

UNIVERZITA PALACKÉHO V OLOMOUCI
Filozofická fakulta
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

ALENA FALTOVÁ

Obor: anglická filologie

THE ROLE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN IN
THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Diplomová práce

Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Matthew Sweney, M.A.

Olomouc 2011

Prohlášení

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V Olomouci dne 7. 1. 2011

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Annotation

Author of the thesis: Faltová Alena

Faculty and Department: Philosophical Faculty, Department of English and American Studies

Title: **The Role of African American Women in the Civil Rights Movement**

Supervisor: PhDr. Matthew Sweney M.A.

Number of pages:

Number of references: 21

Keywords: boycott
Civil Rights movement
discrimination
freedom
grassroots movement
leader
lynching
organization
prison
segregation
struggle
voter registration
woman

Anotace diplomové práce

Příjmení a jméno: Faltová Alena

Název fakulty a katedry: Filozofická fakulta, katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Název práce: **Role Afro-Amerických žen v Hnutí za občanská práva**

Vedoucí práce: PhDr. Matthew Sweney M.A.

Počet stran:

Počet příloh: 0

Počet titulů použité literatury: 21

Klíčová slova: bojkot

Hnutí za občanská práva

diskriminace

lidové hnutí

svoboda

vůdce

lynčování

organizace

vězení

segregace

boj

voličská registrace

žena

Aknowledgments

I would like to thank PhDr. Matthew Sweney M.A., who supervised my work for his help, moral support and patience he provided me with throughout writing my thesis.

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Introduction

In my thesis I have tried to look at the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America through the eyes of its most outstanding women. I have attempted to explore what factors shaped the characters of the key women leaders who refused to conform, submit, go with the crowd and decided to knock down the walls of racism, illiteracy, poverty and ruling stereotypes. I have tried to find out where they took their courageousness, exceptionality, determination and stubbornness with which they fought to fulfill their visions and dreams.

As the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement is very often considered the December 1, 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat for a white man on the bus in Montgomery, Alabama despite an existing segregational law. Her rebellion and following arrest started the first mass action in the history of African American people in the form of bus boycott. The boycott, that lasted over one year and called for an immense will and huge mutual cohesion among black citizens, resulted in a success after the Supreme Court ordered the Montgomery authorities to integrate the public bus transportation.

Many African American females, however, had struggled for rights of the blacks much earlier than Rosa Parks courageously defied the Jim Crow Law. In most cases these women had found the urge to help and fight in themselves and they did not look for it in their communities whose inhabitants often preferred living in oppression to risking the loss of jobs or their own lives and nobody could have blamed them for it. They were mostly women in black communities who put the freedom, justice, truth and the resolve to help people over everything including their lives.

Each of the women had different dreams and visions but what connected them was their life-long effort to improve the life of black people and recover their dignity. What else bonded them was their strong empathy with the poorest and most oppressed ones.

Some of them fought on the ground of education because they knew that knowledge was one of the keys to the freedom. Illiterate people were easy to manipulate, delude and dominate. Knowledge gives power and of this pure and simple fact the white slaveholders were perfectly aware and made the education of slaves illegal.

Other women fought for freedom through the right to vote in which they saw an important step to become the first-class citizen and from the right to vote it was much closer to political leverage. They could have seen that political power ensured the potentiality to change things and made them more visible.

There were also women who used ink and paper in their struggle for the rights of black people. The right to inform became very powerful weapon in the civil rights struggle because through the press people learnt about atrocities that would have never come to their minds like lynching, the cruel treatment of black people and police and white brutality towards the African Americans in general especially in the south.

Other female activists decided to gain more freedom and respect through the desegregation of buses, lunch counters, waiting rooms, hospitals, schools, theaters and other public facilities.

I am also going to depict the life stories of women who decided to fight for civil rights in a more radical way and who called for revolution in which they saw a solution for black people. These women also usually struggled against poverty and inhuman conditions in prisons.

Although civil rights activists suffered many defeats and lost many battles they had always believed that the last victory would be theirs and that one day they would gain all the privileges of the first-class citizen.

I am going to show the civil rights struggle through the eyes and deeds of the most prominent female leaders. Through their life stories I have decided to outline the progress of the Civil Rights Movement and explore the role of black women in black communities in general. There were a few women who led but there were also thousands of women who had supported their leaders so that they were able to reach their goals.

Thousands of anonymous women decided to fight actively for improvement of their lives and the lives of their children and grandchildren. They lost their jobs, were intimidated, arrested, beaten, had to walk long distances for a long time and without them the civil rights struggle would have been unthinkable and unrealizable and definitely would not have been successful.

I should not forget to mention that while all these extraordinary women fought on the field of racial injustice they had always in mind social questions dealing

with provision of food, shelter and clothes for poor blacks. They fought zealously against poverty, hunger or bad housing conditions.

There is no doubt that men played a significant role in the Civil Rights Movement. They were brave and courageous leaders who fought ardently for the rights of black people. However, while men preferred a hierarchical way of leading, women preferred the grassroots way of leadership working with the most ordinary black people, which was a significant factor of the success of the Movement. Men were also usually the ones who had hit the newspaper front pages and headlines, whose photographs decorated the covers of magazines and who gave interviews while women were those who worked more from the background and who made the most laborious work. The women same as men were also frequent objects of beating, arresting and harassment. The women, however, also had to fight with a frequent chauvinistic behavior of some men who did not see in women equal partners in their civil rights struggle but rather as someone who should provide them with a perfect background on their way to the success. Some women did not realize or did not want to realize this reality but others refused to bear it in silence and fought against it as ardently as against racism. Women also, unlike men, devoted more to education and social issues.

I did not intend in my work to degrade the credit of men's work for the movement—quite the contrary—but I wanted to show that African American women had no less credit in gaining rights for black citizens and that they enriched the movement with female empathy and touch and definitely were crucial for the success of the grassroots movement and its actions and campaigns.

Chapter 1

African American Women and Their Life under Slavery

And a'n't I a woman?

Sojourner Truth, 1851

The African American woman was a synonym for an underrated citizen of the United States, fighting for a long time on two different front lines of race and gender. If a newborn baby to a black family was a girl she could have been more than sure that her life would be full of exploitation and hardship.

The United States had always been a multicultural “melting pot” of many different races and nationalities, attracting people from all over the world to start a new, hopefully, better life there. Their reasons could be religion, poverty, or simply a desire to start from scratch somewhere else and America represented more than a promising place for a new beginning. More or less all of those people came to the States out of their own will.

This was not, however, true about a certain plentiful group of people with a striking color of the skin which predetermined their destiny for a long time to come. These dark-skinned people were not brought to America as human beings but rather as captured mules to be sold to plantation owners as very cheap labor. At the moment of their capturing they stopped being free persons and became chattels, things, property with hardly any chance to be free again. Suddenly they found themselves in a totally strange country where they did not know anybody and did not understand anybody, sometimes not even their co-slaves who came from different parts of Africa. After a grueling journey on slavery ships, they were sold gaining thus a new usually lifelong status of a slave. They became very cheap labor force for Southern plantation owners or domestic servants.

Black women unlike their male counterparts had one additional value for their owners concerning their gender. The fact that they were “endowed” with the capability of bearing children meant they were able to extend their white master’s property almost for free and the white slaveholders were very well aware of that fact. They did not see in black women only working machines but also a

profitable “breeding stock” for extending their mostly agricultural human machinery.¹

Their gender in general made them highly vulnerable group of people and predisposed them to many atrocities and barbarian treatment. Female slaves were not the exclusive owners of their body and thus they very often became victims of sexual exploitation.²

If a white man bought a black woman for “breeding” and she did not have a husband, or was separated from him by the sale and there was no man she would like to tie her life with, she found herself in a very complicated situation. In this case the master very often forced such woman to marry one of his male slaves by force. Those forced marriages usually caused permanent trauma to such affected women.³

There was another possibility and probably the most awful one how to make a female slave pregnant. A good observer of those times could not have overseen the truth that children very often had much paler skin than their mothers and testified thus to a universally known fact that white men became responsible for conception of those children. It is not possible to call them fathers in these cases, though. They usually did not behave as real fathers carrying out all their fatherly duties. The white men of course did not abuse black female slaves only to get them pregnant but in most cases they did it out of simple lust. The rape of female slaves by either white owners or plantation overseers became one of the most painfully emblematic pictures of slavery.⁴

Not to mention that those impacted women very often had to face double suffering because their mistresses who fretted about their husband’s infidelity very often vented their anger and pain on poor abused women.⁵

As for working conditions of female slaves they had two possibilities where to work. They could work alongside their men on the plantations or they were part of domestic staff. It is difficult to say which of these two alternatives was the less grueling.⁶

To work in the field meant back-breaking toil and in summer days very often under hot southern sun. The field workers did not have much opportunity to get more food or better clothes. They were not under incessant surveillance of white owner and his family, though unlike those in domestic service.⁷

Female slaves who worked in the white houses usually were luckier as for food and clothes; on the other hand, however, they were the most susceptible to abuse from white masters and whims of their mistresses.⁸

The conditions of black women in slavery were very far from what would be called normal. They had to endure the same toil as men from morning till evening, they had to face a constant threat of being raped and they were not spared brutal punishments just because of their gender. Moreover a popular practice among white men in punishing female slaves was to let them take off all their clothes and carry out the punishment while they were naked, thus the punishment did not represent for women only pain but also huge humiliation.⁹

In spite of all these inhumanities they tried to lead as ordinary family life as possible. Black women got married even though their marriages did not have a legal status. They started families although they had to live with the omnipresent threat that her children could have been stolen anytime from her and sold unknown where. They took care of their families conscientiously as their position permitted them and they did not forget to devote a part of their day to spiritual life as faith in God was one of few things which helped slaves to endure their dismal conditions.¹⁰

Black women were also the backbones of their communities. They looked after children who had lost their mothers either due to the death or sale. They cared for ill, injured and old slaves and served as midwives. They were also given credit for preserving and transmitting traditions from their African homes especially the songs, dances and tales. Black woman sympathy with weaker and more unfortunate people predestined her to their later deep involvement in social issues concerning her race.¹¹

During slavery it is almost impossible to talk about struggle for civil rights as slaves were rid of all of them. Nevertheless there were a few very exceptional black women who dedicated their lives to helping people of their race in several fields.

There are some records about women who secretly taught slaves to read and write. It was more than courageous deed because to educate slaves was an illegal act. Education gives power and white slaveholders were aware of this universally acknowledged truth. What if a slave had read the famous Declaration of Independence with its second paragraph beginning with words: "...that all men

are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”¹² He could have started asking why a country with such a “sacred” document was preaching some principles proudly and at the same time did not live up to them. What if a slave had written a necessary pass signed by his master or mistress if walking in the street on his own? And there are such cases which very often resulted in escape to the North.¹³

As a result of these facts white Southerners were quite allergic to literate blacks and an educated slave became for his owner valueless almost dangerous piece of his property. Many women black or white thus faced punishment for their teaching.¹⁴ One of them Milla Granson secretly opened a night school for slaves and managed to learn hundreds of them to read and write.¹⁵ Another one Susie King Taylor was born a slave and apart from being a laundress and nurse during the Civil War, she gave basic education to the black soldiers of Union Army of US colored Troops.¹⁶ There were many more of them and it would be unfair to forget to mention many white women and children who taught their slaves read and write too despite breaking the law and sometimes also disapproval of their husbands and fathers.¹⁷

One of the first black women who devoted herself completely to helping the people of her race was Harriet Tubman. Once she became the most sought-after slave in the South. After she had managed to escape from slavery to the North, she started her anti-slavery career as a conductor on the Underground Railroad. She returned to the South nineteen times in order to help to escape to more than seven hundred slaves. She was a very tough almost military woman but the circumstances did not allow her to act otherwise. On her rescue operations she always carried a gun and had never let anyone to come back even if that meant that she had had to resort to threats. She simply could not have afforded that her tactics would have been disclosed.¹⁸

Her real military service began with Civil War. She worked as a nurse and cook in army hospitals but her most important contribution was her mission as a spy and scout for the Union Army which earned her the honorary title “General Tubman”. One of her most sensational deeds was the salvation of 756 slaves whom she had rescued with a black Union troop.¹⁹

The end of her life she devoted to community service. She set up a washhouse for freedwomen in Florida and with her modest “belatedly granted government pension”²⁰ she supported a home for aged freedmen in the state of New York where she spent the rest of her life.²¹

Her personality and tenaciousness with which she struggled for her people best reflects her own strong words:

There was one of two things I had a right to, liberty, or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other; for no man should take me alive; I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted, and when the time came for me to go, the Lord would let them take me.²²

There was another field in which black women got involved. Francis Ellen Harper and Sojourner Truth became very ardent abolitionists and tireless advocates of women rights. After the slaves gained freedom, thanks to victory of the Union Army and Abraham Lincoln, both women started to dedicate themselves to the rights of women mainly those concerning their right to vote.

Sojourner Truth, in spite of being an illiterate woman, became also an admirable speaker. She was born a slave and after obtaining freedom, she fought for the same privilege for all slaves and at the same time also defended zealously the womanhood. For example on Convention of the American Equal Rights Association, in New York City in 1867 she had an excellent speech to present men in which she famously pointed to the undeserved inequality between men and women.²³ “I have done a great deal of work; as much as a man, but did not get so much pay. I used to work in the field and bind grain, keeping up with the cradler; but men doing no more, got twice as much pay... We do as much, we eat as much, we want as much.”²⁴

Francis E. Harper and Sojourner Truth did not concur only in one basic thing concerning the Fifteenth Amendment giving the right to vote only to Black men. While Harper fully supported the Amendment because she wanted to fight for rights by the side of black men, Sojourner Truth believed that it would have been more favorable if they had struggled for giving women the vote together with white feminists and they would not have supported the Amendment. She was afraid of giving more power into the hands of not always responsible black men.

Truth was later disappointed by the attitude of white feminists who had turned out not to be such supporters of being on the same level with former female slaves. After the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, Sojourner Truth joined Harper and together fought for franchise of women with support of black men including Frederick Douglass, who was a well-known supporter of women's rights. The women finally got right to vote in 1920.²⁵

Chapter 2

Ida B. Wells Barnett and Mary Church Terrell Anti-lynching Campaign

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar tress.*
from song by Billie Holliday

In March 1892 Memphis became witness to a brutal murder of three black men. The culprit was a merciless mob of white men carrying out “justice” instead of legal system of US.¹

It did not happen for the first time and it did not happen for the last time. This form of murder became one of many such acts in the long row of lynching and as always nobody had been punished. This time something was different, though. The lynching of these three men initiated in two women a resolution to fight against these disgraceful and violent acts.²

The emerge of lynching was related to the unfounded contention that black freedman was obsessed with white women and were prone to rape them as a punishment for all the wrongs he had to bear during slavery. The picture of a black man raping a white woman represented a menace not only for white people but also for black women.³ To put it in Ida B. Wells words: “With the Southern white man, any misalliance existing between a white woman and a colored man is a sufficient foundation for the charge of rape”.⁴ The media and propagandist campaigns carried articles about lascivious black men and such rapes. Another justificatory reason for lynching represented alleged attacks of blacks against whites and lynching mob simply took revenge for such assaults.⁵

It surfaced later that lynching served in most cases only as a cover-up to racist-oriented murders or to get rid of prosperous black businessmen who were thorns in white merchants’ flesh because they stole black customers from them.⁶

This was exactly the case of three murdered men in Memphis. Thomas Moss and his two friends were the owners of a very successful local store called

People's Grocery which also became a meeting place for black people living around. Their success irritated a white owner of another grocery shop who had been used to have monopoly in his business. He initiated several minor attacks which culminated in an armed assault on black store. Black owners protected their property with the help of customers who had happened to be there that night and shot three white men. They were arrested and threatened with a bloody revenge if the whites would not survive. Despite their recovery all three black men had been lynched.⁷

Thomas Moss was a close friend of two women, Ida B. Wells and Mary Church Terrell who knew him as a very honest person and good father and husband. They were so horrified by the incident that they decided to step in personally and finally do something about these atrocities perpetrated by white people against blacks.⁸

Mary Church Terrell all her life ardently fought for improvement of social status of black people. She received a very good education and started her career as a teacher. She was a leading club woman and suffragist and became the first president of the National Association of Colored Women. She made several trips to Europe where she attended several congresses dealing with women's rights. When she was in venerable age of eighty five, Terrell led a successful campaign against discrimination in restaurants in Washington D.C. where she spent most of her life.⁹

After her friend from childhood had been slaughtered together with his two friends, she started a lynching campaign in Washington. She appealed to white people not to be indifferent to these unjust murders because if they overlooked these crimes, they would continue and gradually escalate. She also refused a rape being the reason for lynching because she had found out that "out of every 100 negroes who are lynched, from 75-85 are not even accused of this crime, and many who are accused of it are innocent."¹⁰

Ida B. Wells Barnett became a prominent journalist who used pen as her personal weapon to fight with the injustices committed against black people. Even her first column she wrote had arisen out of embitterment caused by the lost case against a train company. She filed a suit against The Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad in 1884 after she had been forcibly dragged out of the first class carriage because she had refused to leave it and go to the smoking car. Her humiliation was

enormous but at the same time crucial for the beginning of her journalistic career under a penname “Iola”.¹¹ Her regular columns and articles on “everything from compelling national issues to local community ones, became so popular that they were picked up by other Black newspapers throughout the country.”¹²

The lynching of Thomas Moss and his colleagues gave another direction to Wells’s life. She decided “to find the truth” about lynching “by investigating every lynching she could.”¹³ She examined the backgrounds of more than seven hundred cases of lynching that had occurred between 1882 and 1892. Her results were more than shocking. Only one third of all lynchings had been committed because of alleged rape of white woman. Most of them were based on accusation of “race riots” or on white men’s fear of escalating power of blacks after they had been given franchise and through lynching they showed them that white men never let blacks to exert their rights completely. She became also shocked by finding that not even women and children had been spared from this form of murder.¹⁴

Only then she came with the universally used reason for lynching, rape of white women. She researched thoroughly all cases of white woman’s abuse and came out with a shocking ascertainment to then Southern society that many “rapes” were in fact more than voluntary relationship between black man and white woman. Moreover she found out that white women very often had initiated such intercourses and sometimes black men were even lynched because they had refused to succumb to the lust of some white woman.¹⁵

Before Wells ended her research, another two lynchings had happened and Wells decided to write a fateful editorial. She wrote that “Nobody in this section of the country believed the thread bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction. A conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.”¹⁶

Her words stirred white people’s blood and provoked a harsh merciless reaction which resulted in destroying her newspaper office. It was “looted and burned to the ground; her co-owners, barely beating the mob, were run out of town; and Wells herself was warned that she would be hanged from a lamppost if she were to return”¹⁷ to Memphis. Luckily she was staying in Philadelphia with Frances Ellen Harper when the editorial had been published but it meant that she could not have returned to the South for a long time.¹⁸

Wells was also invited to the Great Britain to give several speeches on lynching in America in 1883 and again in 1894. Both of her tours became a great success for her and black people and resulted in formation of the British Anti-Lynching Society. However, she did not enjoy a big popularity from American press who had condemned her tour to be the mud-slinging of her home country.¹⁹

In addition Wells happened to be in Britain at the same time as a prominent white American feminist and reformer Frances Willard whom she disgraced when truthfully answered the question concerning the attitude of Willard to lynching which had not been supportive at all.²⁰

After Wells had come back to the States, she continued tirelessly in her anti-lynching crusade. She published pamphlets and articles and also gave lectures on the lynching issue. She occupied the function of chairman of the Anti-Lynching Bureau of the National Afro-American Council and got involved in various women's clubs. In 1908 she founded the Negro Fellowship League and served as its President. The organization above all helped to organize various militant action concerning local racial problems. She also became one of founding members of NAACP although she stopped being active in it due to her "militantly race-conscious leadership."²¹

Ida Wells Barnett was also deeply involved in politics and woman suffrage movement. She believed that woman's franchise would help to achieve equalization for black people.²² She was a true leader of her people and ardent fighter for justice with or without pen and without doubt her anti-lynching campaign could be considered the beginning of Civil Rights Movement of African-Americans in the United States.

Chapter 3

The Important Roles of Mary McLeod Bethune and Septima Clark in Improving the Conditions for Education of Black People

We are old when we rise against our times, when we resist all change.

We are young as our dreams and hopes and our enthusiasm.

