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**DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISTS
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"I Never Died," Said He

by

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From Reformer to Revolutionary

by

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Reflections on the Legacy



I

**“I Never
Died,” Said
He**
by
**Ethel Shapiro-
Bertolini**

The News... Something Urgent Has Just Happened... What is it? Write, write, record it, record everything from here on... “We’ll keep you informed about his condition as soon as we get more information from Memphis”

Memphis? Yes, I know Memphis, I’ve seen the slums, I’ve seen the shanties—but that was years ago. This is Thursday, April 4, 1968, the garbage collectors are striking in Memphis. Dr. Martin Luther King is there; he’s leading them.

Has anything happened to Dr. King?

Again the announcer: “Dr. Martin Luther King’s condition is declared critical. This is all we can tell you now”

Critical? Martin Luther King’s condition critical? What does he mean? I record the time: 5:04.

The man is back, his hand is trembling as he reads: “We have received word from Memphis that Dr. Martin Luther King just died”

But that’s impossible—my mind replies. “He will never die,” I say aloud. Then sudden silence on the air waves; silence in my room. I hear a whisper: “I never died,” says he.

No! No! That’s another man you’re thinking of. That was Joe Hill, a white man, a labor organizer of another era. But Martin Luther King *is* a labor organizer: yesterday I saw him, arms locked with other black men, leading the Memphis garbage men. In the front lines, leading... singing...

No, no! I heard them say: "Dr. Martin Luther King just died!"

My eyes drift to the vase of roses in front of me. The flowers seem to be mourning: their heads are drooping, and the leaves have sunk themselves deep into the water, as if to hide themselves, as if ashamed of this day.

Remove the wilted roses! Throw them out!

I can't! I can't throw them out. The garbage men won't pick them up. They are striking. But that's in Memphis, not here.

Throw them out!

No, no! Leave them there. Let them mourn in their vase; let war-torn Vietnam mourn; let the rat-infested ghettos mourn; mourn everybody! The Nobel Peace Laureate was assassinated! The garbage men's leader was assassinated! Dr. Martin Luther King just died! I cry in silence. I cry inside. No tears will come.

My heart? I do not feel its beat. It's still. Everything has stopped. The world has stopped moving. It is dead. It is cold. Frozen. Civilization is no more—it has died.

Or has it only temporarily reverted to savagery? my mind asks. Does civilization too refuse to look at me and tell my why it killed my brother?

But suddenly my heart begins to ache. Yes, I feel it. It's paining me now. Then—I'm alive again; the world, too, is alive again—only now it is in pain. We all hurt so much now! I ask you humbly, Coretta King, to accept my outstretched hand, to accept my tears of sorrow in your loss—now my loss, too.

Again I'm watching the screen, and I see you, Mrs. King, standing there near your martyred husband, with the dignity of your entire people, with the courage of all black women; I see you looking upon the dead body, the still body of your husband, and in silence you're studying his features, you're staring at his face, and I know, I know, that you can hear his voice—we all hear it now: "I NEVER DIED," says he.

**I cry in silence.
I cry inside. No
tears will come.**

2

Numbness



The inner turmoil continues; the unreality of his death continues. Mechanically I pick up the neighborhood paper and read,

The Bellevue Club extends an invitation to all in the community to share the last major speech of Dr. Martin Luther King in which he said: "My heart grieves, not only for the hungry and deprived black children, but also for the hungry brown child, and yes, the hungry white child in the Appalachians and other centers of poverty in our beloved land.

Our beloved land!

I must get reassurance from the outside, from the world around me. My hand picks up the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, and at random I turn to a page: "By the 20th century, the Negro was at the bottom of American society. Disfranchised, Negroes throughout the country were excluded by employers and labor unions from white collar and skilled trades."

Yet, he grieves also for the white children; he speaks also for my neighbor's three brown children, who this morning stood at my kitchen window and took from me the bread and jam and milk. They refused to leave and they refused to eat what I had given them. "Good-by, children, see you tomorrow morning again, all right?" They did not go away. I wondered why.

