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--14--

The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto

By acquaintance with the problems of Jews and other targets of oppression, one gets "more complete understanding" of the Negro question

By Dr' W' E' B' Du Bois

We are honored to print below the text of an address delivered by the great Negro scholar and citizen, Dr' W' E' B' Du Bois, at the Jewish Life "Tribute to the Warsaw Ghetto Fighters" at the Hotel Diplomat in New York on April 15. -- Eds'

I HAVE been to Poland three times. The first time was 59 years ago, when I was a student at the University of Berlin. I had been talking to my schoolmate, Stanislaus Ritter von Estreicher. I had been telling him of the race problem in America, which seemed to me at the time the only race problem and the greatest social problem of the world. He brushed it aside. He said, "You know nothing, really, about real race problems." Then he began to tell me about the problem of the Poles and particularly of that part of them who were included in the German empire; of their limited education; of the refusal to let them speak their own language; of the few careers that they were allowed to follow; of the continued insult to their culture and family life.

I was astonished; because race problems at the time were to me purely problems of color, and principally of slavery in the United States and near-slavery in Africa. I promised faithfully that when I went on my vacation that summer, I would stop to see him in his home at Krakow, Poland, where his father was librarian of the university.

Discovery of Jewish Question

I went down to South Germany through Switzerland to Italy, and then came back by Venice and Vienna and went out through Austria, Czechoslovakia and into German Poland and there, on the way, I had a new experience with a new race problem. I was travelling from Budapest through Hungary to a small town in Galicia, where I planned to spend the night. The cabman looked at me and asked if I wanted to stop "*unter die Juden*." I was a little puzzled, but told him "Yes." So we went to a little Jewish hotel on a small, out of the way street. There I realized another problem of race or religion, I did not know which, which had to do with the treatment and segregation of large numbers of human beings. I went on to Krakow, becoming more and more aware of two problems of human groups, and then came back to the university, not a little puzzled as to my own race problem and its place in the world.

Gradually I became aware of the Jewish problem of the modern world and something of its history. In Poland I learned little because the university and its teachers and students were hardly aware themselves of what this problem was, and how it influenced them, or what its meaning was in their life. In Germany I saw it continually obtruding, but being suppressed and seldom mentioned. I remember once visiting on a social occasion in a small German town. A German student was with me and when I became uneasily aware that all was not going well, he reassured me. He whispered, "They think I may be a Jew. It's not you they object to, it's me." I was astonished. It had never occurred to me until then that any exhibition of race prejudice could be anything but color prejudice. I knew that this young man was pure German, yet his dark hair and handsome face made our friends suspicious. Then I went further to investigate this new phenomenon in my experience.

Thirteen years after that I passed again through Poland and Warsaw. It was in the darkness, both physically and spiritually. Hitler was supreme in Germany where I had been visiting for five months and I sensed the oncoming storm. I passed through Warsaw into the Soviet Union just three years before the horror fell upon that city.

But in Berlin, before I left, I sensed something of the Jewish problem and its growth in the generation since my student days. I went to the Jewish quarter one day and entered a bookstore. It was quiet and empty. After a time a man came into the room and very quietly he asked me what I was looking for. I mentioned certain books and browsed among those he pointed out. He said nothing more nor did I. I felt his suspicion and at last I wandered out. I went that night to a teacher's home. There were a few Americans and several Germans present. The curtains were carefully drawn and then the teacher spoke. He defended the nazi program in the main -- its employment, its housing and roads; but he frankly confessed that he was ashamed of the treatment of the Jews or at least some of them. He blamed some severely but he had friends among them and he was ashamed of their treatment.

Then, at midnight I entered Poland. It was dark -- dark not only in the smoke, but in the soul of its people, who whispered in the night as we rode slowly through the murk of the railway yards.

Then finally, three years ago I was in Warsaw. I have seen something of human upheaval in this world: the

--15--

scream and shots of a race riot in Atlanta; the marching of the Ku Klux Klan; the threat of courts and police; the neglect and destruction of human habitation; but nothing in my wildest imagination was equal to what I saw in Warsaw in 1949. I would have said before seeing it that it was impossible for a civilized nation with deep religious convictions and outstanding religious institutions; with literature and art; to treat fellow human beings as Warsaw had been treated. There had been complete, planned and utter destruction. Some streets had been so obliterated that only by using photographs of the past could they tell where the street was. And no one mentioned the total of the dead, the sum of destruction, the story of crippled and insane, the widows and orphans.