We are as old as our fears, our frustrations, our doubts.

We need to feel wanted and to find the joy

that grows out of service to others

if the last of life for which the first was made

is to be a time of happiness for those of us who are growing older.

Septima Clark, 1971

The beginning of the twentieth century was marked with a struggle for women's franchise which successfully ended in 1920. There were many organizations and women's clubs founded that dealt with racial issues including National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and National Association of Colored Women. NAACP worked mainly on legal basis trying to challenge Jim Crow laws in front of the Court.¹

Black Women got mostly involved in social reforms, women's rights and tried to improve the conditions for education for both black pupils and their teachers. Mary McLeod Bethune was one of those who involved themselves in the field of education.

Most of Bethune's family experienced slavery including her older brothers and sisters. Mary was born after Emancipation in 1875 and since her early age she helped her parents to pick up cotton on their own piece of land. Her life changed when she started to go to a five-mile remote school led by missionaries. She was eager to gain as much knowledge as possible and after the graduation she started to teach.²

At first she had dreamt of becoming a missionary somewhere in Africa but the circumstances decided otherwise and she realized that her vocation was teaching. She moved to Florida where Florida East Coast Railroad started to build

new railroads. High possibility of getting a job attracted many black men who took their families and moved there. Bethune sensed in it her opportunity. She hired a shabby cottage and decided to put up a school there with nothing but a dollar and half in her pocket.³

First Bethune had functioned as a fund raiser for her future school but in 1904 she finally contrived to open it. The beginning was very tough and conditions for teaching were so harsh that only a very strong and determined woman could have squared the circle which was exactly the Bethune's case.⁴

We burned logs and used the charred splinters as pencils, and mashed elderberries for ink. I begged strangers for a broom, a lamp, a bit of cretonne to put around the packing case which served as my desk. I haunted the city dump and the trash piles behind hotels, retrieving discarded linen and kitchenware, cracked dishes, broken chairs, pieces of old lumber. Everything was scoured and mended. This was part of the training to salvage, to reconstruct, to make bricks without straw. As parents began gradually to leave their children overnight, I had to provide sleeping accommodations. I took corn sacks for mattresses. Then I picked Spanish moss from trees, dried and cured it, and used it as a substitute for mattress hair.⁵

Nonetheless the school started to expand quickly and later Bethune decided to buy a piece of land and found a college there. Again she did not have money to buy it but she achieved to obtain the land with the repayment for two years.⁶

Bethune realized very soon "that one her most important jobs was to be a good beggar"⁷ and she begged at every possible place and wrote many "begging" letters during her life. She managed to obtain considerable funds from several wealthy businessmen with generous hearts like Mr. Gamble from Procter & Gamble and her college slowly expanded.⁸

Bethune's mission went event further. After one of her students needed a surgery, Bethune took her to a local white hospital. She had to plead a white doctor to take care of her and when later paid her student a visit, she found out that she had been staying in a segregated corner behind the kitchen. This incident infuriated her to such a degree that she decided to build a hospital next to her

college. Bethune operated the hospital for twenty years before the city took it over.⁹

In 1922 Bethune College united with Cookman College and continued under the name Bethune-Cookman College. Bethune must have been very proud and felt a huge satisfaction when she walked in the campus and saw “fourteen modern buildings, a beautiful campus..., an enrollment in regular and summer basis of 600 students, a faculty and staff of thirty-two”¹⁰ remembering her tough starts in a run-down house.¹¹

In 1934 Mary McLeod Bethune was appointed director of the division of Negro affairs of the National Youth Administration by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to supervise the teaching of six hundred black children. She was a founder of National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs and of National Council of Negro Women of which she became also a president. She held many important functions during her life and was awarded many honors for her great and still living merits.¹²

Mary McLeod Bethune maybe was not a true leader of people of her race, she, however, played a very important role in education of many black people. She always primarily turned her thoughts to children whom she wanted to give the best of herself which was the education which opens many doors and definitely improve the quality of every citizen’s life.

Septima Clark was another important activist in the sphere of education. She was unlike Bethune more radical in her acting.

“Separate but equal” ruling in 1896 case *Plessy v. Ferguson* meant a legal segregation of black people in the South. This should have meant that black people would have separated public facilities but the conditions would be equal with white people. The reality was, however, completely different. This could have been best seen at segregated schools.¹³

Here I was, a high-school graduate, eighteen years old, principal in a two-teacher school with 132 pupils ranging from beginners to eighth graders, with no teaching experience, a schoolhouse constructed of boards running up and down, with no slats in the cracks, and a fireplace at one end of the room that cooked the pupils immediately in front of it but allowed those in the rear to shiver and freeze on their uncomfortable, hard, back-breaking benches.¹⁴

This was the beginning of the career of a lifelong teacher Septima Poinsette Clark who dedicated most her life to decreasing the number of illiterate black people in America. She fought for equalization of salaries for black teachers as well. While Clark was teaching on St. John's Island in South Carolina in 1916, she earned only 35 dollars a month while white teachers from nearby white school received the salary of 85 dollars and in addition they had only three pupils in the class.¹⁵

The encounter of Clark with a black leader T. E. Miller led to employment of black teachers in black public schools in Charleston. Till that time black teachers could have taught only in private schools. The Charleston white inhabitants claimed that most black people did not want black teachers to teach their children.¹⁶

Miller decided to start a campaign to support the change of the law and Clark offered him help. They started up a petition in which they asked people if they minded black teachers to be employed. Clark helped to collect signatures by personally visiting and talking to ordinary black people of Charleston. Thanks to 10,000 signatures the law had been changed and the following year, 1920, witnessed first black teachers to be employed in public schools and a year later there were also black principals.¹⁷ It was also around this time she joined NAACP and thus started her career in the Civil Rights Movement. In 1954 Clark became vice president of Charleston branch and her activity in the famous organization eventually cost her teaching job in 1956 as well as state retirement benefits. She had not been granted her pension until 1976 due to the South Carolina law that had made illegal for public teachers to be members of NAACP. Very soon after her dismissal Clark who was 58 at that time was offered the position of the director of education in Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee.¹⁸

Highlander Folk School (HFS) was a radical interracial organization. It was founded in 1932 in Tennessee but only since 1952 its chief concern became race relations dealing with education and politics. Clark had attended several HFS workshops in 1954 bringing with her other future key educators of this organization including her cousin Bernice Robinson. These two women created significant adult literacy program for their night citizenship schools attended by illiterate black people. The goal of this program was not only to teach these

people to read and write but mainly provide them with many practical skills important for everyday life like filling in various forms, basic counting, sewing, crocheting and many others. Clark and Robinson also supported their students in voter registration and trained them how to make their registration successful.¹⁹

Clark's task was recruiting teachers and students for the schools that started to spread across the South. She recruited teachers from ordinary people who were part of their communities including farmers or dressmakers so that they were fully aware of what their students most needed. Bernice Robinson's original job was for example a beautician. Clark felt that illiterate people would have more trust and "feel more comfortable and happy with"²⁰ ordinary community people than with teachers with high or college education.²¹

There was, however, another important goal of the HFS. They wanted to arouse in the Citizenship School students self-confidence to become leaders in their own communities because they would know best the problems these people were dealing with. Rosa Parks, a renowned woman who ignited the Montgomery bus boycott, attended one of such Clark's workshops in 1955 before her famous breaking of the bus segregation law and there were others who later turned in important leaders or activists in various fields of Civil Rights Movement.²²

The activity of the HFS and its success was a thorn in racist white people's side and the organization had to fight for their existence in legal field. As a result Highlander Folk School was legally closed down in 1960 and Clark arrested. After her release she was, however, invited to Atlanta by Martin Luther King to start a similar program under the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). King's intention was to use the Citizenship Education Program formulated by Clark as the basis for SCLC's project to start massive voter registration drive in the South. Bernice Robinson also joined the SCLC as its consultant.²³

At the beginning of the sixties black people who wanted to register to vote still had to pass a humiliating literacy test and the SCLC needed some effective educational program to get as many people educated as possible. In 1961 King and Clark's union panned out. Under the SCLC sponsoring, Clark pointed out that "since the program had been transferred to the SCLC, twenty six thousand black in twelve Southern states had registered to vote."²⁴ Septima Clark fully emerged

herself in voter registration program helping thus many blacks to become first-class citizens thanks to their right to vote.²⁵

Septima Clark was a close friend with Martin Luther King. Nevertheless, she was one of the few who dared to criticize almost full male monopoly on functions in various organizations. She did not approve of Rosa Parks and her abilities being overlooked by men and Ella Baker's eternal struggle with ministers in the SCLC who did not treat her on equal basis. She was aware of the importance of women in Civil Rights Movement and felt that women should have been given more opportunities to prove their aptitudes.²⁶

The thing that I think stands out a whole lot was the fact that women could never be accorded their rightful place even in the southern Christian Leadership Conference.²⁷ I can remember Reverend Abernathy asking many times, why was Septima Clark on the Executive Board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference? And Dr. King would always say, "She was the one who proposed this citizenship education which is bringing to us not only money but a lot of people who will register and vote." And he asked that many times. It was hard for him to see a woman on that executive body.²⁸

They just didn't feel as if a woman, you know, had any sense. ... [Ella Baker] had a brilliant mind in the beginning of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. But the men never would feel, you know, she had a rightful place there. I think that up to the time that Dr. King was nearing the end that he really felt that black women had a place in the movement and in the whole world. The men didn't, though! The men who worked with him didn't have that kind of idea.²⁹

Septima Clark always spoke highly of Citizenship Education Program which enabled thousands of black people of all ages, classes and genders to register to vote and thus become first-class citizens and helped to nurture new leaders from grassroots levels. She endowed illiterate people with confidence to fight for their rights and not only passively stood by. She unflaggingly worked in humanity's service and always cherished even the most ordinary people.

Chapter 4

Jo Ann Robinson and Rosa Parks The Women of Montgomery Bus Boycott

*There is the hidden secret that
when the curtains of darkness fall,
and the sun transports its sunlight into darkness,
color is insignificant.
Proof of it is in the variegated colors of human beings
–white, black red, yellow, brown –
whose physical structures are normally identical.*

Jo Ann Robinson, 1987

Is it possible to have an old woman with heavy bags arrested because she refuses to give her seat up for a man or young person? The answer was once positive. This situation might have happened and it did so very often on the segregated buses in the south of the United States not a very long time ago. People of any age, class, education, or gender got arrested, were beaten, kicked off the buses, or humiliated in many other different ways. Their only misdemeanor was the color of their skin. In case a person was born black, they had been compelled to follow very strict and racially discriminatory laws. They could have never occupied the first ten seats of the buses. As a result a very ridiculous scene could have often been seen in those vehicles when black people were standing over empty seats and no matter how old, tired, or ill they could have been, they were not allowed to sit down. Nonetheless, even if they were lucky and got a seat in the back of the bus, they could not be sure that they would enjoy it till the end of their journey. If the bus was overcrowded and the number of white passengers exceeded the seats reserved for them, a Jim Crow law, personified in a white bus driver, forced the black people to yield their seats to those white people. However, because a white person was not supposed to sit next to a black fellow citizen, the black people had always to abandon the whole row. Thus humiliated people usually left the bus immediately and waited for the next one or continued their route walking.¹

This did not represent the only problem for black people on the segregated buses, though. Black people had to pay at the front door but had to get on the bus through the rear door in order not to pass along the white passengers. Yet the humiliation still did not often end there. If a black person was not fast enough according to a driver's view, he would have left without them, and sometimes he even did it out of a sheer mischievousness or hatred for blacks. White drivers very often treated black riders in a very disrespectful manner being even coarse and harsh against them including calling them the most offensive names and old people and children were not spared. A very common subject of everyday conversation among black people became their bad experiences on those buses.²

Of course not all white bus drivers were racist, heartless and ruthless people. Most of them managed to be respectful to black people and at the same time were respecting Jim Crow laws. Riding the buses was everyday part of their life, though and it was more than probable that sooner or later everybody came across a racist driver and such experience was not something that would be easily forgotten.³

There are cases when women and children were arrested for occupying the first ten seats reserved for white citizens. Mrs. Geneva Johnson was arrested and later fined because she did not have accurate amount of money and was allegedly impertinent to the driver after he reproached her for her "offence". There is also a case of a woman who refused to vacate her seat and defended herself verbally too, which infuriated the driver to such a degree that he wanted to pay another fare. After the woman logically refused to submit, he beat her up right in the street, had her arrested and eventually she had to pay the fine fifty-two dollars.³ Another woman got on the bus with baby twins and she dared to put her children on the front seats because she needed to take the money from her purse. This absolutely innocent triviality made the driver so outraged that he "threw those kids in the aisle so that the mother and the children both got off the bus".⁴

The conditions were even worse on rainy or winter days.

On rainy days black riders were "passed by" by some of the "yellow monsters", as the buses had come to be called. "Wet, bulksome, and smelly," as the drivers described blacks, whites did not want them standing over them, or "passing by them" on their way to the back. Thus, drivers often drove past them without

stopping on rainy days, leaving them standing there to wait for the next bus, or the next, or the next. Those waiting could either continue to wait in the rain or cold for the next bus, or walk to work or home.⁵

These degrading situations had never been forgotten by those affected people and kept them enrooted inside their hearts, souls and minds until they could have taken no more. No wonder that these humiliating experiences left psychological wounds on the souls of those impacted people. The pride of a black man who had not been able to defend not only himself but also his mother, sister, girlfriend, wife or daughter was very often irrecoverably hurt. Many of them preferred walking to riding the bus. Any attempt to defend either himself or another person could have resulted in severe beating, being kicked off the bus or even arrest, which always represented a humiliating experience for in this way affected man. However, black women did not call them cowards because they knew that the price for their courage would be too high.⁶

The Women's Political Council, an organization founded by women in Montgomery, tried with the help of some scholars' researches to study effects of those experiences on people's everyday life and they found out very interesting fact that domestic violence or any other violent behavior among men is very often a result of their helplessness to behave as a man in confrontation with segregational laws.⁷

Every day black people had to deal with white drivers because they formed around 75 per cent of the bus patronage.⁸ Every day they had to face the fact that they are considered to be second-class citizens. Every day there was a chance that they would be humiliated by some racist driver. It was a question of time when the blacks defied those demeaning segregated rules, when they would say that was enough; we would not tolerate it any more.

The time when blacks were silently enduring the Jim Crow's terror and distress on the buses ended with the deed of an unobtrusive ordinary middle aged black woman named Rosa Parks in the capital of Alabama, Montgomery. It was the deed that made history and children know her name as well as the one of Martin Luther King or John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

Rosa Parks was one of those few people who simply refused to give up the seat in favor of a white person and got arrested for her brave rebellion against humiliating segregational laws. But this time something had been different. It

seemed that Rosa Parks became the legendary straw that broke the camel's back; in this case the "camel's back" did not only represent the segregation on the Montgomery buses but also the silence and passivity of black masses.⁹

According to Mary Fair Burks, Rosa Lee McCauley was not a born rebel but rather a gentle person who always respected laws and social rules. She led an exemplary life. She married Raymond Parks and very soon started to devote most of her free time to community service and was an active member of her church. Most importantly, however, she began to work for organizations dealing with gaining rights for black people especially for the NAACP.¹⁰

It must have been right there in those organizations where she found the strength and self-confidence to fight for her right to be the first-class citizen of Montgomery even at the cost of breaking a law.

Her great reputation and probity made her an excellent test case for something that had no parallel in African American history. Black Montgomery citizens of different classes, religion, gender, age united and jointly fought for better conditions and treatment on segregated buses. They did not dare to call for integration yet, though.¹¹

It was a cold day on December 1, 1955 and Rosa Parks was on her way back home from work as a tailor's assistant in the Montgomery Fair Department store, she did some shopping and got on the bus where she sat down in the "for colored" section. However, after few stops the bus started becoming full and there was no vacant place for a white man who had just boarded the vehicle. As was policy on segregated buses, the bus driver wanted all the passengers in Rosa Park's row to stand up and relinquish their seats. They all obeyed but Rosa Parks. The white man asked her if she was about to leave and she responded that she was not and was arrested.¹²

The reason of her defiance is very often explained by historians and her colleagues that she was too tired of her everyday toil at work but Rosa Parks talked about different tiredness she had been suffering.¹³

People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving

in.¹⁴

The black people of Montgomery were obviously tired of the same reason too. When the idea of bus boycott was proposed to them, they did not hesitate and fully supported the boycott even if that meant the loss of their comfort and sometimes also the loss of the job.

However, it is important to realize that the idea of the mass boycott did not arise as a bolt from the blue. There was three years of planning and discussions concerning a possibility of the boycott preceding Rosa Park's arrest.¹⁵

The key role played the Women's Political Council (WPC), an organization founded in 1946 by Mary Fair Burks which was led during the bus boycott period by Jo Ann Robinson who replaced Burks in 1949.¹⁶

Mary Fair Burks was highly educated woman who suffered immensely from inhuman segregation laws and racism which were omnipresent in her hometown Alabama. She believed that the day when blacks got their rights must come one day. Her personal contribution to the struggle for those rights was the foundation of female organization composed mainly of college women.¹⁷ The mission of the WPC was to encourage "Negroes to live about mediocrity, to elevate their thinking, to fight juvenile and adult delinquency, to register and vote, and in general to improve their status as a group." They represented "'woman power,' organized to cope with any injustice, no matter what, against the darker sect."¹⁸

At the very beginning the reason for the boycott was not desegregation of the buses. Nobody dared just to mention it aloud. At first they called only for some arrangements concerning improvement of existing conditions on those buses but within the bounds of Jim Crow laws. They asked for four basic changes:

1. They wanted better courteous treatment without being called offensive and degrading names.
2. They asked for more bus stops in black neighborhoods.
3. They wanted to change the rule according to which the blacks were supposed to pay in the front and then get on in the rear of the bus. They considered this a dangerous practice because it happened quite often that the bus driver left before those passengers made it to the back and sometimes remained even closed in the door.

4. They demanded “First come, first serve” rule in which the whites would occupy the seats from the front of the bus while blacks from the back without those reserved first ten seats for white riders.¹⁹

The members of the WPC knew very well that to announce publicly that they wanted a full integration would mean a bloody revenge from the southern racist but they were certain that the integration was sooner or later inevitable, though.

Jo Ann Robinson was a prominent bus boycott organizer and a part of a negotiating team with the City Commission in Montgomery. Although the person most quoted in historic books concerning the Montgomery Bus Boycott was Martin Luther King, who started his outstanding career as the legendary leader of masses and charismatic speaker right in Montgomery in 1956, Jo Ann Robinson and other women from the WPC became hidden engine in organizing the famous boycott.²⁰

Jo Ann Robinson was born in Georgia in 1912 and was the twelfth and last child in her family. She was the only one who went to college and gained B.S. degree at Georgia State College and M.A. degree in English at Atlanta University. She was a very accomplished and excellent teacher who loved her profession. In 1949 Robinson accepted an offer to teach at English department of Alabama State College and this offer changed her life.²¹

There was another event that influenced her subsequent life. This one was definitely not a positive one. It was her first personal encounter with a Jim Crow law on Montgomery buses.