"She's hungry, too," the oldest said, pointing to their cat.

This unreality of his death has brought about a numbness, and inability to do anything. This numbness seems to have engulfed the entire nation, and parts of the world. I ask: Is it because his life was so overwhelming, so much part of our own lives? Is it because he spoke our thoughts more eloquently than we were able to think to ourselves? Yes, yes! That's why! That must be the reason! I reassure myself, as I reach for something I've treasured. I read Dr. King's words:

White America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism . . . although it is historically imperative that our society take the next step to equality, we find ourselves psychologically and socially imprisoned. All too many white Americans are horrified not with the conditions of Negro life but with the product of these conditions—the Negro himself . . . The white majority, unprepared and unwilling to accept radical structural change, is resisting and producing chaos.

(Address to American Psychological Assn.)

Good, good, Dr. King! Then there must be a white minority that agrees with you; and this white minority has also been "telling it like it is." We'll be heard better now; we'll be listened to better now when we tell them that our destiny is bound up with the destiny of all black people of our beloved land.

**...our destiny is
bound up with
the destiny of
all black
people...**

We'll tell white America that you "...knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continue to draw men and skills and money like some demoniacal destructive suction tube. So I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such." (Riverside Church, NYC. April 4, 1967)

We will explain to white America what you meant when you said: "The bombs that fall in Vietnam explode at home..."

Yesterday they said you died—but you haven't stopped talking to us and to the world, and our numbness is now receding. Again we hear the man with the poetry in his speech, the man with a dream in his heart, the man whose death will bring life to the millions, because he had faith in them.

3

On The Vigil



All day and night people are responding to the 48-hour vigil. The line is long in front of the Federal Building. They are all so young, so innocent.

The sign on the steps of the building reads:

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
NOBEL PEACE LAUREATE
MARTYRED BY RACISM
1929-1968

A minister is now talking:

We are in the midst of a revolution. Ask yourselves: Do I want to contain revolution, or do I want to be a part of it. The revolution that we are concerned with when we mourn Dr. Martin Luther King is the revolution that says that there is a massive injustice done to our black brother; it's a massive oppression and this is a social evil that we cannot allow . . . Dr. Martin Luther King has become part of that revolution.

And at that very same moment, the wife of the martyred black leader is telling the mourners at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia:

My husband often told the children that if a man had nothing that was worth dying for then he was not fit to live . . . He knew that this was a sick society, totally infested with racism

and violence . . . which would ultimately lead to his death . . . He gave his life for the poor of the world - the garbage workers of Memphis and the peasants of Vietnam.

Now the line forms once again, and I take my place next to a young black militant. I ask him: "Why are we given white arm bands instead of the traditional black?"

"Black is beautiful, it should not be identified with mourning," he replies.

I ask the same question of another man. He answers: "White is also a sign of mourning."

I move on and ask the aged, grey-haired woman: "Have you ever met Dr. King personally?"

Her eyes suddenly fill up with joy. "Yes, when I picketed with him the Five-and-Ten Cent Store. I'm an atheist, but marching with Dr. King was the only time in my life I felt I was close to heaven."

**"We are in the
midst of a
revolution."**

The white young girl behind me is very pretty, with clear and honest eyes. I tell her I'm recording people's feelings about this great tragedy. "How does it affect you? Can you tell it as it is?"

She keeps walking with me and thinking, and then looks up to me and says sadly: "It's desperate and people don't realize it. White people refuse to see it, as if they don't want to know any more about it."

I: What do you mean when you say "Desperate"?

She: I feel a great sense of desperation myself about what is happening in this world. I'm only 20 years old but I've done a lot of studying of black history and what the brutalization has done to the black people reflects on what this country is all about.

The people in their drive for materialistic gain have been dehumanized; they have been stripped of their conscience. It is this very inability of white Americans to be able to put themselves even for five minutes in the shoes of a black person—it's this thing where white people can be shown example after example

of absolute brutality, and when the black man says "We don't want to work with you, you work in your own communities because some of us hate you on account of what has been done to us," then the white person forgets all the examples of brutality and says: "How can I help you if you hate me."