The astonishing thing, of course, was the way that in the midst of all these memories of war and destruction, the people were rebuilding the city with an enthusiasm that was simply unbelievable. A city and a nation was literally rising from the dead. Then, one afternoon, I was taken out to the former ghetto. I knew all too little of its story although I had visited ghettos in parts of Europe, particularly in Frankfurt, Germany. Here there was not much to see. There was complete and total waste, and a monument. And the monument brought back again the problem of race and religion, which so long had been my own particular and separate problem. Gradually, from looking and reading, I rebuilt the story of this extraordinary resistance to oppression and wrong in a day of complete frustration, with enemies on every side: a resistance which involved death and destruction for hundreds and hundreds of human beings; a deliberate sacrifice in life for a great ideal in the face of the fact that the sacrifice might be completely in vain.

Enlarged View of Negro Question

The result of these three visits, and particularly of my view of the Warsaw ghetto, was not so much clearer understanding of the Jewish problem in the world as it was a real and more complete understanding of the Negro problem. In the first place, the problem of slavery, emancipation, and caste in the United States was no longer in my mind a separate and unique thing as I had so long conceived it. It was not even solely a matter of color and physical and racial characteristics, which was particularly a hard thing for me to learn, since for a lifetime the color line had been a real and efficient cause of misery. It was not merely a matter of religion. I had seen religions of many kinds -- I had sat in the Shinto temples of Japan, in the Baptist churches of Georgia, in the Catholic cathedral of Cologne and in Westminster Abbey. No, the race problem in which I was interested cut across lines of color and physique and belief and status and was a matter of cultural patterns, perverted teaching and human hate and prejudice, which reached all sorts of people and caused endless evil to all men. So that the ghetto of Warsaw helped me to emerge from a certain social provincialism into a broader conception of what the fight against race segregation, religious discrimination and the oppression by wealth had to become if civilization was going to triumph and broaden in the world.

I remembered now my schoolmate, Stanislaus. He has long been dead and he died refusing to be a stoolpigeon for the nazis in conquered Poland. He gave his life for a great cause. How broad it eventually became! How much he realized that behind the Polish problem lay the Jewish problem and that all were one crime against civilization, I do not know.

I remember now one scene in Poland over a half century ago. It was of worship in a Catholic church. The peasants were crowded together and were grovelling on their knees. They were in utter subjection to a powerful hierarchy. And out of that, today, they have crawled and fought and struggled. They see the light.

Path to the Future

My friend, Gabriel D'Arboussier, an African, recently visited Warsaw and wrote: "At the entrance to the city rises an imposing mausoleum erected to the memory of the 40,000 soldiers of the Red Army who fell for the liberation of Warsaw and who are all buried there. This is no cemetery, cut off from the living, but the last resting place of these glorious dead, near whom the living come to sit and ponder the sacrifice of those to whom they owe life, Had I seen nothing else, that mausoleum alone would have taught me enough to understand the Polish people's will to peace and its attachment to the Soviet Union. But there is more to tell and it cannot be too often told: of Poland's thirty-two million inhabitants six and a half million died. There is also Warsaw, 83 per cent destroyed and its population reduced from over a million to 22,000, and the poignant spectacle of the flattened ghetto."

But where are we going -- whither are we drifting? We are facing war, taxation, hate and cowardice and particularly increasing division of aim and opinion within our own groups. Negroes are dividing by social classes, and selling their souls to those who want war and colonialism, in order to become part of the ruling plutarchy, and encourage their sons to kill "Gooks." Among Jews there is the same dichotomy and inner strife, which forgets the bravery of the Warsaw ghetto and the bones of the thousands of dead who still lie buried in that dust. All this should lead both these groups and others to reassess and reformulate the problems of our day, whose solution belongs to no one group: the stopping of war and preparation for war; increased expenditure for schools better than we have or are likely to have in our present neglect and suppression of education; the curbing of the freedom of industry for the public welfare; and amid all this; the right to think, talk, study, without fear of starvation or jail. This is a present problem of all Americans and becomes the pressing problem of the civilized world.

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