Robinson was teaching her first year at Alabama State College and was looking forward to Christmas holiday with her family and friends in Ohio. She was going through a very happy stage of her life, teaching at a distinguished college, making a new circle of friends and living a life of her own. She could not have waited to spend peaceful holiday with her relatives and friends but she made a decision that eventually gave her life a new direction. She had to use the bus to get to her friend’s house with whom she was supposed to continue to the airport. Because Jo Ann came from Georgia where the buses were integrated, and she used her car since she had moved to Montgomery, she did not realize that there are Jim Crow laws to follow. Robinson unthinkingly sat down in the fifth row seat, a fact that was punishable at that time, and the driver did not leave it without notice. As she told in her autobiography she was so excited about coming holiday

and fully emerged in her thoughts that she at first did not even take notice of someone yelling at her. When she realized that it was her who was the driver screaming at, she felt so embarrassed that she just ran off from the bus in tears unable to say anything let alone defend herself.²²

Robinson had not been able to share her humiliation with somebody else for many years but the experience that hurt her dignity and degraded her as a human being was always present at the back of her mind and became the catalyst for her determination to do something about the bus segregation.²³

The Women's Political Council with Jo Ann Robinson as her President had branches in various corners of the city and they were able to inform blacks from all over the town in a relatively short time. When Rosa Parks was arrested for her brave act, Jo Ann Robinson sensed an opportunity to finally put their plans into action. She called the men who supported the WPC and told them about Rosa Parks' arrest and trial which was about to take place on Monday, December 5. They all gave her consent to set their plans in motion, which they did.²⁴

Of course Rosa Parks was not the first woman who defied the system and this was not the first time the WPC planned a boycott. On March 2, 1955 a fifteen-year-old girl Claudette Colvin refused to stand up in order that a white person could have sat as the other black people did including a pregnant black woman. The infuriated driver called police and demanded her arrest. Claudette, who in Jo Ann Robinson's words was "an A-student, quiet, well-mannered, neat, clean, intelligent, pretty and deeply religious,"²⁵ refused to abandon her place even after she had been asked to by two police officers. They literally had to haul her out of the bus while she was kicking and screaming. She was handcuffed and taken to jail.²⁶

The information about her arrest spread very fast across the town. People got angry and they started to talk about boycott. The WPC had everything prepared for it and all they needed was to determine the time and place. However, there were still doubts if Claudette was a right person concerning her young age. The decision was eventually made that the boycott would be postponed. Nevertheless, the trial with Claudette was closely observed. When she was found guilty, everybody was stunned by the unjust verdict and Claudette herself left the court in tears. According to Jo Ann Robinson the girl was not the same person as she used

to be before the incident. Later was found out that Claudette was pregnant, which would have probably destroyed the potential success if the boycott had started.²⁷

A similar case happened also in October to Mary Louis Smith but this time nobody learnt about it until she was convicted.²⁸

An ideal test case came only with Rosa Parks. There was nothing in her history which could have damaged the possible victory of the boycotters. This time everybody was ready. The perfect time had come up and the Women's Political Council was perfectly prepared. The boycott could have finally begun.

The date of the boycott was set on Monday, December 5, which was the day of Rosa Parks' trial. On Friday night Jo Ann Robinson wrote a notice announcing a bus boycott and made thousands of copies to distribute them among people.²⁹

The notice contained the following words:

Another Negro Woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down. It is the second time since the Claudette Colvin case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This had to be stopped. Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother. This woman's case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses Monday in protest of the arrest and trial. Don't ride the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday. You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus. You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children, and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off of all buses Monday.³⁰

The following morning Robinson and two of her students managed to distribute thousands of leaflets thanks to perfectly organized network of members and supporters of the WPC. Leaflets were also distributed to every place where black people were gathering including beauty parlors, barber shops or beerhouses. By the end of the day practically every black citizen was familiarized with the plans of boycott.³¹

The white inhabitants including the City Commissioners had no inkling of what was going on in their town. Black people were very so confidential about the following boycott that without one individual failure, everything could have been different. However, Jo Ann talked about it as a necessary failure because it eventually turned out that it was the best thing to have everything publicized.³²

A certain black woman who worked as a domestic servant was so loyal to her employer that she felt it was her duty to confide to her boss the intentions of black people and showed her one of the leaflets. The white woman immediately called relevant authority and before the boycott had begun, the bus company, City Commission and especially thanks to the media coverage everybody in town knew with what black people wanted to surprise them on following Monday. The positive side of all this was that not only whites found out about the plans but also if by chance some black person did not get to the information about the boycott, the organizers could have been sure then, they had learnt about it.³³

The WPC with its President Jo Ann Robinson was quite a frequent visitor to the meetings of the City Commission of Montgomery. They incessantly discussed the conditions on Montgomery buses and other problems of minority groups long before the bus boycott. The Mayor of that time W. A. Gayle had a good relationship with Robinson and other WPC members and whenever there was a meeting dealing with issues dealing with minority groups in town, he had never forgotten to invite also Robinson and her colleagues to the City Hall and they always joined in.³⁴

The “friendship” with the Mayor and other members of the City Commission ended when the boycott had begun and they had been irreconcilable rivals since then.

The truth also was that composition of the City Commission underwent few important changes and all of them were for the worse. Especially painful for the WPC was the replacement of the Commissioner Dave Birmingham who had had the supervision over police force and had always been willing to discuss and handle the problems of black citizens.³⁵ Jo Ann Robinson called him “a gentleman, an honest man, and a Christian.”³⁶

However, at the beginning of 1955 Mr. Birmingham unfortunately lost his position in election as police commissioner to Clyde Sellers. He managed to win the trust of middle-class people who started to be panic-stricken with blacks’

gradual gaining of the rights particularly after *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka*. This historical Supreme Court's decision from 1954 proclaimed the segregation at public school unconstitutional.³⁷

Clyde Sellers pushed for preservation of existing segregation at all costs and for someone who had under his control the whole police department in Montgomery, it did not represent any problem. This meant that black people could have not expected from representatives of the law any support or help. What was even worse sometimes they were the police officers themselves who attacked the boycotters or their property.³⁸

Jo Ann Robinson had two such first-hand experiences during the boycott. First when two police officers threw a big stone into her window. They were seen by Jo Ann's friends who were just visiting her at that time, though. A neighbor managed to write down the number of their squad car and license plate number, too. Robinson's friends took the stone together with the numbers and went to police station. They were, however, in humiliating way send back away if they wished to save their lives.³⁹

The second time two men in police uniform scattered acid all over her Chrysler car, which left it with big holes all over. Although the car was irrecoverable damaged, Jo Ann was proud of a new "coat" of her car that and had been driving it until she moved from Montgomery.⁴⁰

Nevertheless there is of course a possibility that the policemen could have been in fact only civil people in disguise, but even if this had been true, the real police would have never defended similarly injured persons in a proper way and thus expressed their absolute approve and support of such despicable acts, which was maybe even worse.⁴¹

Apart from the WPC members and Rosa Parks there was another group of people which played a very important role in Montgomery boycott. They were representatives of local clergymen. While the WPC represented female force of bus boycott, ministers added to the boycott its testosterone power. Women were the carriers of the main idea, they were those who organized things and last but not least Rosa Parks had been definitely a catalyst for the whole thing. Although Jo Ann Robinson attended all the negotiations with the City Committee, they were especially men who conquered the headlines and appeared in the newspaper and magazines photos covering the boycott issue.⁴²

Rosa Parks was without doubts the symbol of the beginning of the boycott but there was another person who became the symbol of the boycott as a whole and eventually became the symbol of the whole Civil Rights Movement. He was no one smaller than Martin Luther King.

Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was a beginning pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery and his stunning career as a leader started on December 5, 1955, on the first day of the bus boycott.⁴³

Jo Ann Robinson was aware that ministers should have taken an active part because the organizers, boycotters alias common people and ministers would need one another. People were strongly decided to support boycott and if the ministers were not in, they could have lost respect of their sheep or even lost them completely. On the other hand it was more than clear that the boycott would be by no means a piece of cake and people would need some spiritual support which would help them overcome the hardest moment of their struggle. It was a natural alliance which eventually proved to be a lucky one.⁴⁴

There was quite a different view of the ministers' leadership of the boycott among women civil rights activists. While Jo Ann Robinson and Rosa Parks talked always admiringly and approvingly about King and other clergymen and credited them with the success of the boycott, Ella Baker was not that enthusiastic and unconditional admirer at all.

Jo Ann Robinson sang the praises of the black clergymen in her memoirs and also gave them credit for the successful outcome of the boycott.

The black ministers and their churches made the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 – 1956 the success that it was. Had it not been for the ministers and the support they received from their wonderful congregations, the outcome of the boycott might have been different. The ministers gave themselves, their time, their contributions, their minds, their prayers, and their leadership...They gave us confidence, faith in ourselves, faith in them and their leadership, that helped the congregations to support the movement every foot of the way.⁴⁵

She also spoke highly about their capacity for calming down the anger of outraged people and curbed thus any potential violent urge of those people. The ministers managed “to give Christian guidance to a rebellious people, and to keep

the masses under control. Had the ministers not assumed leadership, disorganized, irresponsible persons might have resorted to shameful violence or individual retaliation upon certain bus drivers.”⁴⁶

Ella Baker was totally different from her female colleague. She was in her fifties and had quite a long career of activism behind her and was well-known for her rebellious and stubborn character. She was one of few people who dared to criticize Martin Luther King, Jr. since the beginning. She, however, did not criticize that much King as a person but rather what he had represented. What she especially did not like was the way he was put on pedestal as a prominent leader of Civil Rights Movement. Baker did not like the hierarchic type of leading masses of people and was renowned promoter of grassroots leadership. She wanted people to lead themselves without anybody to make decisions for them.⁴⁷

The truth also was that initially the ministers wanted to support the boycott anonymously without white people learning about their participation. Their gutless behavior made angry E. D. Nixon. E. D. Nixon was a very important person for black people in Montgomery. He had been working for the NAACP in high positions for a many years and was also a president of a local organization dealing with black rights called the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and Rosa Parks was his loyal secretary. No doubt that he was one of the first people learning about her arrest and arranged her release. He was also the man Jo Ann Robinson discussed the planning and organization of the boycott with and was one of the crucial men of the boycott who arranged the participation of the ministers.⁴⁸

E. D. Nixon menaced the ministers with telling about their intentions either to white authorities or “poor washerwomen”. Ministers eventually chose a safer way.⁴⁹

Robinson, Parks and other women took risks of losing their job or any other hurt and had never speculated on an eventual recourse. Nevertheless, it turned out afterward that it would have been impossible for ministers to lead the boycott without their names to be publicized. Later, however, they devoted themselves fully to the direction of the boycott.⁵⁰

On Friday, December 2, around hundreds of leaders of the boycott met to discuss the organization of the one-day boycott. They had to arrange alternate transportation for the boycotting people so that they got to work without

problems. They worked up very precise plans how to organize everything. They also planned a mass meeting on Monday evening to discuss the outcome of boycott and decide whether they should continue in their struggle or just take it as a lesson they gave the white people. Only the head of the boycott had still not been elected.⁵¹

A thrilling Monday was here and everybody, black or white, was tense and anxious how this day would end. It was quite a cold day with a cloudy sky which unceasingly threatened with rain. Jo Ann Robinson and other leaders drove in the streets observing how seriously had the people taken the boycott and potentially gave the ride to the walking people.⁵²

The picture that was offered to them showed happily walking black people and sometimes even white ones who decided to back up their black co-citizens and predominantly empty buses usually escorted by two policemen on motorbikes. These policemen were there to protect the black passengers because among white people rumor had it that black leaders would hurt those who did not want to support the boycott, which was of course a total nonsense. This, however, turned out to be a positive thing because these policemen terrified potential riders who thought they had been there to prevent them to ride those buses.⁵³

Nevertheless majority of Montgomery black population stayed off the buses more than voluntarily. They were picked up along the roads or took taxis. The black taxi drivers charged only ten cents on this day, which was a usual fare on the buses. However, most of people walked and they were proud to walk.⁵⁴ They walked for their rights. They walked for their desire to become first-class citizens; they walked because they were tired of riding the segregated buses, tired of racist drivers and their disrespectful treatment. Walking represented the freedom to express their dissatisfaction with the way the things were going in Montgomery.

In the afternoon it was more than clear that the boycott had been successful and that black people of Montgomery were ready to take their fate in their own hands and fought for more dignified life.⁵⁵

The leaders were aware of that fact and they knew that it was necessary to make the best of it if they wanted to achieve a real success, which meant better conditions on the buses. It was now or never and it was up to the leaders not to lose this unique chance. The boycott had to continue.

A spacious Holt Street Baptist Church became witness to the important meeting that took place after the Monday boycott. The attendance was higher than anyone could have expected, the sources talk about some six thousand people. Hundreds of people had to stay outside the church but they did not miss the word thanks to installed loudspeakers.⁵⁶

The speakers took turns on the platform. All the speakers were men; no woman had been offered to give a speech that night. Not even Rosa Parks, who just stood up when her story had been retold there by one of the male speakers. “I had asked did they want me to say anything. They said, ‘You have had enough and you have said enough and you don’t have to speak.’ So I didn’t speak.”⁵⁷ Rosa Parks did not feel any bitterness; nevertheless it looks like she served only as someone to show at when present men were talking about her case. Literally they robbed her of her public voice. Not many women had become well-known speakers in history and the reason was definitely not their incapacity to be a good speaker. If they wanted to say something publicly, they had to be sort of radical person who did not fill a common image of black woman of her time. Suffice it to remember Sojourner Truth whose most of her thirteen children had been sold during slavery or Ella Baker.⁵⁸

Nevertheless the mass meeting was a huge success. People as single voice responded a big “no” to the fundamental question of the night whether they wanted to end the boycott. And thus one-day boycott changed into indefinitely long one.⁵⁹

The meeting also became a starting point for M. L. King’s career as an eloquent and brilliant speaker who was able to carry the masses of the hearers to his side. In addition he became the head of the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), a newly formed organization which was founded to coordinate people, funds, cars and other matters concerning the boycott. The organization’s main concern was to provide everyday transportation for hundreds of people who needed to get to the work. They were especially female domestic workers who had to travel to white quarters located usually on the other side of their homes.⁶⁰

The transportation system arranged by the MIA was carefully developed. At the beginning everybody who owned a car, by the spirit of the slogan “share-a-drive”, drove in the streets and gave lifts to walking people and all that without

being refunded for expended fuel. However, there were still many people who had to walk great distances to get to the place of their work. After some time the MIA started to receive donations from all over the country, which enabled them to hire more cars with drivers and buy stage wagons so that at the end the black people had better transportation conditions than they had before the boycott. Nonetheless there were such people who refused to accept any ride and voluntarily walked through the whole boycott with their heads high.⁶¹

The Women's Political Council and MIA tried to lead a dialogue with City Commissioners during the boycott but the longer the boycott lasted the more obvious it had been that the representatives of the City Commission would neither buckle under the demands of black people nor try to find any compromise between them. They were afraid that if they compromised just a little bit with black people, it would be only the beginning of their claims and little by little they would ask for more. It goes without saying that they were not wrong about their surmise. Slowly the situation started to look like undeclared war full of intimidation, threatening calls, arresting and police harassment. White commissioners insisted stubbornly on preserving everything as it was and black leaders stopped calling for improvement of conditions but demanded complete integration on the buses.⁶²

The both parties stopped mutual talks face to face and started to show their strength and attitudes through their actions and media. It was a national bombshell when Clyde Sellers himself joined the notorious White Citizens Council (WCC).⁶³

The WCC was a very racist organization which was formed to fight for preservation of segregation. At first it was mostly joined by primitive men who thus compensated their own personal problems and failures, down-and-outers, or outcasts and led by maybe highly intelligent but unscrupulous men.⁶⁴

However, with the raise of black people's demands to climb higher on social ladder and become first-class citizens, the WCC started to be joined by more prominent people of the city. Clyde Sellers was almost immediately followed by other City commissioners and other prominent representatives of Montgomery.⁶⁵

If the intention of Sellers and others was to frighten black people and show them that if they did not come back on buses, they would have to do with the power of a really strong and large organization, the result was totally the opposite. Black people got very angry because Clyde Sellers as a chief of Montgomery

police force was supposed to protect all people without prejudice against class, gender, or race and with his act he showed them that he abused his authority of his vocation.⁶⁶

Black people started to be very tired of everyday walking and because they still did not see bright light at the end of their struggle, some of them started to consider returning to the buses but Seller's ostentatious official "entrance" among racists gave them a new strength to continue walking. Even Jo Ann Robinson left her car in the garage and started to walk alongside her people. This was not the only act that was supposed to intimidate or undermine black leaders' authority among black people which finally resulted in reverse effect, though.⁶⁷

On one January evening, Jo Ann Robinson received a surprising phone call. It was Martin Luther King himself. He got a notice from the press that three unidentified ministers allegedly agreed with the City Commission on the end of the boycott and returning to the buses under the same conditions they were before the boycott. Robinson was as surprised as Dr. King. Very soon it turned out that it was all just a sordid work of City Commissioners who under some made-up pretext invited three black ministers from different churches who had absolutely nothing to do with the leading of the boycott to a meeting where they discussed the boycott.⁶⁸

Those ministers of course did not betray their people but the City Commissioners called the press and issued a statement about the agreement. The people of the press, however, immediately called Dr. King to verify the information they had just got. Fortunately the boycott leaders had managed to prevent the panic the news would have probably aroused in ordinary people. The City Fathers lost much sympathy due to their disgraceful behavior and black people gained a new impulse for their persistency.⁶⁹

All the pressure from the side of City Commissioners culminated with the police harassment of walking people and black drivers who were fined or even jailed including Dr. King for ridiculously "trumped-up" driving offences. Robinson herself was "rewarded" with seventeen fine tickets.⁷⁰

The more serious graduation of the situation came with the bombing of M. L. King and Mr. E. D. Nixon's homes and the boycotters slowly gained the sympathy and support from people all over the country.⁷¹

At the beginning of February the legal battle began. “The case was designed to integrate all transportation in the city of Montgomery”⁷² and all the five plaintiffs were females who had some bad experiences on the buses. They included teenagers, ordinary domestic women or a widow with six children. Clyde Sellers, Frank Parks and Mayor W. A. Gayle were “charged individually as defendants and collectively as members of the Board of Commissioners of the City of Montgomery”⁷³ together with some other people involved in the Montgomery “bus affair”.⁷⁴

There was, however, another investigation going on concerning the boycott. This time they were whites who called for “justice” and asked the grand jury to investigate the legality of boycott according to Alabama State Code, Title 14, Section 54 that said that anybody who were responsible for the boycott, would be guilty of misdemeanor.⁷⁵

On February 21, the newspapers announced the grand jury’s verdict which found the boycott illegal and that its 115 leaders including Dr. King or Jo Ann Robinson would be arrested the following morning. The following day instead of a mass arrest full of despair and hysteria, a comical situation was to be witnessed in Montgomery. Only few leaders were brought to police station personally by policemen. Those first arrested notified with police staff’s permission the others on the list who successively arrived at the police station by themselves.⁷⁶

Jo Ann Robinson described the situation at the station as pleasant one. The police staff was polite to the arrested and gentle with women. Black leaders conversed with ease with the officers during police procedures and with one another everybody being relieved that the time of unpleasant uncertainty when they would end in jail was over. Nobody, however, indeed got to prison because they were all bailed out thanks to generous funds that were sent to Montgomery from all the parts of States to support the boycotters.⁷⁷

Surprisingly it was only King who was put on trial and eventually found guilty, which was a verdict that the lawyers expected. Nevertheless he had never been imprisoned for that and none of the leaders had to pay a fine and the boycott went buoyantly on as nothing of this had ever happened.⁷⁸

Slowly but surely the City Fathers must have realized their inevitable defeat after all their not always honest attempts to bring black citizens back to buses had fallen through. More and more people from all over the country sympathized with

boycotting people who showed the whole world that they were deadly serious about their “thing” and cheerfully ignored deserted public buses that had been for so long spectators of their humiliation and maltreatment.

On June 5, the judges declared the segregated seating on city buses was against the 14th Amendment’s guarantee of equal government treatment of all citizens, irrespective of race and thus unconstitutional. This verdict, of course, meant just the first but not the last and lasting victory for black people. City Fathers appealed to the Supreme Court and it was not until November when the Supreme Court upheld the previous decision and even after that the City Commission endeavored to preserve the existing system as long as possible, which in this case meant till December 20. That very day city officials finally received officially the Supreme Court’s written decision.⁷⁹

The following day almost every newspaper in the country carried the picture of Martin Luther King, the Reverend Abernathy, E. D. Nixon and other prominent black leaders of the boycott riding the freshly integrated buses. Rosa Parks did not plan to be part of that show because her mother was ill and she wanted to take care of her. However, the reporters of the *Look* magazine found out where she lived and persuaded her to come with them so that they could take a picture of her riding the bus that day too.⁸⁰

The integration was not a matter of a smooth and immediate transformation. It took some time to change the thinking of the most obstinate people that integrated buses was a natural thing, something that today is a commonplace.⁸¹

The most important achievement of the boycott lied in the fact that black people realized that in mass action and absolute trust in themselves and in one another is their ultimate power and as Robinson summed the situation up: “We had won self respect. We had won a feeling that we had achieved...had accomplished... We felt that we were somebody, that somebody had to listen to us, that we had forced the white man to give what we knew was a part of our citizenship...and so we had won that.”⁸² The black people started to have their destiny in their own hands.