I: What do you see ahead?

She: Everything that's going on in the world, the protests about the war, all the happenings – America being hated all over the world – you have Americans hating each other within this country – so there's going to be violence, something is going to happen violently in this country.

I: Where is it all leading to? Where is it going?

She: I'm trying to say to you that I hope it'll lead to democracy (laughs).

I: Why do you laugh when you use the word democracy?

She: Because democracy doesn't exist in this country and everybody screams that it does. But that is what I hope to get in the end.

I: What does democracy mean to you? Can you spell it out?

She: At first the word that came to me when I thought of democracy was the word freedom. You can divide things into two camps: one is the pro-life camp, and the other is the anti-life camp, and freedom is giving way to all the pro-life elements.

The thing I'm really concerned with – I'll go along with anything that will teach love, equality, love with sensuality; sensuality is being able to feel, to respond to something, like Reverend King responded and loved.

**"I hope it will
lead to
democracy."**

She looks at me and asks: "Do you think that there's something wrong with me for saying these things?"

And I tell her that I'd mail her one of Dr. King's papers about a maladjusted person in our society.

I mail her the speech in which I circled out several sections.

You who are in the field of psychology have given us a great word. It is the word maladjusted . . . you are declaring that . . . all must seek the well-adjusted life in order to avoid neurotic and schizophrenic personalities.

But on the other hand, I am sure that we all recognize that there are some things in our society, some things in our world to which we should never be adjusted. There are some things concerning which we must always be maladjusted if we are to be people of good will. We must never adjust ourselves to racial discrimination and racial segregation. We must never adjust ourselves to religious bigotry. We must never adjust ourselves to economic conditions that take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few. We must never adjust ourselves to the madness of militarism, and the self-defeating effects of physical violence.

4

Ziporah's 95th Birthday Party



The party for Ziporah had been set a long time ago. A catered dinner, a musical program, prominent speakers—the family clan arriving from several parts of the country. Many people came to honor Ziporah Chelnick while thousands of others went to the Memorial Meeting for Dr. Martin Luther King. Yet, both seemed to belong to each other, and tied together by history.

Surely Dr. King must have known that many Ziporahs throughout the land had preceeded him in the fight for the liberation of black Americans; surely Dr. King must have met the Ziporahs and their offspring during the long marches and demonstrations which he led! And now the dignified battler of another generation, sitting at the head of the table, surrounded by friends and relatives is nodding her head in approval, when a speaker says:

Dr. King's advocacy of non-violence did not mean submissiveness, but defiance; it did not mean passivity, but an independent spirit and the full dignity of man. The creation of a new pride in the Negroes' heritage, a new hope and confidence that obstacles to liberation would be overcome was, to Dr. Martin Luther King, the most important achievement of the numerous battles he led.

As if reading the minds of the guests, and the silent thoughts of the diminutive Ziporah, one of her sons rises, and looking at his mother says:

**“Dr. King’s
advocacy of
non-violence
did not mean
submissiveness,
but defiance.”**

My Mother will agree with me that as an individual she’s a symbol of the continuation of the struggle in our country for a better life here, and in the world; a continuation of the younger generation and of the immigrants who came to this country – for not all immigrants came here lured by the gold that was supposed to be littering the streets, but came here to escape persecutions. They came here lured by the traditions of this country, traditions of Jefferson, Thomas Paine and Abe Lincoln.

Today the very young generation of Americans is looking around in their country and do not like what they see; this generation is picking up the torch of my Mother’s generation and of my own – fighting for peace, for civil rights and for a better world.

A toast to you, Mother!

