithetical to that idea? (FIGHTING RACISM)
- 15** What do you believe to be the lasting lessons of the story depicted in *From Swastika to Jim Crow*? Has your understanding of the relationship between Blacks and Jews changed as a result of viewing this film? How can we bring the message of the film to the larger community to encourage dialogue and action amongst its members? (FIGHTING RACISM)

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### **Moorland Spinarn Research Center**

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### **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People**

www.naacp.org  
410-521-4939  
4805 Mt. Hope Drive  
Baltimore, MD 21215

### **National Urban League**

www.nul.org  
212-558-5300  
120 Wall Street  
New York, NY 10005

### **Operation Understanding**

117 S. 17<sup>th</sup> Street, Ste 1010  
Philadelphia, PA 19103  
215-665-2300

### **The Schomburg Center for Research**

www.nypl.org/research/sc/sc.html  
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New York, NY 10037-1801  
212-491-2200

### **Southern Christian Leadership Conference**

www.mindspring.com/~sartor/gradyhs/  
org\_SCLC.html  
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### **United States Holocaust Memorial Museum**

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