The Montgomery bus boycott was definitely the first huge success and victory of ordinary people. This time they participated in the struggle alongside the leaders of various organizations, which was a cooperation that had never taken place before. The fact that they endured all the inconveniences concerning the

boycott for the whole thirteen months testified that they had had to be very tired of their conditions and determined to finally do something personally about their hardship. To put in Robinson's words "The spirit, the desire, the injustices that had been endured by thousand of people through the years. I think that people were fed up, they had reached the point that they knew there was no return, that they had to do it or die. And that's what kept it going. It was the sheer spirit for freedom, for the feeling of being a man and a woman."⁸²

It is also important to realize that this time the women played a crucial role in a civil rights struggle alongside the men. One woman became the catalyst of the whole thing, the other one in fact planned and set in motion the beginning of the boycott and others became the important plaintiffs in the legal battle. And it would not be just if I forgot to mention all those ordinary women who had to walk hundreds of miles to become the first-class riders of the Montgomery buses.

Chapter 5

The role of Ella Baker in the Civil Rights Movement

*I did not hesitate to voice my opinion
and sometimes it was the voicing of that opinion
it was obvious that it was not
a very comforting sort of presence that I presented*

Ella Baker, 1974

At the beginning of 1957 a group of ministers headed by Martin Luther King started to contemplate forming a new civil rights organization. Dr. King became a strong advocate of mass action after the success of Montgomery boycott and desired to continue in this field. The MIA, an organization that emerged during the boycott and of which King was a President, began to be too tight for him and he wanted to focus more on increase of number of voters in the south. King also felt that the NAACP was too much involved in legal fight with black discrimination and it would have been more convenient to bring movement among people. The NAACP and especially its then president Roy Wilkins saw in a newly formed organization unwanted competition and made it very hard for its members at the beginning of their activity but eventually they started to respect each other.¹

The name of this new organization was the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (Christian probably because King wanted to prevent the link with Communism)² and the first project they planned was “Crusade for Citizenship” with central office in Atlanta. Main aim of the project was “arouse the masses of Negroes to realize that, in a democracy, their chances for improvement rest on their ability to vote”³ and they wanted to achieve it through founding of voting centers, providing educational materials coping with voter registration and gleaning the cases of discrimination during registrations. The first King’s vision was to at least double the existing number of local voters, which very soon showed to be too optimistic.⁴

The first step to King's plan was to open an office in Atlanta in which an appointed person would have planned and organized rallies in at least twenty towns on February 12, the day of Lincoln's birthday, to set up the program for the Crusade. As this appointed person was chosen Ella Baker, one of the most prominent leaders in Civil Rights movement who was fifty four at that time and whose most important and shining achievement should have come few years later with another organization.⁵

Ella Baker had very individual conception of leadership and led very unconventional way of life. She always acted according to her own judgment, Ella was one of the few who afforded to criticize the "untouchable" ones and with her age she became more and more radical in her opinions. During her career she was involved with most of important and central black organizations and stood at the birth of one of the crucial ones, the Student Nonviolent Committee Conference (SNCC) which could be considered to be her most cherished child.

5.1. Ella Baker's Background

*Your relationship to human beings
was more important than your relationship
to the amount of money that you made.*

Ella Baker

Ella Jo Baker was born to a very loving and supporting family that formed her personality and way of thinking since her early age. She was born on December 13, 1903 in Norfolk, Virginia. Her family moved to North Carolina seven years later. She was raised in mainly female environment dominated by her mother who had been an exceptional woman and thus very influential on Ella's life.⁶

Although Ella and her two siblings lived in very financially decent conditions, Mrs. Baker led them to be sympathetic and respectful of less fortunate ones, take their advantages with humility and always try to help those living in worse conditions.⁷

The views of Ella's mother had to do with being of strongly religious turn of mind. Ann Ross Baker's father was a favorite preacher in a Baptist church who was born in slavery and all this shaped his family's life. Little Ella admired the

modest, generous and unselfish personality of her grandfather who always cared about the weaker and needy. Baker's mother was a very active Baptist church member and little Ella experienced the strength of unity of women when she had accompanied her to the meetings of female church members. The women in mother's church devoted ardently and selflessly not only to community service but also to various projects dealing with oppression of blacks like anti-lynching campaigns or segregation issues.⁸

The unselfish and self-sacrificing manners of those middle-class women probably reached to slavery when it was a moral duty to take care of the less fortunate slaves as for food, medical service or looking after parentless children who stayed alone due to the cruel slave market system or parent's (usually the mother's one) death.⁹

Same as those female slaves, these church women acted altruistically and took it as their moral mission following from their luckier class status. It is no wonder that Ella's social feeling was so immense.¹⁰

Baker in her later interviews also called her mother a feminist with her approaching to men and white people. To put it in Baker's words she "showed no deference to white authority and very little deference to male authority."¹¹ Probably it was her mother's attitude to men and white people from where Ella later took her strength to face the male domination and not to fear of white authority even at the cost of some potential difficulties or risking her own life.

Ann Ross Baker was according to Ella Baker's words "a very bright woman" whose many ambitions stayed unfulfilled due to a married status. She led despite to her potential a conventional life being a teacher who after her wedding stopped working and became full-time wife and mother. This represented exactly what the society expected of their women at that time.¹²

Ella completely challenged these expectations. She made quite a controversial decision of not having children and though she got married she had never played a typical "wife-role" and always kept her independence. She also refused to follow a traditional career of black women becoming a teacher although at the beginning it was very difficult for her to find some other job.¹³

Ella Baker definitely was not a conventional woman of her time. As she expressed it in one of her interviews, she was not a fashion plate and she never desired to be one. She also refused to play only an inferior role in Civil Rights

Movement serving the men around her.¹⁴ She certainly was a woman of her own mind, which was not always welcomed with a complete enthusiasm.

5.2 Ella Baker's Beginnings as a Civil Rights Activist

*If something came up that I didn't like,
I'd react to it. I retained what I called my essential integrity.*

Ella Baker

After finishing her degree in Shaw University in Raleigh she moved to New York full of ambitions in political and social spheres. Unfortunately she arrived there with Depression of 1929 behind her back. First years were especially hard for Baker, doing anything almost for nothing but all the time she attempted to relate to different social organizations and clubs dealing with social or educational issues. In 1936 she finally gained a more decent work in Workers Education Project (WEP), which was part of Roosevelt's New Deal program Works Progress Administration (WPA).¹⁵

She was very successful as an educator and soon was promoted. Her new tasks embraced coordination and direction of workshops on "consumer issues for church labor, and community groups."¹⁶ Since the beginning she tried to approach to the most ordinary people conducting workshops and having classes in various workplaces, storefronts and hospitals in Harlem.¹⁷

Baker's real entrance into Civil Rights Movement came in early 1940's when she was hired as an assistant field secretary by the NAACP. She spent four or five months travelling through Southern cities and rural towns. Her official job was to help organizing local membership campaigns. She, however, saw her most important job in "getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence even when it was perpetrated by the police, or, in some instances, the state."¹⁸ She simply wanted "to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence or injustice"¹⁹

One of Ella Baker's lifelong efforts was giving the power into the hands of ordinary people. She saw the importance of a good leader in identification with

people of every class so he or she knew exactly what these people really needed.²⁰ She wanted them to rely only on themselves. Her favorite motto was “strong people don’t need strong leaders”²¹ Baker did not like very much the idea of the NAACP to collect as many members as possible without any bigger cooperation and real work with them and she was always trying to set up personal cooperation trying to help with whatever a local branch needed. During her travels she made many important contacts with local leaders with many of them she cooperated for many years and established lifelong personal relationships with people from all classes.²²

Ella Baker was a very personal type of leader which made her an exceptional among other leaders. Another typical feature of her leadership was that she always worked from the behind of all projects and actions in which she was involved. She had never been the one who hit the front pages and gave plenty of interviews accompanying by abundance of pictures of her with one exception when she was appointed to become one of four people who attempted to challenge a regular Southern Democratic Party at their Convention in 1964.²³

In spring 1943 to her surprise and flattery she was appointed a new director of branches. She started to promote her notion of leadership. She opposed a classical hierarchy and wanted each field worker dispatched by the NAACP to work closely with their branches according to their individual needs. As her biographer Barbara Ransby expressed in her masterpiece about Baker “she insisted that the strength of an organization grew from the bottom up, not the top down.”²⁴

She saw her major job in transforming “the local branches from being centers of sporadic activity to becoming centers of sustained and dynamic community leadership.”²⁵ Between 1944 and 1946 she also led the organization of workshops across the South in which she gave lessons on grass-roots leadership. Rosa Parks and E. D. Nixon were among the famous participants in one of them.²⁶

Nevertheless Ella Baker’ stubborn mind, sincerity and very individual style of leadership had not always been judged with an approving assessment and very often she had to face criticism from the highest ranks. Especially she fought with then President of NAACP Walter White whom she seen too egoistic and vain wanting to dominate everything and it was no secret that she despised him. Definitely it was not the last time she had a clash with a man in a high position, it could have been one of her trademark not having too much respect for anybody

and was always forthright with everybody without regard to their level of authority or gender.²⁷

Three years later Ella Baker decided that it was time to move on in her life mission and resigned from her position. She started to devote to new projects in new organizations although she continued to cooperate with the NAACP on the local level.²⁸

Baker returned to the official board of the NAACP staff in 1952 as president of the New York branch. She was the first woman in this position. Her newly gained power gave her finally free hand in realizing her envisioned way of leading the branches. She moved her office to the heart of Harlem to be more connected to people and enlarge the number of active members. She tried to identify with their real problems so that she could have solved them more effectively. She also became involved more politically discussing problems with authorities mainly those regarding fair education and police treatment of all black people. Apart from her presidential position she also functioned as chairman of the Educational Committee of the New York branch when the NAACP reached probably its most famous victory in legal battle *Brown v. Board of Education* which declared the segregation of schools unconstitutional.²⁹

5.3 Ella Baker on the Board of the SCLC

*I might be quiet but if there was discussion
and I was suppose[d] to be able to participate,
I participated at the level of my thinking.*

Ella Baker, 1974

In 1957 Ella Baker appeared in the South to participate in formation of a new organization led by M. L. King, Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She occupied several positions during her two and a half year cooperation. One of her first tasks was organization of Crusade for Citizenship in Atlanta. King had a big plan to shield the project with 200, 000 \$ but it turned out impossible to obtain at least part of the money. The reality finally proved to be more than despairing. “When I [Ella Baker] came in, there was no office. For the first couple of days, whatever functioning there was I had to function out of a telephone booth and my

pocketbook – keep my notes in the pocketbook.”³⁰ However, it would not have been Ella Baker if she had given up such a critical situation and with the help of one of the local ministers she soon had an office to work at.³¹

The project was not too successful and it was definitely not due to Ella’s struggling conditions but rather due to sabotage by NAACP who saw in SCLC and its Crusade unpleasant competition as they had the plans of their own concerning voter increase.³²

The relationship between Baker and the SCLC including M. L. King was not too ideal. The official position of Baker in the SCLC became a recurrent topic of discussions. She had never been offered an official title, although she served some time as an unofficial executive director of the SCLC. The reason was more than obvious. Baker did not comply with two for SCLC male membership important qualities. She was not a man and she was not a minister and Ella was perfectly aware of that. “They wanted a minister. I knew that. They couldn’t have tolerated a woman”.³³ This did not make Baker bitter about it, though and it was even her who had suggested and gained the first minister in that function.³⁴

Baker was not a type of person who yearned for functions and official titles. She always concentrated on her work and how and where she could have been the most useful. She knew that ministers did not see in a woman an equal partner especially on the ground of leadership but rather someone who just carried out their instructions without their own initiative.³⁵ According to Baker, Baptist minister saw in females someone who “were nice to talk to about such things as how well they cooked, how beautiful they looked, and how well they carried out a program that the minister had delegated them to carry out but not a person with independence and creative ideas of his own, but on whom they had to rely.”³⁶

Baker in no case fit in with their notion of woman. “I did not hesitate to voice my opinion and sometimes it was the voicing of that opinion it was obvious that it was not a very comforting sort of presence that I presented [in the SCLC].”³⁷

It is no wonder that she “did not hesitate to voice her opinion”³⁸ on M. L. King himself and it was not very flattering one. She acknowledged many of King’s personal qualities but she did not like the way he had been put on pedestal and everybody saw in him their only savior no matter how “supernormal” leader he had been and warned of possible perils of relying too much on one single person.³⁹

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed peoples to depend so largely upon a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means he has been touted through the public media, which means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he is the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time, and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.⁴⁰

5.4 Ella Baker and Her Role in the SNCC Formation

They were open to ideas that would not have been certainly cherished, or in some instances certainly, tolerated by either the NAACP or SCLC.

Ella Baker, 1974

Ella Baker's vision of leadership finally came up in February 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina. Four local black college students decided that it was time for young people to show their discontent with the existing state of affairs and fought for their improvement. On February 1, these four young men sat in a local lunch counter and although they did not expect to be served they stayed in till the closing time. Next day they came back accompanied by other students and with every new day more and more people joined them. Their spontaneous act influenced many young people and sit-ins started to spread like wildfire across the South.⁴¹

The sit-ins had brought a huge success and black young people alongside the white ones achieved the desegregation of lunch counters. Baker felt that this is the moment she had been for so long waiting for and immediately started to act. She always wanted to see young people and women being more involved in Civil Rights Movement and this was her chance because they showed to be very capable and determined. She organized various meetings discussing the potential role of young people in Civil Rights Movement. She met many young leaders

listening to their suggestions and opinions and also contacted many of her friends who would potentially offered funds and guidance to them.⁴²

The culmination came with a conference in Raleigh at her alma mater university. The success started with the attendance which overcame Baker's expectation with some two hundred participants. In defiance of aspirations of both the SCLC and NAACP to make from young people eager to fight for their rights the part of their organizations Baker supported the idea of creating a totally independent body. She strived very hard to achieve their independence and David J. Garrow, author of King's biography, described her endeavor to be too hysterical.⁴³ However, it was more than probable that without her firm intervention these young people would have been broken under the pressure of such strong personalities like that of Martin Luther King and others from the SCLC or NAACP. Martin L. King, nevertheless, served as one of his advisors and lent them his name.⁴⁴

Baker's dream came true with the formation of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee shortly called the SNCC (snick). She did not intend to serve in any high position of this new organization or lead it in any other way but she offered them her experience, contacts and guidance and stayed with them for the first six years of the SNCC's existence. Young people really admired her and listened to her. She highly respected young people and their opinions and did not try to command them but only guided them. It was a mutual enrichment when young people learnt from Ella's rich life experiences and Ella learnt from them through their refreshing ideas and view of the world. Baker saw the SNCC's best advantage in the fact that they were not under control of any other organizations and that they were not burdened with such common adult concerns as responsibility for family and churches (in case of ministers), or loss of job.⁴⁵

Ella Baker was also crucial in settlement of their first disagreement concerning the direction in which the SNCC should have gone. There were two strong camps. One camp wanted to go to the deepest south and devote to mass voter registration while the other one coming from Nashville wanted to dedicate to non-violent direct actions similar to that of sit-ins. Baker supported the proposal to have two groups and encouraged them to go in both directions.⁴⁶ "I felt that the young people were in better position to show that they could function and deal with these

differing points of view without having to split up... I was happy to have seen the two chief proponents of these two camps finally work out their differences.”⁴⁷

Carole Mueller wrote an essay on Ella Baker’s unique notion of leadership in Civil Rights organizations which was called participatory democracy and highlighted its three most important features: first was “grass roots involvement of the ordinary people in the decisions that affect their life”⁴⁸; second, she strongly opposed hierarchy in organizations, which was related to her promotion of necessity to identify with people and her claim that every person matters even a drunk. The third feature was direct action in all fields of discrimination and injustice.⁴⁹

SNCC set off exactly in that direction to much delight of Ella Baker who became their chief advisor since its foundation and could have finally seen that her dream up group-centered leadership proved to be very effective.

I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people. Every time I see a young person who has come through the system to a stage where he could profit from the system and identify with it, but who identifies more with the struggle of black people who have not had his chance, every time I find such a person I take new hope. I feel a new life as a result of it.⁵⁰

Ella Baker was with the SNCC through most of their programs including Freedom Rides and Freedom Summer, two of their successful projects but as she pointed out she always worked from behind. This changed in 1964 when Ella Baker was one of the four people nominated by newly formed Freedom Mississippi Democratic Party to challenge the regular Mississippi Democratic Party at their regular Convention in Atlantic City. I am going to cover this event more thoroughly later in my work.

Miss Baker (how everybody called her) remained engaged usually as a highly respected advisor and consultant in many organizations dealing with civil rights until her death in 1986.

Chapter 6

Diane Nash

The Key Figure of the Early Student Movement

6.1 Sit-in Movement

The person is not the problem, or the enemy.

Racist attitudes--that's the enemy.

The system of segregation--that's the enemy.

You could beat up a person, and it would still leave segregation unattacked.

Diane Nash, 2000

Ella Baker had a strong influence on many young women in the ranks of the SNCC. Diane Nash, a key figure of Nashville sit-ins, Rock Hill campaigns promoting “jail, no bail” strategy and Freedom Rides, was one of them. She was also a beautiful example of how an ordinary carefree girl with her own fears and self-doubting could have developed into a strong and courageous leader in a relatively short time.

Diane Nash was born in 1938 in Chicago, which was a city where most of public services were accessible for black inhabitants. Her life changed rapidly after she had gone to college in a still segregated Nashville.¹

She was excited about gaining new experiences and meeting new people and could not wait to grow and expand herself there. She, however, did not anticipate that her “growing and expanding” would have been realized in a totally different sense than that she had assumed.²

Diane took the segregation very hard and to put it in her words she “felt stifled and...unfairly... [and] shut in.”³ She underwent an extreme emotional reaction having first-hand experience with Jim Crow laws and strongly opposed the fact she could have not eaten at lunch counters, drink from water fountains, or go to the ladies room if there had not been a sign “for colored”. She decided not to passively conform to those humiliating ordinances and began to look for people who felt the same way she did. She was recommended the workshop of Jim Lawson, a man who had spent few years studying Gandhi’s non-violent

philosophy and strategy of resistance in India and who intended to apply his acquired knowledge in Civil Rights struggle.⁴

Diane was happy to finally find people who shared her resolution to change the degrading situation in Nashville. In Lawson's workshops students intensively prepared themselves for potential actions. They learnt how to protect themselves and protect others from possible white violent attacks. The participants also learnt to love and respect their enemies and to be always truthful with everybody, which made them morally higher over their opponents. They also tested local lunch-counters and talked to their managers discussing the immorality of desegregation.⁵

Thanks to these workshops Nashville group had been perfectly prepared when Greensboro sit-ins happened and eventually became the most effective group of sit-in mass action.