The audience rises and drinks to Ziporah and as I look around and see the aged, white faces, I also see tears running down their wrinkled cheeks, and I know that they, and I, and Ziporah, are thinking at this moment of our fallen martyred hero, of Dr. Martin Luther King. And when entertainer Jerry Atinsky sings the words and music he had written for this occasion – MAZLTOV TO YOU ZIPORAH – he seems to tell us all that Ziporah Chelnick and Dr. Martin Luther King, and all of us in that hall, are bound together by a common destiny.

Down the road of life you go
You travelled far and wide
On the highway you have found
The people on your side.
Love and friendship came along
Peace and freedom is your song
Mazl, Mazl, Mazltov to you.

In her eyes there is a dream
That burns just like a fire
In her heart there is a song
That sings just like a choir.
On her lips there is a sound
Tell’m that we’re freedom bound
Mazl, Mazl, Mazltov to you.

Now we are asked to stand and cross arms with our neighbors; and we all see in front of us Ziporah Chelnick, who picketed for Negro rights 50 years ago sing now in a thin voice WE SHALL OVERCOME and soon we all join and sign with her.

My mind, however, roams to the other part of the city, where thousands had turned out to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, and I wonder: Is that the reason why there are no black faces in this audience? Is that the reason why there are no brown faces in this audience? Is this small group of white militants also racist?

The only blacks I see are the ones working in the kitchen, cooking and serving the dinner. Now everybody has eaten; the chores in the kitchen have ended; and now the blacks from the kitchen join Ziporah Chelnick and sit by her side, at the head of the table. They are her friends who cannot obtain work catering dinners for other whites. And I think: How long? Oh how long before We Shall Overcome?

The party has come to an end. Ziporah is now speaking:

I want to thank you for the honor you have given me. My heart is broken about the great tragedy that has taken place; there will come a time when there will not be any more such tragedies—when we will live in peace with the entire world.

Is it possible, my mind inquires, that Ziporah knows better than any of us, that only when peace shall be obtained throughout the world, only then will we be free of the tragedies that have befallen us?

**How long? Oh
how long before
We Shall
Overcome?**

5

Pull Me Up,
Brother!



Slowly the people are entering the park for the noon memorial. They sit on the grass and on the stumps and fences built around the flower beds. I stand near the concrete retaining wall and see an open space on which I could sit and could observe the program from an elevation. But I can't get up there. It's too high. I need someone to help me.

The black militant with the natural, and the "Freedom Now" button on his blue denim shirt, is looking towards the center of the park where the platform is being set up for the speakers and entertainers. He does not see me; he does not know that I'm trying to get up to where he is sitting. I holler to him: "Pull me up, brother!" and I stretch my hand towards him.

Now he sees my hand but he hesitates, as if not wishing to touch something that's unclean, something that no black man should ever touch! Through my mind flashes the thought which Dr. King had left behind: "... what has penetrated substantially all strata of Negro life is the revolutionary idea that the philosophy and morals of the dominant society are not holy or sacred, but in all too many respects are degenerate and profane!"

Surely this black militant understands that I am with him, or I wouldn't be here in the park. He mustn't refuse my hand!

As if reading my mind, he bends down, gives me his hand, and pulls me up.

"Thank you, brother," I say.

I sit down on the wall, next to this black militant, and now I can read the huge sign on the platform, MAKE HIS DREAM A REALITY, and I want to say something to the

young man who pulled me up, but I don't know how to open a conversation with him.

We now hear the voice of the lone white girl standing on the platform, in the middle of the park, leading the audience in the singing of "FREEDOM." He sings. I sing.

"I'm recording the events of this week-end, and what people think during these days of this great tragedy. Mind telling me how you feel about this whole situation?"

He replies readily: "As far as I am concerned I could see them killing H. Rap Brown, or Stockley Carmichael. I can see them being shot at, killed. But as far as Martin Luther King is concerned, I can't see that at all. He has done more than any man I know to bring the blacks and whites together."

I: Maybe that's the reason he was assassinated.

He: That's possible. But he should have been better protected than he was. He was a target for a long time and was warned.

I: Do you think blacks and whites should be more together, like HE wanted?