The fact that sit-ins infectiously spread to many places across the South was very important for young participants assuring them that they had been doing a right thing. Diane Nash, who had been only twenty-two at that time, had many doubts about what they were trying to achieve and she really appreciated that they were not alone in their effort.⁶

When you are at that age, you don't feel powerful. I remember realizing that with what we were doing, trying to abolish segregation, we were coming up against governors of seven states, judges, politicians, businessmen, and I remember thinking, I'm only 22 years old, what do I know, what am I doing? And I felt very vulnerable. So when we heard these newscasts, that other cities had demonstrations, it really helped. Because there were more of us. And it was very important.⁷

Thanks to the movement Diane discovered in herself attributes she had never thought she possessed like courage and love for people. Although she looked very confident outwardly, inwardly she was very scared especially of getting into jail. Nevertheless, when the time came for her to be arrested, there was no time for fear and Diane Nash became a fully confident and brave leader.⁸

It was also her who boldly faced then Mayor of Nashville Ben West on the steps of the City Hall. After the house of a local respected black attorney Luby had been blown up, the students decided to organize a mass protest march which

culminated in the meeting with Mayor. Thousands of people participated in the march dressed in their best suits and dresses walking silently but resolutely in the protest of endless everyday discrimination and the threats of violence only because of the color of their skin.⁹

Diane Nash confronted Mayor West before the thousands of marchers and the press with a delicate question if he personally thought that it was right to discriminate a certain group of people “at the lunch counters solely on the basis of the color of their skin.”¹⁰ He responded to Nash that it was wrong to do so and his answer became a turning point in desegregating the lunch counters.¹¹

Another important step was the negotiations with the white business community in which Diane Nash was also present. She described how at first the white businessmen refused to discuss a potential end of segregation but after black and sympathetic white people had started to boycott their stores in for merchants a very important Easter season, they quickly changed their minds and became more willing to bargain with blacks. It turned out soon that the merchants had not been strongly against desegregation but rather they had been afraid of white boycott if they had started to serve blacks. However, thanks to many white people who supported the black’s rights, they were assured that this would have never happened.¹²

Very soon after the meeting with Mayor and those negotiations, the lunch counters in Nashville were desegregated and the world of the Civil Rights Movement gained new strong leaders and among them was also Diane Nash who by the end of sit-ins movement became an accomplished leader.¹³

If Diane Nash had ever doubted about herself as a good leader because she was a woman, Ella Baker refuted all her incertitudes and concerns. She deeply appreciated the role that Ella Baker played in forming the SNCC organization and her subsequent participation. Baker also gave her an excellent example that being a woman and a leader at the same time were definitely not two things which would have been contradictory.¹⁴

[Ella Baker] was very important to me, personally, for several reasons... I never had to worry about where Ella Baker was coming from. She was a very honest person, and she...would speak her mind honestly. She was a person that I turned to frequently, who could emotionally pick me back up and dust me

off...She was the person who was able to make us see, and work together [SNCC]. I think her participation as a person some years older than we, could really serve as a model of how older people can give energy and help to younger people, at the same time, not take over and tell them what to do, really strengthen them as individuals and also strengthen our organization.¹⁵

Barbara Ransby was also aware of the important role that Ella Baker had played in Nash's life and in her biography about Baker aptly wrote that "Ella Baker became a confidence-builder, role model, and adviser for Nash as she evolved into one of the most influential young personalities within the student movement during its first years."¹⁶

Unlike Ella Baker, Diane Nash had quite contradictory feeling about Martin Luther King. She without a doubt respected him and appreciated his contribution for the Movement. As Ann Standley, an author of essay on "The Role of Black Women in the Civil Rights Movement" noticed, Diane Nash as well as Jo Ann Robinson, a figure of Montgomery Bus Boycott, failed to admit the discriminatory position of women inside Civil Rights Movement let alone dared to criticize men for not treating women as their equals. Standley mainly criticized Nash's article for *Ebony* in which according to Nash, the movement should have been led chiefly by men.¹⁷

On the other hand Nash in one of her interviews pointed out that it was not Martin Luther King who had developed and been responsible for the movement in the sixties but ordinary people. She also advised young people not to wait for somebody like King if they wanted to achieve some changes and instead of complaining and doing nothing they should start to act on their own because they themselves were responsible for their own life.¹⁸ "It's important that young people today understand that the movement of the sixties was really a people's movement. The media and history seems to record it as Martin Luther King's movement, but if young people realized that it was people just like them, their age, that formulated goals and strategies, and actually developed the movement...they would say, what can I do...to effect that change."¹⁹

5.2 Diane Nash and Her Involvement in the SNCC

*It's really important to realize
that each individual shoulders a great deal of responsibility...
that's the way the movement in the sixties was accomplished*

Diane Nash, 1985

Diane Nash also became one of the key protagonists in Rock Hill campaigns organizing by the SNCC. The sit-ins protests were accompanied by massive arrests across the south. The jails were full of demonstrating people who were sooner or later bailed out, which became financially demanding for black community because it had been taking a great deal of money from their financial resources. The solution came with the new motto “jail, no bail” which consisted in simple refusing by arrested people to be bailed out and served their sentences, a strategy started with the group of students in Friendship College. To propagate new tactics the SNCC decided to send a delegation to Rock Hill in South Carolina in February 1961 that would have been responsible for campaigns promoting their new stand. The delegation was composed of four people, two men and two women, Diane Nash and very young Ruby Smith Robinson who thus started her short but intensive career in the Civil Rights Movement.²⁰

The delegation was very successful in many respects although they were very strenuous thirty days for its four participants. First the campaign caught the attention of the general public to the new organization, second the authorities had to cope with overcrowded jails and last but not least it brought closer the young people who had to spend together long hours and days in prisons, which was very emotional and strengthening experience. The Rock Hill is considered to be a turning point in the SNCC activity. Diane Nash was herself jailed later in Mississippi and although pregnant she stayed loyal to her principles and refused to be bailed out, which perfectly demonstrated the huge change Nash had gone through in her leadership career.²¹

The both Nash and Smith decided to leave their colleges and fully emerged in work for the SNCC. Nash even became the first paid field staff member of the young organization.

5.3 Freedom Rides

It was like being at war.

Diane Nash, 1985

Diane Nash's one of the last important achievements in her SNCC involvement was during Freedom Rides. The participation of Nash, Smith and some other women became crucial for the success to integrate the interstate transportation. Freedom Rides was an action planned and organized by another Civil Rights organization the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) but fully supported by Nashville group. The plan was to board the interstate bus in the North and go to the deepest South. Very soon it was clear that the Rides would become one of the bloodiest episodes in the Civil Rights Movement. The riders had to face furious and armed white mobs including women and children who were waiting for them in various places of their journeys.²²

After Freedom Riders had been brutally attacked in Anniston on Mother's day and their buses had been burnt down, the CORE wanted to stop the rides. Diane Nash realized the seriousness of the situation but she was convinced that it was necessary to continue the Rides. "If the Freedom Ride had been stopped as a result of violence, I strongly felt that the future of the movement was going to be, just cut short. Because the impression would have been given that whenever a movement starts, all that has to be done is that you attack it, massive violence and the, blacks would stop. And I thought that was a very dangerous thing to happen."²³

Nash, who had been elected a coordinator, was responsible for recruiting and training potential Freedom Riders and for being in touch with the Justice Department and the press. She also guarded letters and wills written by the Riders who were perfectly aware of the danger they were facing and which could even culminate in the lost of their lives.²⁴

Nash together with other Nashville female activists Lucretia Collins and Katherine Burke felt that they had to continue the Rides at all costs and mobilized some more students and set out to Birmingham. In Birmingham they had been stopped by local police headed by notorious Sheriff Bull Connor and arrested. They boldly faced the police intimidation and eventually were driven to the train

station in the middle of the night. This, however, did not prevent them from continuing in their “journey”. Despite all the violent attacks on Freedom Riders during their action, on September 22, 1961, the Interstate Commerce Commission finally ended racial discrimination in interstate buses and facilities.²⁵

The Freedom Rides also outlined the following steps of the student organization that would lead into the deepest corners of the south with the most entrenched racism.

Chapter 7

Women as the Bearers of the Grassroots Movement

*If you can't vote, you ain't free,
and if you ain't free, well then, you're a slave.
So therefore we were slaves. We didn't have our freedom.*

Rachel Nelson West, 1985

Ella Baker and Septima Clark were among the strongest advocates and promoters of grassroots movement which reckoned on the cooperation of the most ordinary people from even the most god-forsaken corners of the country. According to Baker the leaders should arise from their own communities because they know best what the most burning problems are the people from their communities have to face. People should rely on themselves and not to look up at solely one leader even if it would have been strongly charismatic Martin Luther King and passively wait for what he would do for them.¹

The big opportunity to prove that she was right about her conception of leadership arrived with the formation of a new organization full of brave and determined young people mostly students who wanted to partake in shaping their future. The SNCC eventually divided after short dispute into two wings. The first wing led by Diane Nash devoted to the street protests mainly with the aim to desegregate still segregated public facilities.²

The second wing chose for their goal the augmentation of the number of registered voters. The same ambition had also King and his SCLC but young people went further. They decided to go into the deepest south still untouched by any civil rights activity including Mississippi Delta which was till that time the place known as “owned by whites, worked by blacks”³ with the most entrenched racism and the poorest and most toiling black people still dominated by white men.⁴

Most black people worked on cotton plantations under the grueling conditions of sharecropping system. Their prospects of better life was more than slight and usually every little success was “rewarded” by mean whites who did not like to see black people becoming too prosperous. This exactly happened to Fannie Lou

Hamer's parents who after one good year managed to buy their own mules, wagon and tools to cultivate their land and thus make their life better. Very soon after their little success a white man poisoned all their animals. This despicable act brought Hamer's family into very deep poverty.⁶

Mississippi was also a place where culprit was always black and injured person white. The black people had absolutely no legal protection and Delta county was more than in any other place witness to absurd situations when a white person or group of whites committed crime against a black person but it was in almost hundred per cent of the cases the black person who had been attacked who ended up in prison, or in worse case even killed just to be silenced. The racist Southern state also saw most lynchings.⁷

Mississippi State definitely was not an easy place to live for its black dwellers; however black people praised and loved their homeland. They did not accuse the land of their misfortune because they were perfectly aware that the evil was entrenched in white people's heads and hearts. Nevertheless they humbly accepted their life as it was offered to them and resigned to their fate. It wanted a fair amount of courage to rebel against the unjust order and very often every display of rebellion or defiance had been severely punished.⁸

When federal court gave black people right to vote, many blacks in Mississippi did not even take notice of it. They were too busy with their everyday struggle with poverty, hunger, back-breaking work, tiredness, clothes shortage, poor medical care and white intimidation to be concerned with their rights. In addition many of them were still illiterate or gained very little education, which also predestined them to ignorance of their rights without a prospect for better life. Black children usually went to school only four months in year. They had to work since an early age. Fanny Lou Hamer for example began to work when she was only six. There were two main reasons which prevented children from attending the school. First reason was that they had to help their parents on the plantations and second no less saddening one was that they did not have proper clothes to attend the school in winter.⁹

This should have changed in 1961 with the arrival of the first civil rights scouts to explore the situation for potential mass voter registration drive in the deepest south and afterward the summer of 1964 that changed the life in Mississippi completely.

The SNCC formed a new association with other civil rights organization including the SCLC, NAACP and CORE operating under the name Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) with the aim to start the voter registration of blacks in the South. It was, however, the activists from the SNCC who were responsible for most actions.¹⁰

The first steps of black activists led into the churches in black communities or other places where black people gathered in greater numbers and they tried to persuade local people to go to the closest register place and try to register. They also visited people in their homes. It was not an easy thing to do. Black people who had lived till that time in complete isolation from the rest of the world were reluctant to let those strangers, although they were black, in into their lives. They usually did not see the reason why they should have suddenly registered and voted.¹¹

Nevertheless, here and there the activists were lucky and found the courageous few who were willing to get with them in their cars and go to the nearest place of registration. Their boldness was not without consequences, though. Southern whites started to be nervous seeing those young people urging the always submissive black people to take political stand and they took immediate action.¹²

The registration was in fact a journey full of various obstacles, intimidation and reprisals. Black people had to bear humiliation or harassment from the registerers or some police officers who were usually present, then had to fill in very personal questionnaire, undergo unjust literacy test which consisted in copying a certain passage from Constitution and then interpret it and after that they had to wait some time for the results which in most cases were not positive. The most effective weapon, however was, that people who had decided to register almost automatically lost their jobs immediately after their return.¹³

7.1 Fannie Lou Hamer

One of the Most Inspirational and Bravest People of the Grassroots Movement in the Mississippi Delta

I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Fannie Lou Hamer

Fannie Lou Hamer, who was probably the most famous grassroots activists in Mississippi, was one the many people who had underwent the strenuous way of registration. She was unique in every respect, although her life till she reached forty-four had been almost identical with every other woman in Mississippi Delta. She became the symbol of grassroots movement and was respected by every person involved in the Civil Rights Movement without reference to their age, color, gender, class. She was the example of immense inner strength, will and determination and boundless courage. Hamer also loved people greatly and all of them including her enemies because she believed that a man should love every one even their foes. It was a virtue coming from her Christian faith. She was a devoted Christian who was able to quote the Bible by heart. She had never had her heart filled with hate. Hamer was very often angry about the injustices around her and her anger became one of her driving forces but she had never let hatred enter her heart. Apart from anger there was another factor driving her to helping people. It was her life-long poverty. She knew that poverty and racism were the most pervading problems of Mississippian black people and she combated the both. Later in her life she created a project called Freedom Farms which helped people to struggle with hunger. It was based on the cooperation system and soon thousands of people were involved.¹⁴

Fannie Lou Hamer's biggest dream was to become first-class citizen and she wanted to endow all black people with that privilege. She decided to devote her life to make her dream come true. She had found sense of her life in persuading black people to take the life into their own hands. She was a great speaker who had always spoken right from her heart. What made her also special and unforgettable as a speaker was the fact that she always accompanied her already powerful speech with captivating singing. Singing was her recognition sign. She sang to overcome her fear and anger and to encourage and calm her friends down

in some disturbing situation. She sang to connect people together and she also sang out of a pure pleasure. She usually began her speech with a spiritual song *This Little Light of Mine*.¹⁵

Fannie Lou Hamer was also amazing with young people. She loved to work with them and always preferred working with young activists from the SNCC to the ministers from the SCLC. It was a mutual relationship because they admired and respected her and to many of them she became the second mother including Robert Moses, a prominent figure of Mississippi movement or Charles McLaurin probably the closest friend of Hamer who still dedicates most of his life to keep Hamer's memory alive.¹⁶

Fannie Lou Hamer was born as Fannie Lou Townsend in Mississippi Delta in 1917 to a very poor sharecropper family and remained poor for the rest of her life. She spent her childhood in Sunflower County getting only little education although she was always eager to learn more and was a big lover of reading. In 1942 she married Perry "Pep" Hamer who was her lifelong support, even though his life changed radically overnight due to his wife's civil rights activities. She followed her husband to Ruleville's plantation where she worked on the cotton plantation till her fateful day in August 1962 when she decided to register to vote.¹⁷

A few months before her registration attempt, it had not even come to her mind that she had such right. "I had never heard, until 1962, that black people could register and vote..., we hadn't heard anything about registering to vote because when the people would get out of the fields if they had a radio, they'd be too tired to play it. So we didn't know what was going on in the rest of the state, even, much less in other places."¹⁸ This changed with a mass meeting Hamer attended in a local church where Robert Moses with other activists explained people how it was important for them to register to vote. Hamer became enthused by what she had heard and soon with some other people boarded the bus to Indianola to get registered.¹⁹

There she realized that it had been just the beginning of a long process. She found the process of registering beyond her actual strength, especially the part with the interpretation of Constitution. She soon realized that the process of registration was not the most challenging. On the way back their bus was stopped by police. One of the passengers was arrested and the driver was fined for the bus

being too yellow and thus could have been mistaken for a school bus. Later when Hamer arrived back in the plantation, her boss had already known about her action and as was a common practice he told her she had not been allowed to work there anymore unless she withdrew her registration. Then Hamer interposed one of her famous lines when she told him: “I didn’t go down there to register for you; I went down there to register for myself.”²⁰ These words sealed her destiny for good. She had to abandon the place where she had spent almost twenty years and for a while also her husband whom the boss forced to stay till the harvest time would have not been over.²¹

Hamer had never thought of giving up of what she had begun. She was full of anger and her heart was touched by sorrow and as she put it she “was sick and tired of being sick and tired”. Her pain was also caused by sterilization performed against her will in 1961. Unfortunately her hysterectomy was definitely not a rare case but quite a common practice in the south.²²

Fannie Lou Hamer started to fully devote to recruiting of the new potential black voters. She was hired by the SNCC and in December she went to register again because her first attempt had been unsuccessful. This time she was prepared thoroughly. She attended the SNCC’s workshops in which people were trained to master the registration. She was successful even though, due to the poll taxation, she was not allowed to vote for the first time until 1964. Paradoxically the first vote she had cast was for her when she was running for the Congress.²³

Fannie Lou Hamer also started to participate in workshops organizing by Voter Education Project and leading by Septima Clark in Charleston, and one of those Charleston trips became a crucial moment of her life. When she was on her way back from one of the Charleston workshops, her mind and body probably suffered the most appalling experience in her life. The incident, however, became an inherent part of the Hamer’s life story and the most shining illustration of the fact that she was resolved to endure anything on her way to become the first-class citizen.²⁴

In June 1963 she was travelling on the bus with other four female activists, young June Johnson, the SCLC activist Annell Ponder, Euvester Simpson, Rosemary Freeman and James West. The problems started when Hamer had been insulted by the driver and she did not take it with silence. Later the group started to sing freedom songs which made the driver so angry that at every stop along the

way he made a call to local authorities about his passengers. At the bus station in Winona there was already a group of police standing around. The activists entered the local café where they were refused to be served on the segregational basis and marched out by police officers. Euvester Simpson tried to use the rest room but she was also prevented from using it due to Jim Crow laws. The activists started to protest, which culminated in their arrest.²⁵

The nightmare of the black activists continued at a police station. The local representatives of the law were an illustrious example of what could happen if a racist and simple people came to power. Then only fifteen-year-old Johnson was the first one who had experienced the brutality of the local police force. Annell Ponder and James West were the following ones. The worst and most brutal beating, however, waited for Fannie. One of the policemen found out about Hamer's involvement in voter registration in Ruleville and after verbal insults he brought her to a bullpen where he forced under the threats the present black prisoners to beat her with a blackjack. The black men beat poor Fannie until they got weary and the patrolman left satisfied. Fannie Lou Hamer had been bearing the consequences of the beating for the rest of her life.²⁶

The group left the jail three days later after the fast intervention of influential people from the movement who fortunately managed to found out about the activists before something worse had happened to them. Hamer even had overheard the police staff debating about their possible "disappearance". After their release the FBI investigated the incident and the police officers stood trial on violating the constitutional rights of the six arrested people. In spite of the Hamer's emotional testimony none of the defendants had been punished as was the habit in the South at this time, though. Nevertheless, Justice Department at the intervention of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy also stopped the prosecution against Hamer and the others.²⁷

Fannie Lou Hamer may have come out from the prison physically weakened but definitely the experience made her stronger and more determined to continue her struggle for first-class citizenship of black people, and it was more than clear that no intimidation or threatening from the part of the Southern racists could have stopped her. As she expressed it in one of the interviews "We're tired of all this beatin', we're tired of takin' this. It's been a hundred years and we're still being

beaten and shot at, crosses are still being burned, because we want to vote. But I'm goin' to stay in Mississippi and if they shoot me down, I'll be buried here."²⁸

Hamer hurled herself into her personal mission trying to get as many people to register to vote as possible. She travelled across the south telling her life story, making speeches and singing hoping to persuade local people to register. She was very emphatic and powerful in her endeavor but the fear of black people was bigger. They were not willing to risk the loss of their jobs which would certainly throw them into the deepest poverty. Not to mention that black people who mingled with the civil rights workers often had to face the anger of white people, which could have always culminate in beating, arresting or other form of harassment.²⁹

Fannie Lou Hamer very soon realized the social problem of her effort and decided to develop a program offering poverty-stricken black Mississippians a social help in the form of giving them clothes and food. Very soon trucks loaded with food and clothes donated by sympathetic mainly northern supporters started to pour to Mississippi. Hamer was, however, strongly uncompromising as for who would receive the help. She conditioned the donation by applicant's attempt on registration.³⁰

Nevertheless, without regard to Hamer and COFO activist's effort to increase the number of Mississippi black voters, they were not very successful. The situation in the racist part of America where life of a black man did not have any value for white people unless they worked for them was hardly getting better. They had lived in isolation and been oppressed by whites for too long so that it was difficult for them to suddenly believe that something could have been changed and that they themselves could have changed something. It is a question what made Fannie Lou Hamer different from her people and where she had found her inner strength but her time should have come soon.

7.2 Mississippi Freedom Summer

This little light of mine,

I'm gonna let it shine

...

All over Mississippi

I'm gonna let it shine

Excerpt from the favorite spiritual song of Fannie Lou Hamer

The summer 1964 became a turning point for Mississippi. Robert Moses very soon understood that something must happen in the Deep South if they wanted to achieve some success and change the situation there. He was also angry with the government which did not offer any protect for black people in Mississippi, although they had asked for it many times. In January 1964 Moses proposed at COFO meeting to organize a mass voter registration campaign in the following summer. The COFO staff accepted his proposal and set three fundamental goals. They wanted to bring the situation in the south into stronger focus especially through hiring more white students willing to go down to Mississippi. They believed that if the white activists had been caught in a dangerous life threatening situation, the federal government would have finally intervened. The white student's participation would have also drawn more media attention.³¹

The second aim was "to use black political power to promote institutional reform."³² This meant involvement of black people in politics so that they could have influenced social advances of poor blacks.