He: If the whites want to be by themselves—that's their own business. Let them be where they are. As far as we blacks are concerned, we want to be by ourselves, too.

I: But how do you think racism will be wiped out in this...

We are interrupted by the loud sounds coming over the microphones. Several of the speakers had climbed on the platform during our interview, and now a labor leader is addressing the audience:

Dr. Martin Luther King was the man who did more than any other American to raise the concept that labor and the Negroes must build an alliance, must work together. His leadership of the 1300 sanitation workers drew national attention because of the big lesson it held: that racism and anti-unionism go together.

"He has done more than any man I know to bring the blacks and whites together."

A professor follows. He now quotes from a recent book written by Dr. Martin Luther King:

This is a multiracial nation where all groups are dependent on each other . . . in this vast interdependent nation no national group can retreat to an island entirely of itself . . . The American Negro will be living tomorrow with the very people against whom he is struggling today. The American Negro is not in a Congo, where the Belgians will go back to Belgium—after the battle is over, or in an India where the British will go back to England after independence is won . . . but in the struggle for racial justice in a multiracial society where the oppressor and oppressed are both “at home,” liberation must come through integration . . .

At the dinner table, talking softly among ourselves, each one of us feeling the urge to say something, as if wishing to turn this particular meal into our own personal memorial, our own family tribute to Dr. King.

Clara: (reaching for a magazine on the bookcase) I think he'll be remembered as one of the greatest men because of his fearlessness. I mean his courage of ideas. At Carnegie Hall, a month ago, honoring the Centennial Year of Dr. W. E. B. DuBois, Dr. King said:

(reading from magazine) We can't talk of Dr. DuBois without recognizing that he was a radical all of his life. Some people would like to ignore the fact that he was a Communist in his later years.

It is worth noting that Abraham Lincoln warmly welcomed the support of Karl Marx during the Civil War and corresponded with him freely . . . In contemporary life the English speaking world has no difficulty with the fact that Sean O' Casey was a literary giant of the 20th century and a Communist, or that Pablo Neruda is generally considered the greatest living poet though

he also served in the Chilean Senate as a Communist.

It is time to cease muting the fact that Dr. DuBois was a genius and chose to be a Communist. Our irrational anti-Communism has led us into too many quagmires...

At that precise moment we hear a rumble – the earth trembles and shakes, and the chandelier sways but seconds later, after its big sigh, the earth settles back. On my napkin I write: 6:28 P.M.

Elvi: Even the earth is shaken up as it gets ready to receive Dr. King.
(we laugh nervously)

Jack: Come on, all of you, stop being so dramatic. Let's eat.

Angelo: I'm with you, Jack.

Frank: That speech you quoted from, Clara, shook me up, too.

I: (picking up the same magazine) Dr. King also said:

With all his pride and spirit Dr. DuBois did not make a mystique out of blackness. He was proud of his people not because their color endowed them with some vague greatness but because their concrete achievement in struggle had advanced humanity and he saw and loved progressive humanity in all its hues, black, white, yellow, red and brown.

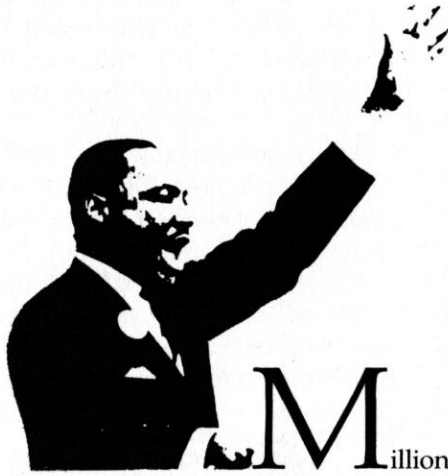
We continue eating in silence the rest of the meal; and these particular white mourners are judging this great American the way he wished his children to be judged, when he said:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but the content of their character.