The third important goal of the Freedom Summer was dealing with the increase of self-confidence and self-respect of people who had been living too long without common rights of a citizen.³³

The third objective was also related to the establishment of so called Freedom Schools which were founded to help to empower blacks. At the beginning of the sixties still a large amount of people were illiterate or semi-literate, which meant that they had not been eligible to register. The people attending Freedom Schools were not, however, only taught by volunteers to read and write or trained in knowledge of Constitution but also they learnt about African American history, the Civil Rights Movement and its organizations and their citizenship rights.³⁴

Before the Freedom Summer started, Fannie Lou Hamer had begun her political career together with another black female activist and former beautician a decade younger Victoria Gray Adams by running for Congress. Hamer since the beginning of the campaign knew well that there was only a little chance to win but she wanted black people to know that it was not any intricate thing to become involved in politics, and anybody could have done it. The other reason of her political involvement was that it had allowed her to let the world know about the situation in the south.³⁵

On June 8, 1964 the organizers held a hearing in Washington D.C. which could be marked as the beginning of the Freedom Summer. It was a mass meeting with the objective to discuss the organizational issues concerning the Freedom Summer, give basic instructions to the newly recruited students and inform the press. The highlight of the meeting was the testimony of several activists so that everybody came to know how the things are going in the Deep South. Among those who had testified Fannie Lou Hamer could not have been missing. It had been just few days after her unsuccessful bid for Congress. She told the world about the loss of her job after she had attempted to register, imprisonment and beating in Winona, the sterilization against her will and last but not least about her constant intimidation and harassment she had to face after her involvement with the movement. She also told the world about incessant threatening phone calls and letters not to mention that she had learnt that there was a hired person to kill her.³⁶

The Freedom Summer was also a breaking point as for the relationship between black and white people in Mississippi. Mississippi Delta was a place where a black man walked with downcast eyes and did not dare to just clap eyes on white woman and where any intermingling between a white woman and black man was punished by usually very painful death of a black man. In summer 1955 a news ran around the country about fourteen-year old Emmett Till from Chicago who came to visit his relatives in Mississippi Delta. He allegedly wolf-whistled at a young white woman at a local grocery shop and few days later was found in a local river after being evidently tortured to death. His case was widely publicized across the States but again the killers were acquitted.³⁷

With the Freedom Summer hundreds of white students including females started to flow to Mississippi where they very often imprudently showed themselves in the company of black men. Especially Fannie Lou Hamer bore it

with displeasure. She was afraid of white reactions because the miscegenation was still illegal and thus punished. Nevertheless, white Mississippians slowly had to get used to see black and white people together not only on employer-employee basis but on equally partnership. Black people, on the other hand, slowly overcame their subordinate reflexes which were entrenched too deep and stopped to have fear of just talking to white people.³⁸

7.3 The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

*If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now,
I question America, is this America, the land of the free
and the home of the brave
where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks
because our lives be threatened daily
because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?*
Fannie Lou Hamer, 1964

After the Freedom Summer there were not many people who would not have known charismatic Fannie Lou Hamer. The whole summer she was travelling across the South helping the activists to persuade local people to try to become a first-class citizen by registering. She again gave speeches talking about her experiences and giving moral strength to those whom they talked into it and singing everywhere and every time she had opportunity.³⁹

Apart from this she devoted to the newly established Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The grassroots party emerged in April 1964 as the reaction to disinclined white members of regular Mississippi Democratic Party who did their “best” to prevent black people from attending their precinct meetings. The MFDP gave voice to all the oppressed people, who could finally see that the black activists thought it seriously, when they were talking about black empowerment.⁴⁰

The MFDP set up its own executive committee and organized precinct meetings as well as country conventions. In August 1964 an important state convention took place in Jackson, Mississippi. More than eight hundred participants agreed on sending the delegation of sixty-eight people to the

upcoming Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Their aim was to try to unseat the regular Mississippi Democratic Party on the basis of the contention that the regular Democrats repudiated all the principles of democracy by preventing blacks to join them, while the Freedom Party was open for all citizens without exception.⁴¹

Among the members of the delegation there were three important female grassroots activists Victoria Gray Adams, Annie Devine and Fannie Lou Hamer who although had not had an opportunity to meet each other personally till that time, they found in one another kindred spirits and loyal workmates.⁴² Victoria Gray said about their mutual affection that

One thing we have in common, we're deeply spiritual people; that is one common denominator. We come from three totally different places; three totally different environments; never had heard of each other before the movement, and somehow, as we journeyed, our paths came together and remained so, throughout, and continues. And, the black woman was the only one who could do it and live.⁴³

Victoria Gray Adams was a grassroots leader from a small all-black village Palmers Crossing outside Hattisburg. She was angry about the black position in the south since an early childhood. Before she met the activists from the SNCC, her only protest had been that she refused to ride the buses because she could not have stood the humiliation. She, however, became a successful businesswoman with beauty products and influential member in her community. Since her village had been visited by the SNCC group in 1962, she was eager to become a registered voter. She had attempted to register five times before she was successful.⁴⁴

Later she met Septima Clark and under her influence started to teach in the SCLC Citizenship Education programs and later became its state director. She, however, continued to be the sonorous promoter of black registration drive.⁴⁵

Annie Devine spent most of her life in Canton, Mississippi. She was a teacher for a short time and later started to work for an insurance company. Her position as a debit manager and a devoted church worker helped her to gain an influential

position in Canton community and became a backbone of the local civil rights activities organized by the CORE.⁴⁶

These three women formed the core of the Atlantic City delegation and played an important role in its negotiations.

The MFDP's first step in their effort to unseat the regular Democrats was the hearing before the Credentials Committee. The members of Freedom Democrats bore the impressive testimony of the violence, intimidation and brutality of the Southern racists and the harassment of people interested in registration to vote. The MFDP effort was supported by the testimony of the prominent national leaders including Dr. Martin Luther King, James Farmer of the CORE and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the crucial testimony went out of the mouth of Fannie Lou Hamer. She made history that day telling her life story and making a good deal of Americans crying. Lyndon Johnson, whose candidacy for the future President was dependant on the Southern voters, felt that his candidacy is in danger and all beside himself organized emergency press conference to prevent the America to hear the whole Hamer's testimony. When Hamer and others learnt what had happened they were disappointed by Johnson's attitude but later it turned out that it served well to their thing as her testimony appeared in prime time on national TV.⁴⁸

Due to the behind-the-scenes political machinations the MFDP delegation was not successful. They were offered the most discussed compromise in the form of two at-large seats at the convention. It was definitely not a compromise at all and Fannie and many other people from delegation were perfectly aware of that. In spite of the pressure from many people including some of the national civil rights leaders, the Mississippi delegation refused the compromise. Victoria Adams said that the reason for their rejection was that to accept the compromise would have been the dishonor of all the Mississippians who trusted them.⁴⁹

You may get home and not have a house, you may get home and a member of your family might be missing, or you may not get home at all and so you know we are not going to accept anything less that what we came after, which is the real thing. Which is representation, which is the right to participate and if we

don't get that then we'll go back and take our chance and regroup and come to fight another day and that is precisely what we did.⁵⁰

Fannie Lou Hamer bitterly remarked that they “didn't come all this way for no two seats.”⁵¹

The MFDP's challenge to make the politics more righteous represented the starting point for coming efforts of southern black people to become more powerful in politics. It also probably helped to gain the support for the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which finally made illegal many discriminatory techniques to prevent blacks from voter registration including literacy tests or poll tax requirements.⁵²

Fannie Lou Hamer tried to run for political office several times and never ceased to struggle against racism and poverty. In 1964 she was invited to join the delegation to West Africa. She had an opportunity to see blacks in the places and occupying the jobs she could have never seen in the States. She was touched by what she had seen but she knew that her home was Mississippi. All she regretted was that the white slaveholders disrupted all their African background so they did not know anything about their ancestors neither they could have preserved their African names and had to accept a new name given to them by the whites.⁵³

Fannie Lou Hamer spent all her life in poverty. She suffered from bad health and few personal tragedies. She was disappointed by her unsuccessful attempts to gain a political office as well as by SNCC's turn to black separatism. She, however, found a new strength in founding an institution helping the poor Mississippians to become economically self-sufficient. Freedom Farms was a project based on the cooperation. The people cultivated land gained mostly through the donations where they grew their own corn and vegetables and reared animals making their own farming products. Fannie Lou Hamer was very proud of Freedom Farms which helped to struggle the poverty effectively. To stop the man's suffering was exactly what Fannie had always strived for.⁵⁴

Fannie Lou Hamer became the symbol of indomitable will and boundless inner strength who is credited with thousands black registered voters. She will be always respected for her courageous fight against racisms and poverty as well as admired for her personal magnetism, powerful speaking and inimitable singing. She is the embodiment of the grassroots leadership and a beautiful example that

things like gender, age, social class or health condition can prevent anybody from trying to fight for justice and better life of the others.

After the Freedom Summer Mississippi had never been the same. Mississippi stopped to be a closed society where the blacks and whites were two totally different worlds meeting only on the basis of industrial relationships or in a worse case in some violent clash and where a black was always the one who suffered. Blacks gained self-confidence that they could change things and knew that the world was on their side. The Freedom Summer did not change the feelings of local white people against the blacks but they had to be more careful because the world started to watch them. It was the starting point of improving conditions for black people in Mississippi but it was still a long journey to form a fully integrated society in which people of different races would live not next to each other but together and the journey is not at the end yet.⁵⁵

The Freedom Summer also showed the world that the cooperation among black and white people and women and men is possible and very fruitful. The racist Mississippi had to get used to seeing black and white people together on equal basis and it remained a choke pear to swallow for most of the white Mississippians for a long time.

Chapter 8

African American Women and the Black Power Movement

*Revolution is a serious thing,
the most serious thing about a revolutionary's life.
When one commits oneself to the struggle,
it must be for a lifetime.*
Angela Davis, 1974

The Civil Rights Movement till 1963 advocated and promoted mainly non-violent way of protest. It was a philosophy that influenced the most prominent leaders including Martin Luther King from the SCLC or Diane Nash and Jim Lawson from Nashville movement. The non-violent philosophy proclaims that we should love our enemies and never strike back. These leaders were aware that violence produced other violence and believed that if they wanted to gain the sympathy of the observers and people in the north, they must have not been seen using violence even if it had been in self-defense. They knew well how easy it was to falsify the facts.¹

Only few women turned up before 1963 who had not been ardent fans of the non-violent philosophy, among them were Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Ruby Smith Robinson or Gloria Richardson from Cambridge. They were more radical in achieving their goals and struggling for justice.

8.1 Gloria Richardson and the Cambridge Movement

*The choice that Cambridge and the rest of the nation finally faces
is between progress and anarchy,
between witnessing change and experiencing destruction.*
Gloria Richardson, 1974

At the beginning of the sixties Cambridge still was a city of high segregation and deep poverty and very isolated place in East Shore of Maryland. Between 1962 and 1964 it became a place of a fierce civil rights struggle who was led by relentless Gloria Richardson.²

Gloria St. Clair Hayes Richardson Dandridge was born in 1922 into a well-off family. Her grandfather was a member of local Cambridge Citizen Council for more than thirty years. However, his exceptional status did not spare him of humiliating segregationist practices. Richardson's grandfather humbly succumbed to the racist laws and his attitude was sometimes called a "gradualist" one. His granddaughter was all but gradualist. Although living in a quite wealth, she could not have overlooked the miserable conditions of people in Cambridge. In 1962 Richardson started to work for the SNCC in the local Cambridge Movement in accordance with non-violent strategy. She did not identify with this philosophy, though and started very soon becoming more militant. What she most opposed was the segregation and her organization, comprising also her mother and daughter, fought tough against it. They used all sorts of tactics from boycotts, sit-ins, picketing to various demonstrations and protests. On May 14, 1963 Gloria, her mother and daughter were among sixty-two arrested activists during a massive civil rights protest.³

Gloria Richardson was depicted in many newspapers and magazines as uncompromising and militant woman who pursued her goal relentlessly. For example a long article about Gloria Richardson appeared in a 1964 issue of *Ebony* magazine and bore the title on the front page "The Lady general in civil rights fight".⁴ Nevertheless, if some demonstration got out of control, the responsible authorities very often sent for Richardson to help them to settle the situation. As one of the members of White Citizen Council aptly observed, "We can't deal with her and we can't deal without her."⁵

The struggle against segregation was not the only Richardson's assigned target. She also wanted an economic improvement for black people. Although she had never experienced hunger or cold due to a lack of clothes, she was aware of the fact that what people most desired for was to escape from the poverty, which became the most burning issue of the sixties.⁶

Gloria Richardson did not represent a typical leader of the beginning of the sixties. She was a woman in a leadership position and frequently she did not act according to the rules of a non-violent strategy, which did not make her a favorite political activist among members of such organizations like the SCLC or SNCC. She simply led the fight on her own in accordance with her own principles and according to her best convictions.⁷

Maybe Richardson did not appear important for the authors of historical books on the Civil Rights Movement until very recently, but she was definitely an important model person for new female militant leaders of the late sixties and early seventies including one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party Kathleen Cleaver who labeled Richardson as one of the women who shaped her on her way to become a leader.

I learned what heroism and leadership meant from Diane Nash, who led student demonstrations in Nashville, Tennessee, and later organized Freedom Rides, from Gloria Richardson, who mobilized the black community to fight segregation in Cambridge, Maryland, and from Ruby Doris Robinson, who helped coordinate the 1964 Mississippi Summer project. It never once entered my head that women could not be civil rights leaders or organizers.⁸

8.2 Ruby Doris Smith

A Pillar of the SNCC Administration and a Young Radical

*[Ruby Doris] had this sense of wanting to
know about the different participants.*

How were people doing, were you all right or not.

She had this sense of caring about the different individuals.

John Lewis, 1989

Cleaver also mentioned Ruby Doris Smith who in her short career as a civil rights activist managed to make her mark as a brave and hard-working leader with a strong sense of justice.

Ruby Doris Smith entered into civil rights struggle when she was only eighteen years old in 1961. She became a part of the delegation sent to Rock Hill with the aim to start a campaign “jail, no bail” together with Diane Nash and other two male activists. Later Smith joined Nash in her effort to continue Freedom Rides after a bloody suppression of Riders in Birmingham, Alabama.⁹

Smith had been often praised by her colleagues and friends for her courage and strong interest in people around her and their feelings. She decided to abandon university to be able to fully devote to the civil rights struggle. She was given

more and more responsibility inside the SNCC becoming an assistant of its chairman James Forman.¹⁰

Smith was known for her strict and uncompromising style of running administration especially when she became the SNCC's Executive Secretary in 1966 effectively controlling the organization's money probably to the wrath of some members who wanted to misuse the SNCC's funds.¹¹

In June 1966 Smith was present at a gathering when a new SNCC's chairman Stokely Carmichael had a famous speech after he had been arrested for the twenty-seventh time. The crowd, together with Smith, was strongly touched by Carmichael's words of the necessity of "black power". These two words shaped the new era of black civil rights movement which slowly turned into a militant way of fight. Black people started to be proud of being black and Smith, although not without objections, was among them.¹² Unfortunately her stressful and demanding work for the organization which she tried to cohere with a traditional family role took its cruel toll when Smith died of cancer at the age of twenty-five.

She also had to deal with male chauvinism same as other women in higher positions inside the organization.¹³ As Kathleen Cleaver, one of the Smith's colleagues, remarked: "What killed Ruby Doris was the constant outpouring of work, work, work, work, with being married, having a child, the constant conflicts, the constant struggle that she was subjected to because she was a woman. She was destroyed by the movement."¹⁴

Nevertheless, Ruby Smith Robinson remained one of the most important female activists during the SNCC acting and became the embodiment of an immense courage and big heart who selflessly sacrificed herself for the well-being of others.

8.3 Angela Davis

The Most Famous Female Political Prisoner at the Turn of the Sixties and Seventies

*Nothing in the world made me angrier than inaction,
than silence. The refusal or inability to do something, say something
when a thing needed doing or saying, was unbearable.
The watchers, the head shakers, the back turners
made my skin prickle.
Angela Davis, 1973*

In 1974 was published an autobiography written by only twenty-eight-year old Angela Davis who was in her young age already a well-known person not only across the United States.

Angela Davis became a symbol of political imprisonment and her name became almost synonymous with a revolutionary woman. She was also a proud communist member and an admirer of Marx's philosophy and socialist countries which she had visited them all.

Davis who spent fourteen months in several prisons became an ardent fighter for the improvement of conditions for prisoners, especially the political and black ones. Later she ardently advocated the abolishment of prison system at all considering them to be obsolete.

Angela Davis also committed herself in the struggle against male chauvinism always considering herself to be men's equal. She never let gender prevent her from fighting hard for justice alongside men and was always proud of being a woman.

Apart from her political activism and teaching career, she wrote several books on history of African American women or prisons.

Angela Davis was born in 1944 in Birmingham, Alabama. Her mother was very active in the Civil Rights Movement and always imbued her daughter to be proud of being black and at the same time not to feel hatred against white people.¹⁵ Angela's mother "through her own political work...learned that it was possible for white people to walk out of their skin and respond with the integrity of human beings."¹⁶

Before Angela started to attend school, she had spent a summer in New York. For the first time, she experienced the life in a desegregated locality and relished a

real freedom. After her return to Birmingham, she realized her life could not have been the same. She fully realized the omnipresent constraints of Jim Crow laws and started to desire to challenge the degrading system.¹⁷ Angela Davis also noticed an absurd thing that the segregational laws were relating only to American blacks. If she had been for example from some Caribbean island, she would have been treated in a more dignified way. She made her first personal attack against segregation when she was a teenager using exactly this ludicrous and at the same time ridiculous part of American racism. She and her younger sister Fania pretended to be the tourists from Martinique intending to buy shoes in a segregated shoe shop in Birmingham. Young Angela enjoyed the smarminess of the owner of the shop while he was trying to converse with them and exulted in their triumph when she started to speak fluent English revealing thus their true identities to the astonished faces of the sellers.¹⁸

She did not, however, felt anger only about segregation at her young age but she also could not have overseen that many of her schoolmates and friends were living in poverty and that she was rather an exception coming from family not suffering from lack of food, clothes or bad housing. She confessed later that she felt so sorry about her schoolmates who could not have afforded to buy lunch that she had stolen money from her father's wallet and bought lunch for her them.¹⁹

Angela Davis was definitely one of the best educated civil rights leaders of her time. She studied at Elisabeth Irwin High School in New York where she for the first time acquainted herself with socialist thinking and discovered for her so important *Communist Manifesto* which shaped the future direction of her life.²⁰ "The Communist Manifesto hit me like a bolt of lightening. I read it avidly, finding in it answers to many of the seemingly unanswerable dilemmas which had plagued me. I read it over and over again, not completely understanding every passage or every idea, but enthralled by the possibility of a communist revolution here. I began to see the problems of Black people within the context of a large working-class movement."²¹

After high school Angela started to study at Brandeis University where she received a full scholarship. She was one of only three black students there all of whom were female. She chose French literature as her major but incessantly read major philosophical works which eventually led her into Germany where she studied Philosophy. All the time she was very interested in the ongoing civil rights

activities back in the United States. While she was spending one year in France she was horrified by the news of church bombing in her hometown Birmingham in 1963 in which four girls found their death. Davis personally knew three of them.²²

Although Davis was happy studying philosophy in Germany, she also felt very powerless and useless being so far away from all events dealing with Civil Rights Movement about which she only read in newspapers but could not have participate in them. After two years of studying in Germany, she decided that it was her time to come back and finally become involved. She entered the famous University of California in San Diego where she started to work on her doctorate's degree.²³

Angela Davis returned from Frankfurt to the United States in 1967. It was the time when the Civil Rights Movement moved more forward from a non-violent strategy to more militant one. A year ago young black men headed by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale formed the most militant organization in the history of the United States, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. These black men dressed in leather jackets, blue shirts and wearing black berets “were calling for an end, not only to discrimination, an end not only to the denial of civil rights, but to all forms of oppression of blacks – social, political, and economic – on all fronts.”²⁴ They demanded all these rights with the weapon in their hands adverting to the right of American citizen to carry a gun to be able to defend themselves. It is no wonder that their biggest enemies represented policemen whom they called “pigs” and they were under constant surveillance of FBI.²⁵

Davis soon found out that it would not be easy to participate in civil rights struggle or enter some of the existing civil rights organizations. Nobody dared to accept somebody they did not know. Finally she decided to form her own organization on the campus. It was called a Black Student Union and Davis became the leader of the black movement at the university. Her new position brought her nearer to the leading black civil rights organizations including the SNCC, US-organization led by Karenga, Black Panther Political Party (which had nothing to do with Newton and Seals' Party) and also to the people from the Communist Party.²⁶

Thanks to Ron Karenga Davis also got to know that women would have never had it easy among men in the struggle because men very often considered women to be their inferiors and Karenga and his men exceeded everybody in that opinion.