**“Even the earth
is shaken up as
it gets ready to
receive Dr.
King.”**

6

You Never Died, Say We



Millions of black and white Americans join in the day of mourning on "Black Tuesday" to honor the fallen martyr. Work stoppages, closed schools, marches, vigils, and memorial services; docks from Texas to Maine and from San Diego to Vancouver are at a standstill. The flag is flown at half-mast on official buildings. "Never before in the history of our country had the death of a private citizen evoked such profound emotion and sorrow," the commentator says. "One of humanity's great leaders has been silenced forever," the man continues; but millions seem to be shouting back: "No, no! He never died!"

I see a cross on top of the Ebenezer Baptist Church where the final farewell is being said, and somehow I imagine that through that cross I also see the Star of David, and the Coptic Cross, and a multitude of other symbols, and as the camera focuses on the weeping face of a Negro minister, all these symbols outside the church seem to be weeping with this black man.

He dreamed a dream of world brotherhood.

"Sing it once again, for Martin, and for me," says the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, calling upon the woman from the choir, and we all sing with her in our silent farewell.

"The last time, sing this for Martin, and for me," and the woman continues with the same hymn.

DEATH has united us—the poor, the blacks, the whites and blacks. Now LIFE must unite us, and we shall sing for

you, Martin; the millions shall sing for you when your dream and our dream becomes a reality.

The choir woman just sat down; her eyes still closed, her hands on her face, emotionally exhausted and the other choir members are fanning her. She did not cry when she sang that last farewell to Martin, but now she is weeping.

The mules that plow the land of the South, the symbol of the poor people's march, are standing there amidst the thousands of waiting people, outside this church. Everybody is waiting for the body to be placed on the mule-train, and to be hauled to his resting place.

But suddenly the words of the martyred man himself, booming from a recorder, played upon the request of his widow, seem to be coming out from his own casket. I hear his familiar voice, I hear him say clearly:

I don't want a long funeral... Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize... Tell them not to mention that I have 300 to 400 other awards... I'd like somebody to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others... I want you to say that I tried to be right on the war question... I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.

Oh Lord! Make sacred the memory of Martin Luther King—someone says and there appears now the aged Jew, with his white fluffy hair, covered by the traditional yarmolke, and as I look upon Rabbi Abraham Heschel, he unfolds his papers and reads from "The Suffering of the Lord's Servant." I catch only snatches:

Surely he hath born our griefs, and carried our sorrows... but he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities... he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth... therefore will I divide him a portion with the great...

And as the Rabbi reads on from the Bible at Isaiah, I see in my mind millions of Jews martyred by tyrants of another generation, as Dr. King is martyred by the racism of my generation.

I want to give my hand to Mahalia Jackson, who's standing in front of the entire world, it seems, but she's not look-

...the millions shall sing for you when your dream and our dream becomes a reality.

ing at anyone; she sings the sad words of her spiritual "Precious Lord, Take My Hand"; and reaching out over the weeping audience she now shouts: "Take My Hand" and millions seem to respond with their own cry, "Take My Hand" and the thousands outside this church seem to be crying "Take My Hand" as all mankind seems to be taking each other's hand, and seems to be marching together towards Martin Luther King's dream. And for a brief moment in history, I see a phenomenon—I see all mankind united by the death of a black man!

But another black man, behind Mahalia Jackson is now looking directly into the camera, into the eyes of the world, and in silence he seems to be demanding: Never, never, must you forget this rare moment in history!

**Never, never,
must you forget
this rare
moment in
history.**

Out of nowhere, high up on the screen, super-imposed over the hugh crowd, there appears a film of Dr. Martin Luther King, marching at the head of a tremendous crowd of blacks and whites, and singing, singing, "Black and white together, we shall overcome"; and all who are marching behind the mule-drawn wooden farm cart, bearing his martyred body, are mixing their voices in a strange cadence with his, and are shouting in strange sounds, **You Never Died, Say We, You Never Died, Say We.**

Ethel Shapiro-Bertolini has been an activist since the 1930s organizing for the CIO and in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. She is currently active in the peace movement and writing a novel about the Depression.