In organizing for this rally back in San Diego, I ran headlong into a situation which was to become a constant problem in my political life. I was criticized very heavily, especially by male members of Karenga's organization, for doing "a man's job." Women should not play leadership roles, they insisted. A woman was supposed to "inspire" her man and educate his children. The arrangements for the publicity of the rally, for instance, had been in a man's hand, but because his work left much to be desired, I began to do simply to make sure that it got done. It was also ironical that precisely those who criticized me most did the least to ensure the success of the rally.²⁷

Angela Davis also started to contemplate becoming a member of the Communist Party. Her soul longed for revolution and she hoped that joining the Communist Party would be the best step but as she still had many unanswered questions concerning communism, she eventually decided to join the Black Panther Political Party. The BPPP later merged with the SNCC because the Black Panther Party founded its branch in Los Angeles and they strongly opposed the fact that there would be another party with almost identical name.²⁸

Davis worked for the SNCC but she was aware that they did not look with favor upon Marx and his socialism considering it to be a white "thing". Nevertheless, their Los Angeles' organization was quite independent of the national SNCC that had their own goals and programs. Davis became the director of one of their programs the "Liberation School". They soon became the most important organization in Los Angeles especially thanks to the People's Tribunal Committee whose main objection was the struggle with the brutality and hard repression of Los Angeles police.²⁹

Unfortunately the Los Angeles SNCC started to run up against two serious problems. The first one was dealing with the fact that the organization was led mainly by women. The late sixties started to be very sensitive to women in high positions and Angela Davis was perfectly aware of it. The worse was, however,

that most of the men who criticized the women were not very hard-working for the organization.³⁰

Some of the brothers came around only for staff meetings (sometimes), and whenever we women were involved in something important, they began to talk about “women taking over the organization” - calling it a matriarchal coup d'état. All the myths about Black women surfaced. Bobbie, Rene and I were too domineering; we were trying to control everything including the men – which meant by extension that we wanted to rob them of their manhood. By playing such a leading role in the organization, some of them insisted, we were aiding and abetting the enemy, who wanted to see Black men weak and unable to hold their own.³¹

The second problem dealt with the fear of black people of communism. The most important man in the organization Franklin Alexander was a member of US Communist Party as well as his wife Kendra and everybody knew that Angela Davis had a very close relationship to them too. It was eventually its communist background that broke the neck of the organization.³²

Angela Davis had a strong urge to “become a part of a serious revolutionary party”³³ and finally decided to become a member of the Communist Party. She joined the Che-Lumumba Club the black branch of the party in Los Angeles.

She divided her life in teaching in the Philosophy Department and work for the organization. They very soon started to cooperate with local section of the Black Panther Party (BPP) who wanted her to work for their political education program. The year 1969 became critical for the BPP. The powerful chief of FBI J. Edgar Hoover declared war on the BPP calling it “the single greatest threat to the internal security of the United States”³⁴ and as a result in one year 27 Panthers were killed and mainly the most charismatic and powerful ones. After the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 and Martin Luther King in 1968, Hoover and racist part of white America was more than anything afraid of a new Messiah of black people, and they did anything to prevent it including the most despicable murders.³⁵

One of them was also George Jackson who was put in prison when he was only eighteen years old for robbery of fifty dollars. His sentence read from one year to

life imprisonment. He was a symbol of unjustifiable imprisonment of a black man because the prisons were full of such men. George Jackson was something more, though. He became the embodiment of invincible will, courage and strength.³⁶

His younger brother Jonathan loved his brother more than anything else and his meeting with Angela Davis became crucial one. Angela Davis became close to both brothers trying to help George and other two men to get out of the prison after they had been accused of killing a jailer. Angela Davis' Che-Lumumba Club with the help of UCLA and support of the BPP founded Soledad Brothers Defense Committee. Angela Davis started to heavily criticize the conditions in American prisons. She accused poverty and lack of good jobs for black men of the fact that the prisons were overcrowded with black men.³⁷

In the meantime Angela Davis started to feel the consequences of her Communist membership and her political activity. She was not hired again as a teacher at UCLA (a euphemism for being expelled) for next year and the more serious punishment should have come soon.³⁸

Jonathan Jackson, who knew his brother mostly from behind the bars, decided to save his brother at all costs and during a trial with his brother Jonathan burst in the court taking hostage a Judge. During the action both Jonathan and the Judge died. Angela Davis was later accused of kidnapping, murder and conspiracy because one of the guns was registered in her name. She became the most sought-after person in the States and after she had been caught, she became probably the most famous political prisoner not only in the States. The punishment for such accusations was death and she knew that.³⁹

She spent most of her fourteen months isolated from other prisoners. The authorities proclaimed that they had had to keep her in isolation because of her own safety but Davis knew that they were too afraid of her Communist "fame". During her fourteenth months in different prisons she became an ardent objector of conditions in prisons and after her release she became a member of an organization striving to abolish the prisons at all.⁴⁰

Angela Davis and Soledad Brothers' cases definitely opened the eyes of many Americans and compelled them to become active in the Civil Rights Movement.⁴¹ Unfortunately while Angela Davis came out of prison deprived of all accusations alive, her soul mate George Jackson was killed in the prison in August 1971. Nobody was accused of this horrendous crime which paralyzed whole America.

His funeral attracted ten thousands people from all the corners of the States. George Jackson and his two accused co-prisoners were finally acquitted of their charges.⁴²

Angela Davis became a true revolutionary woman and although many people could not have put up with her Communist involvement, she definitely made a great contribution to the fight for civil rights of black people. She is still very active in political, social and educational spheres. She keeps on fighting for abolishment of prison system in the United States and she became a very ardent defender of women rights. She is also an author of several books dealing with black women, prisons and politics.⁴³

8.4 Elaine Brown

A Woman Who Led the Black Panthers

I believed with everything in me that it could be done.

I believed with everything in me that I could do it.

Elaine Brown, 1992

If someone starts to talk about Black Panthers, everybody usually imagines tough men in leather jackets, black berets and weapons in their hands. This picture changed radically in 1974 when the Black Panthers' leader Huey P. Newton was forced to go to exile in Cuba to avoid prison and as his substitute appointed a loyal member of the Panthers and his former lover Elaine Brown.⁴⁴

Elaine Brown managed to work her way from a half-naked waitress in a famous club for whites, through a lover of a rich famous white writer up to the leader of the most militant group in the United States. She was born in 1943 in North Philadelphia as an illegitimate child to a hard-working woman who loved her only child more than anything else. She managed to enroll Elaine in experimental elementary school for "exceptional" children. Elaine loved to be at school among mostly rich Jewish children so much as she hated to come back home. She lived in the poorest part of Philadelphia and her childish dream was to become white because she believed that it meant wealth and good life.⁴⁵

When Elaine was twenty-two years old, she moved to California to escape the poverty of her home and one-bedroom flat she shared with her mother without the

slightest knowledge about or interest in the black Civil Rights Movement. She hoped to become a song-writer but at the beginning she was happy to have at least a place to stay and something to eat. She started to work in a famous night club as a waitress and soon met the cream of the society around Frank Sinatra. She became a lover of Jay Kennedy, a well-known writer and a communist, who let her in on the struggle of African Americans for their rights. She was an acute listener and fast learner. He also forced her to accept herself as a black woman.⁴⁶ “During that first year we were together, Jay told me something I was reluctant to hear. He taught me to begin to appreciate myself as a black woman.”⁴⁷

Elaine Brown slowly started to work for Black Movement in California. She worked for the newspaper published by the Black Congress.⁴⁸ The Black Congress “was an umbrella group, made up of virtually every black organization in the area... [It] was the expression of a collective desire to emphasize the common will and serve the common interests of black people.”⁴⁹

Through the Congress’ meetings Elaine got to know various organizations dealing with civil rights. She despised Ron Karenga’s US Organization from the same reasons as Angela Davis. She differed from other women in the Black Panther Party in the fact that she was always reluctant to be inferior to men and always wanted men to treat her on equal basis. She struggled incessantly with male chauvinism when she was in the BBP, but Karenga and his men were champions in treating women inferiorly and Brown had never had respect for this at that time powerful man.⁵⁰

On the other hand she started to be attracted with men in black leather jackets and berets and very soon became a zealous member of Black Panthers. There was a significant difference between the US Organization and BPP and very soon they became the fiercest rivals in Los Angeles. Karenga was most afraid of losing the position of the “most militant black in the area.”⁵¹

Karenga promoted the idea that the development of an African-based culture among blacks would unite blacks and lead to black liberation. This represented what was generally referred to as a “cultural nationalist” philosophy. The main feature of Karenga’s particular program was the denigration of all things white, or not black. The Black Panther Party held

that the freedom of black people was tied to liberation of all oppressed people, including poor and working-class whites.⁵²

Elaine Brown soon gained a significant position among both men and women of the BPP. She was also exceptional through her musical talent. She wrote celebrational songs about strong black men mainly from the Black Panther Party and eventually published two records of these songs with Motown Records company and made a close friend with its vice president Suzanne de Passe. They both had to struggle with the well-known issue dealing with a woman in a high position.⁵³

Elaine Brown and other women in the BPP started various programs to help poor people to survive everyday fight with their poverty. They started with Breakfast for Children program which provided at least one meal a day for children. Later they expanded their activity founding a free clinic and 'busing-to-prisons program, the first in the party, which provided transport and expenses to black families without the means to visit relatives in the vast California prison network."⁵⁴ Although the Black Panthers still led war against Los Angeles police and the US Organization, it was precisely these programs that helped the Black Panthers gained the support of the masses of ordinary people as well as many rich white people including Hollywood actors, directors, producers who subsidized Party with funds.⁵⁵

Elaine Brown also had to cope with the problem inside the Party because of the two directions of its concerns. The Party's minister of information Eldridge Cleaver was forced to stay several years in exile and invited Elaine to visit him in spring 1970 abroad and travel with him to various socialist countries including North Korea. Soon after her arrival to Soviet Union, she realized her mistake. Cleaver strongly opposed the Programs which he considered useless and anti-revolutionary. He wanted the Black Panthers to be more militant again killing their enemies and be a true revolutionary organization. He held Brown abroad for almost three months but during her stay Huey Newton, the most important man in the BPP despite spending the last three years in prison, was finally released. Cleaver believed that Newton would support him in his attitude and Elaine Brown could have finally returned to the States where she was supposed to inform Newton about Cleaver's visions.⁵⁶

The encounter with Newton at the airport was fateful for both Brown and the Panther Party. She immediately became his lover and his right-hand in leading the BPP again. Newton dismissed Eldridge Cleaver and fully supported the Party's Programs. Elaine Brown became the editor of the Black Panther newspaper and had to fight again with male ego this time with other important Panther Bobby Seale. He was hopeless in writing articles but wanted all of them to be published. First Brown spent a large amount of time giving a decent form to his articles but later refused to publish them completely, which made Bobby Seale angry to that point that he started to criticize her incompetence and tried to complicate her work as much as possible. The last straw was that due to his mistake he castigated Brown with ten lashes as a punishment for her being one hour late with getting the newspaper ready for publishing. Newton finally worked it out with assigning Seale with the expanding of Survival Programs.⁵⁷

The death of George Jackson made the party become more involved in the fight with the conditions in American prisons. As Elaine Brown put it: "The party had put forth the most radical and forceful demand on behalf of all black prisoners in America. We had given body to our rhetoric with 'free busing to prisons' and free legal-aid programs. We published articles about prisoner injustices, set up a correspondence network between inside and outside, sent reading materials, money, and other things necessary to at least survive years of life in prison. The Black Panther Party provided a voice and hope for thousands of black inmates."⁵⁸

In 1972 Elaine Brown and Bobby Seale announced their attempt to enter into politics of West Oakland. Bobby Seale declared his intention to become the next Mayor of Oakland and Brown intended to run for a City Council seat. They concentrated their campaign on struggle with poverty of both black and white people as well on the lack of good education. Although they eventually lost their bids, the most significant fruit of their effort was opening of a new school: The Intercommunal Youth Institute, which was a Newton's biggest dream, was a special school for black children which eventually turned into the biggest achievement of the Black Panther Party in the seventies.⁵⁹

In 1974 Huey Newton was arrested for murder of a young prostitute. He escaped to Cuba and chose Elaine Brown to lead the Black Panther Party. Elaine Brown was very well aware that it would be a hard blow for the male part of the BPP to have a woman in the highest position. In addition she appointed more

women into leading positions of the Party's administration because she needed people around her she could have really trusted. She had to have, however, a strong backup consisting of few men who protected their new leader.⁶⁰

A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. A woman attempting the role of leadership was, to my proud black Brothers, making an alliance with the "counter-revolutionary, man-hating, lesbian, feminist white bitches." It was a violation of some Black Power principle that was left undefined. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of black people.⁶¹

Nevertheless, Elaine Brown accomplished to make a significant piece of work during her four-year long Black Panther leadership in political, economical and social spheres. She continued in expanding the Survival Programs and improving their school for black children and started new projects dealing with community housing conditions. She also worked hard to make Lionel Wilson to become the first black Mayor of West Oakland and became an influent and only black member of Oakland Council for Economic Development so that she could have secured thousands of jobs for local black people. She also made possible for Huey Newton to come back to the States and he was soon acquitted of all his charges. Nevertheless, after Huey's return to California in 1977 and his repeated assumption of the party's leader position, the BPP started slowly but surely to decline. Men in the BPP looked up at him as their savior and believed that the organization would return to the old orders where men had ruled over women. Huey came back as a broken and insensitive man, though. He soon returned to his cocaine addiction and almost retired from public life.⁶²

Elaine Brown seeing the organization in decline together with her stressful and exhausting work for the BPP suffered a mental breakdown. She eventually left the BPP and started a new life with her mother and only daughter she had with one of the Black Panthers. She had never regretted her engagement in the Civil Rights Movement and her involvement in the most militant organization of the Movement, though.⁶³

Now I was flying away, abandoning what I had sworn to die for, leaving comrades and friends, and so much work undone. Yet I could not be so arrogant as to imagine I was indispensable. I could not be so mad as to sacrifice my life to a dream that was dying. The pain was entwined in the complexity, for I loved the Black Panther Party.⁶⁴

Conclusion

At the beginning of the 20th century the African American female was a victim of various widespread stereotypical judgments about black women. She occupied the lowest position in American society. She was black and she was a woman and most probably poor. She had to thus struggle on three different battlefields, usually at the same time, and it made her an exceptionally strong human being and a true heroine of American history. During the Civil Rights Movement she acquired a new position in American society as a hard-working, incredibly courageous, self-scarifying and bright woman who was willing to sacrifice everything but her dignity and rights to become a first-class citizen of the United States.

I have decided to devote my thesis to the most extraordinary African-American women who had fought in various spheres using different weapons but always for the improvement of the living conditions of black people. I have attempted to depict the history of the Civil Rights Movement through the lives of those women and show the important and irreplaceable role they played in the Movement's struggle. Apart from their fight alongside their men for their civil rights they also displayed an immense social feeling with the poorest and most oppressive black people.

Despite the fact that these women usually had not been seen on magazine covers and very often worked from behind the scenes, their contribution to the civil rights struggle is indisputable. They were also ignored by authors of historical books dealing with Civil Rights Movement for a long time, but recently people have started to be interested in those women and their experiences. Many books (mostly autobiographies or biographies) were published, as well conferences held in which the black woman played a title role. The public finally acknowledged the importance of the participation of African American women in the Civil Rights Movement who fought not only for respect of their race but also for respect for their gender.

In my work I have dealt with women who had different goals and visions they wanted to achieve. Some of them wanted better education for black children and fairer conditions for black teachers. Others decided to fight against cruel lynchings or the degrading system of segregation. Some of them believed that the

power lies in the right to express themselves politically, either through their votes or through gaining a political function.

There were also women who inclined to a true revolutionary change and wanted a social revolution in the United States or even involved themselves in militant organizations usually associated with most tough men and managed to gain highly respected positions in them.

Those women usually had to fight harder than men to demonstrate their abilities. At the same time they had to cope with escalating male ego, especially with the appearance of Muslim organizations, Karenga's nationalists or even the Black Panthers, who saw a black woman mostly only as someone who should serve them and be absolutely obedient. These women, however, were more than proud of their femininity and knew that they were as good as their men and refused to subordinate to the whims of these men.

As I said at the very beginning I did not contemplate decreasing the merits of black men but I wanted to show that they had equal partners in their struggle in black women and that they both deserved the credit for achieving their rights as first-class citizens of the United States of America.

List of Abbreviations from my Thesis

BBP	Black Panther Party
COFO	Council of Federated Organizations
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
HFS	Highlander Folk School
MFDP	Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party
MIA	Montgomery Improvement Association
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
SNCC	Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee
WCC	White Citizens Council
WPC	Women's Political Council

Notes

Chapter 1

- 1 see my own thesis, Alena Faltová, *The Life of Afro-American Women in the South during the 19th Century*, B. A. Thesis (Olomouc, Palacký University, 2007) 13-18.
- 2 Faltová 23-26.
- 3 see Faltová 13-18.
- 4 see Faltová 23-26.
- 5 see Faltová 23-26.
- 6 see Faltová 7.
- 7 see Faltová 7-9.
- 8 see Faltová 9-12.
- 9 see Faltová 27-28.
- 10 see Faltová 13-18.
- 11 see Faltová 11-12, 31.
- 12 see The Declaration of Independence of the United States.
- 13 see Faltová 32-33.
- 14 see Gerda Lerner, ed. *Black Women in White America* (1972; New York: Vintage Books, 1992) 76-90. See also Faltová 32-33.
- 15 see Lerner 33.
- 16 see Lerner 99-101.
- 17 see Faltová 32-33
- 18 see Faltová 35. See also Lerner 326-329.
- 19 see Faltová 35. See also Lerner 326-329.
- 20 quoted in Lerner 64.
- 21 see Lerner 63-66, 326-328.
- 22 quoted in Lerner 65.
- 23 see Lerner 566-572.
- 24 quoted in Lerner 569-570.
- 25 see Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter. The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1984) 64-74.

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- 1 see Giddings, 17-18.
- 2 see Giddings 17-20.
- 3 see Lerner 193-194.
- 4 quoted in Lerner 202.
- 5 see Lerner 193-215. See also Giddings, 17-31.
- 6 see Lerner 193-215. See also Giddings, 17-31.
- 7 see Lerner 193-215. See also Giddings, 17-31.
- 8 see Lerner 193-215. See also Giddings, 17-31.
- 9 see Lerner 205-211. See also Giddings, 18-31.
- 10 quoted in Lerner 207. See also Lerner 205-211.
- 11 see Giddings, 22-24.
- 12 Giddings, 24.
- 13 Giddings, 28.
- 14 see Giddings, 26-31. See also Lerner 199-205.

- 15 see Giddings, 27-31.
- 16 quoted in Giddings, 29.
- 17 Giddings, 29.
- 18 see Giddings, 28-31.
- 19 see Giddings, 89-94. See also Lerner 196-199.
- 20 see Giddings, 89-94.
- 21 Lerner 198.
- 22 see Lerner 196-199.

Chapter 3

- 1 see Lerner 134.
- 2 see Lerner 135-137.
- 3 see Lerner 137-139.
- 4 see Lerner 139-140.
- 5 Lerner 138.
- 6 see Lerner 138-139.
- 7 Lerner 139.
- 8 see Lerner 138-143.
- 9 see Lerner 142.
- 10 Lerner 142.
- 11 see Lerner 142-143.
- 12 see Lerner 134-135, 143.
- 13 see Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty. The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (United Kingdom: Longman, 1998) 24.
- 14 Lerner 114.
- 15 see Lerner 114-116.
- 16 see Lerner 116-117.
- 17 see Lerner 114-117.
- 18 see Grace Jordan McFadden, "Septima P. Clark and the Struggle for Human Rights," *Women in the Civil Rights Movement. Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941 – 1965*, eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, Barbara Woods (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 88-90.
- 19 see Donna Langston, "The Women of Highlander," *Women in the Civil Rights Movement. Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941 – 1965*, eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, Barbara Woods (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 145-156.
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- 21 see Walker, interview with Septima Clark.
- 22 see McFadden 89-90. See also Sandra B. Oldendorf, "The South Carolina Sea Island Citizenship Schools, 1957-1961," *Women in the Civil Rights Movement. Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941 – 1965*, eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, Barbara Woods (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 172-179.
- 23 see Langston 153-165. See also Walker, interview with Septima Clark.
- 24 see Langston 163.
- 25 see Langston 162-164. See also Walker, interview with Septima Clark.

26 see McFadden 93-95. See also Walker, interview with Septima Clark.
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28 see Walker, interview with Septima Clark.
29 quoted in McFadden 93.

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2 see Robinson 34-35. See also Smith, interview with Jo Ann Robinson. See also Interview with Rosa Parks.
3 see Robinson 20.
4 see Smith, interview with Jo Ann Robinson.
5 Robinson 35-36.
6 see Robinson 36-37.
7 see Robinson 36.
8 see Robinson 77.
9 see Rosa Parks, "'Tired of Giving in' The Launching of the Montgomery Bus Boycott" *Sisters in the Struggle. African American Women in the Civil Rights–Black Power Movement*, eds. Bettye Collier-Thomas, V. P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001) 61-64.
10 see Mary Fair Burks, "Trailblazers: Women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott," *Women in the Civil Rights Movement. Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941 – 1965*, eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, Barbara Woods (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990)72.
11 see Robinson 23.
12 see interview with Rosa Parks. See also Parks, *Tired of Giving in*, 61-62.
13 see Robinson 43.
14 Parks, *Tired of Giving in*, 61.
15 see Robinson 20-23.
16 see Smith, interview with Jo Ann Robinson.
17 see Robinson 22-23.
18 Robinson 23.
19 Robinson 31.
20 see Robinson 30-33.
21 see Robinson 9-10.
22 see Robinson 15-17.

23 see Robinson 15-16
 24 see Robinson 43-52. See also Smith, interview with Jo Ann Robinson.
 25 Robinson 25.
 26 see Robinson 37-38.
 27 see Robinson 42-43.
 28 see Robinson 43.
 29 see Robinson 45.
 30 Robinson 45-46.
 31 see Robinson 46-47.
 32 see Robinson 54-55.
 33 see Robinson 54-55.
 34 see Robinson 25.
 35 see Robinson 39-41.
 36 Robinson 41.
 37 see Cook 85, 100.
 38 see Robinson 138-140.
 39 see Robinson 140-141.
 40 see Robinson 139-141. See also Smith, interview with Jo Ann Robinson.
 41 see Robinson 139-141.
 42 see Robinson 53-57.
 43 Robinson 67-68.
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 46 Robinson 64.
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 49 see 265-266.
 50 see Giddings, 265-266. See also Interview with E. D. Nixon
 51 see Robinson 53-56.
 52 see Robinson 57-60; Smith, interview with Jo Ann Robinson.
 53 see Robinson 57-60.
 54 see Robinson 57-60.
 55 see Robinson 57-60.
 56 see Robinson 61-64. See also Smith, interview with Jo Ann Robinson.
 57 Parks 70.
 58 see Parks 69-71.
 See also Faltová 36-38. See also Lerner 566-572.
 59 see Robinson 61-64.
 60 see Cook 102-104.
 61 see Robinson 93.
 62 see Robinson 77-90.
 63 see Robinson 111-115.
 64 see Robinson 111-115.
 65 see Robinson 111-115.
 66 see Robinson 111-128.

67 see Robinson 119-123.
68 see Robinson 119-123.
69 see Robinson 117-118.
70 see Robinson 123.
71 see Cook 104. See also Robinson 123, 130-131.
72 Robinson 136.
73 Robinson 137.
74 see Robinson 136-137.
75 see Robinson 135-147.
76 see Robinson 151-155.
77 see Robinson 151-155.
78 see Robinson 159-161.
79 see Robinson 161-165.
80 see Parks 74.
81 see Robinson 167-168.
82 Smith, interview with Jo Ann Robinson.
83 Smith, interview with Jo Ann Robinson.

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3 quoted in Garrow 97.
4 see Garrow 97.
5 see Walker, interview with Baker.
6 see Barbara Ransby 13-15.
7 see Ransby 13-15.
8 see Ransby 13-22.
9 see Faltová 13-18.
10 see Ransby 16-22.
11 quoted in Ransby 21.
12 see see Ransby 16-22.
13 see Ransby 16-22.
14 see Walker, interview with Baker.
15 see Ransby 67-92.
16 Ransby 92-93.
17 see Ransby 92-93.
18 Lerner 347.
19 Lerner 347.
20 see Carol Mueller, "Ella Baker and the Origins of 'Participatory Democracy'," *Women in the Civil Rights Movement. Trailblazers & Torchbearers 1941 – 1965*, eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, Barbara Woods (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 60-61.
21 quoted in Mueller 51.
22 see Ransby 132-142.

- 23 see Ransby 136-137.
- 24 Ransby 139.
- 25 quoted in Ransby 140.
- 26 see Ransby 140-142.
- 27 see Ransby 142-147.
- 28 Lerner 347.
- 29 Lerner 348. See also Ransby 148-162.
- 30 Walker, interview with Baker.
- 31 see Walker, interview with Baker. See also Garrow 100-102.
- 32 Garrow 100-104.
- 33 Walker, interview with Baker.
- 34 see Walker, interview with Baker.
- 35 see Walker, interview with Baker.
- 36 Walker, interview with Baker.
- 37 Walker, interview with Baker.
- 38 Walker, interview with Baker.
- 39 see Lerner 350-352.
- 40 Lerner 351.
- 41 see Cook 113-115.
- 42 see Ransby 238-246.
- 43 see Garrow 131-134.
- 44 see Garrow 131-134.
- 45 see Walker, interview with Baker. See also Ransby 239-253.
- 46 see Walker, interview with Baker.
- 47 Walker, interview with Baker.
- 48 Mueller 56.
- 49 see Mueller 51-68.
- 50 Lerner 352.

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22 see Cook 123-125.

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13 see Mills 23-42.

14 see McMillen, interview with Hamer.

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27 see Mills 66-77.

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32 Cook 166.

33 see Cook 166.

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35 see Mills 89-94.

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38 see Lee 158-160.

39 see Mills 99-106.

40 see Mills 105-110.

41 see Mills 105-108.

42 see Lee 125.

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Shrnutí v češtině

Úvod

Ve své diplomové práci jsem se pokusila podívat na Hnutí za občanská práva Afro-Američanů ve Spojených státech amerických skrz prostřednictvím příběhů jeho nejvýznamnějších žen. Pokusila jsem se zjistit, které faktory nejvíce ovlivnily klíčové vůdčí osobnosti ženského hnutí, které se odmítly přizpůsobit a podřídit diskriminačnímu, nespravedlivému a hlavně často násilnému chování bílých obyvatel převážně amerického Jihu. Často se jako počátek Hnutí za občanská práva označuje statečný čin Rosy Parksové, které odmítla 1. prosince roku 1955 v Montgomery v Alabamě pustit sednout bílého muže, ačkoliv ji tak přikazoval segregační zákon. Její vzdor a následné zatčení rozpoutalo první masovou akci v dějinách afro-amerického národa v podobě autobusového bojkotu. Bojkot, který trval celý jeden rok, vyžadoval od afro-amerického obyvatelstva nezměrnou vůli a obrovskou vzájemnou soudržnost. Skončil prvním větším úspěchem, když Nejvyšší soud přikázal městu Montgomery integrovat veřejnou autobusovou dopravu.

Spousta afro-amerických žen ale úspěšně bojovala za práva černošských obyvatel ještě dříve, než Rosa Parks odvážně vzdorovala zákonu Jimmiho Crowa – toto byl jiný název pro segregační zákon pojmenovaný podle jedné z mnoha stereotypních černošských postav. Tyto ženy se rozhodly probořit zdi rasismu, negramotnosti, chudoby, ale také panujících stereotypů. Ve své práci jsem se pokusila vypátrat, kde se vzala jejich statečnost, výjimečnost, odhodlanost a vytrvalost s jakou bojovaly, aby naplnily své vize a sny o lepší budoucnosti pro Afro-Američany.

Ve většině případů musely tyto ženy samy v sobě najít touhu pomáhat a bojovat, protože lidé žijící v komunitách často dávali přednost životu v útlaku, než aby riskovali, že ztratí práci, či dokonce holý život. A rozhodně je za to nemohl nikdo vinit. Často to ale byly právě ženy v těchto komunitách, které stavěly svobodu, spravedlnost, pravdu a odhodlání pomáhat lidem nade vše, včetně svých životů.

Některé z těchto žen bojovaly za lepší vzdělání černošského obyvatelstva, protože velmi dobře věděly, že vědění je jedním z klíčů ke svobodě. Nevzdělání

lidé se často stávají oběťmi manipulace, podvodů a ovládnání ze stran vzdělanějších jedinců. Vzdělání dává moc a vlastníci otroků si toho byli moc dobře vědomi, takže zakázali, a to dokonce pomocí zákona, učit otroky číst a psát stejně jako zakázali otrokům se tomu učit. Vzdělaný otrok byl v podstatě bezcenný otrok.

Další ženy bojovaly za lepší postavení Afro-Američanů ve společnosti prostřednictvím volebního práva, ve kterém spatřovaly důležitý krok jak na cestě stát se plnohodnotným občanem tak na cestě k získání politické moci.

Inkoust a pero se staly důležitou zbraní v boji za občanská práva pro další skupinu žen. Lidé se díky tisku dozvídali o krutostech páchaných na Afro-Američanech, o kterých by jinak neměli ani tušení. Šlo hlavně o lynčování a brutalitu nejen ze strany bílého obyvatelstva, ale také ze strany policie, pro které člověk černé pleti byl vždycky pachatelem a člověk bílé pleti poškozeným.

Později se aktivisté domáhali svých občanských práv především bojem za zrušení ponižující segregace, která panovala nejen v autobusech, ale také v nejrůznějších stravovacích zařízeních, hotelech, čekárnách, nemocnicích, divadlech, parcích a v dalších veřejných zařízeních, včetně škol.

Nakonec se budu věnovat ženám, které se rozhodly bojovat za svá práva radikálnější způsobem, a některé z nich volaly dokonce po revoluci, ve které viděly řešení pro černošské obyvatelstvo. Tyto ženy se také snažily bojovat proti nezměrné chudobě a to nejen Afro-Američanů, ale všech lidí bez ohledu na barvu pleti. Další náplní jejich práce byla snaha změnit podmínky ve vězeních, kde spousta vězňů seděla spíše kvůli barvě své pleti, než kvůli nějakému zločinu.

Ačkoli bojovníci za občanská práva utrpěli spoustu porážek a ztratili mnoho bitev, nikdy nepřestali věřit, že poslední vítězství bude patřit jim a že jednoho dne získají všechny právní výsady občana první třídy.

Ve své práci jsem se pokusila podívat na historii Hnutí za občanská práva Afro-Američanů očima a činy jeho několika nejvýznamnějších žen, které vedly své lidi k lepší budoucnosti. Díky jejím životním příběhům jsem se pokusila nastínit vývoj Hnutí za občanská práva Afro-Američanů a prozkoumat obecně roli afro-amerických žen v černošských komunitách. Bylo sice jen pár žen ve vedení ale za nimi stál dlouhý zástup žen, které podporovaly své vůdkyně v jejich snaze dosáhnout občanských práv.

Tisíce anonymních žen se rozhodly bojovat za lepší život nejen pro sebe, ale i pro své děti. Tyto ženy často ztratily práci, byly zastrašovány, zatčeny, zmláceny nebo byly nuceni po dlouhou dobu chodit i obrovské vzdálenosti pěšky. Bez nich by byl boj za občanská práva nejen nemyslitelný, ale hlavně neuskutečnitelný.

Kromě toho, že všechny tyto výjimečné ženy bojovaly proti rasové diskriminaci a nenávisti, věnovaly také spoustu energie boji proti chudobě černošského lidu, který často trpěl nejen hladu a nedostatkem šatstva, ale také žalostnou úrovní bydlení a nedostatečnou zdravotní péčí.

Touto prací jsem se v žádném případě nesnažila snížit důležitost role, kterou měli muži v Hnutí za občanská práva. Muži byli bezesporu statečnými a odvážnými vůdci, kteří nekompromisně bojovali za práva Afro-Američanů. Zatímco ale muži dávali přednost hierarchickému způsobu vedení, kdy se lidé upínali většinou k jedinému vůdci typu Martin Luthera Kinga a jemu spřízněné organizaci Ženy upřednostňovaly takzvanému vedení ze zdola (the grassroots leadership), kdy spolupracovaly s obyčejnými lidmi a snažily se vždy najít vůdce mezi obyvateli jednotlivých komunit, což se později ukázalo důležitým faktorem pro úspěch Hnutí. Takto zmobilizovaní vůdci měli totiž větší přehled o tom, co lidé v jejich komunitách právě potřebují a jaké jsou jejich nejpálčivější problémy.

Byli to také většinou muži, jejichž fotografie nejčastěji zdobily první strany novin a časopisů a kteří poskytovali rozhovory a stávali se hrdiny nejrůznějších článků týkajících se Hnutí. Ženy nejčastěji pracovaly v pozadí veřejných akcí, projektů a kampaní, a byly to také většinou ženy, které odváděly mravenčí práci, která sice nebyla tak vidět, ale byla o to důležitější.

Ženy, stejně jako muži, čelily každodennímu nebezpečí, které plynulo z jejich aktivit a stejně jako oni se často stávaly obětmi bití, zatýkání a zastrašování. Ženy se ale navíc musely srovnat s častým šovinistickým chováním některých mužů, kteří neviděli v ženách rovnocenné partnery, ale spíše někoho, kdo jim poskytne perfektní zázemí na cestě za úspěchem. Některé z nich si v tvrdém boji proti rasismu tuto skutečnost moc neuvědomovaly, jiné si ale naopak toto chování líbit nenechaly a bojovaly proti němu stejně zaníceně jako proti rasismu. Ženy se také na rozdíl od mužů věnovaly častěji otázkám vzdělání a sociálním problémům.

Touto prací jsem se nesnažila snížit zásluhy mužů, kteří se angažovali v Hnutí, ale chtěla jsem ukázat, že jejich ženy neměly o nic menší zásluhy na získání

občanských práv. Ženy také obohatily Hnutí o ženské schopnosti vcítit se do druhých lidí a potřebou pomáhat slabším a chudším jedincům.

Ženy, kterým jsem se věnovala ve své diplomové práci

Na začátku své práce jsem shrnula postavení afro-amerických žen v dobách otroctví. Co bylo náplní jejich každodenní dřiny, jak v tom zvládaly vychovávat děti a jak se snažily bojovat proti svému nelehkému údělu, který jim často ještě ztěžovalo sexuální násilí, které na nich páchaly někteří jejich vlastníci i jejich bílí zaměstnanci.

Zmínila jsem také první hrdinky, které se rozhodly věnovat svůj život pomoci ostatním otrokům. Harriet Tubmanové se podařilo utéct z otroctví, ale vrátila se ještě několikrát na Jih, aby pomohla dostat na Sever další otroky a v době Občanské války pomáhala afro-americkému oddílu Seveřanů. Sojourner Truth byla nejspíše první afro-americkou feministkou, která spolu s Francis Ellen Harperovou bojovala za zrušení otroctví a později za právo žen volit.

Druhou kapitolu jsem věnovala dvěma ženám, které bojovaly proti lynčování, které se stalo noční můrou pro mnoho Jižanů. Ida B. Wellsová a Mary Church Terellová se snažily dopátrat skutečných důvodů, proč bylo lynčováno tolik mužů, protože nevěřily obecnému tvrzení, že se většina takto popravených jedinců dopustila sexuálního násilí na bílé ženě. Ida B. Wellsová napsala a zveřejnila spoustu článků a novinových sloupců, kde seznamovala širokou veřejnost se zjištěnými a někdy až šokujícími skutečnostmi. Navštívila také dvakrát Velkou Británii, kde přednášela své poznatky o lynčování anglickému publiku znechucenému těmito hroznými vraždami. Mary Church Terellová se kromě boji proti lynčování věnovala také právům žen a bojovala proti diskriminačnímu chování v restauracích ve Washingtonu, D. C..

V následující kapitole jsem se zabývala ženami, které se angažovaly ve vzdělávací sféře. Mary McLeod Bethunová dokázala bez jakéhokoliv finančního kapitálu postavit školu pro afro-americké dívky. Ty nejen učila, ale zároveň také živila a šatila. Tuto školu později dokonce rozšířila o vysokou školu. Největším přínosem Septimy Clarkové byl speciální výukový program pro negramotné Afro-Američany, který vypracovala se svou sestřenicí Bernice Robinsonovou v rámci organizace Highlander Folk School. Jeho náplní nebylo pouze naučit tyto lidi číst

a psát, ale také je vybavit praktickými znalostmi potřebnými pro každodenní život.

Čtvrtá kapitola přináší životní boj Rosy Parksové a Jo Ann Robinsonové, kteře byly důležitými články v autobusovém bojkotu v Montgomery. Rosa Parksová byla katalyzátorem celé akce, když odmítla po dlouhém pracovním dni opustit své sedadlo, aby se místo ní mohl posadit bílý muž. Po jejím zatčení Jo Ann Robinsonová zmobilizovala členy místní ženské organizace, jejíž byla prezidentkou a také své studenty a za čtyři dny černošské obyvatelstvo přestalo používat veřejné autobusy v rámci autobusového bojkotu a neustoupilo dokud město nebylo nuceno veřejnou dopravu integrovat.

Ella Bakerová je hlavní postavou páté kapitoly. Byla to žena, která se svou neústupností a jedinečným přístupem k boji za občanská práva stala vzorem pro spoustu pozdějších aktivistů. Kromě jiného pracovala pro organizaci Martina Luthera Kinga a později se zasloužila o vznik jedné z nejvýznamnějších studentských organizací SNCC, která udávala krok Hnutí v šedesátých letech. Ella Bakerová byla také jedním z největších kritiků hierarchického způsobu vedení a nadřazeného mužského chování vůči ženským aktivistkám.

V centru zájmu další kapitoly stojí Diane Nashová, která se stala hrdinkou studentského hnutí na počátku šedesátých let. Byla jednou z těch, které se zasloužily o desegregaci restauračních zařízení v Nashvillu a později se také zapřičinila o úspěch takzvaných účastníků jízd svobody, který se snažili o integraci mezistátních autobusů.

Fannie Lou Hamerová z Mississippi byla jednou z nejstatečnějších a nejodhodlanějších bojovnic za volební právo černošského lidu. Jejím největším přáním bylo stát se plnohodnotným občanem. Byla také členkou delegace, která se snažila sesadit rasistickou Demokratickou stranu z Mississippi na národním kongresu Demokratů v Atlantě v roce 1964. Kromě své politické angažovanosti se věnovala také boji proti chudobě, která byla v Missisippské Deltě stejně zakořeněná jako rasismus.

Závěrečnou kapitolu jsem věnovala radikálním aktivistkám, které odmítly „nenásilnou“ filozofii prosazovanou například Martinem Lutherem Kingem. Mezi ně patřila vůdkyně Cambridgeského hnutí Gloria Richardsonová či administrátorka studentské organizace SNCC Ruby Doris Smithová. Zatímco v sedmdesátých letech u nás v Československu sedělo spousta lidí za svůj boj

proti komunismu, Angela Davisová se stala na začátku sedmdesátých letech asi nejslavnější politickou vězenkyní právě kvůli své komunistické příslušnosti. Věřila, že v sociální revoluci se nachází klíč ke konci rasismu a chudobě. Po svém propuštění se také stala celoživotní odpůrkyní vězeňského systému a neustále bojuje za jeho zrušení.

Poslední hrdinkou mé práce se stala Elaine Brownová, která mezi lety 1974 a 1978 úspěšně vedla Černé Pantery, pravděpodobně nejmilitantnější organizaci Hnutí za občanská práva afro-amerického lidu.

Všechny tyto ženy měly důležitou roli v Hnutí za občanská práva Afro-Američanů. I když každá z nich měla svůj osobitý přístup a jiné pole působnosti, spojovala je obrovská vůle změnit věci, které se zdály po desítky let nezměnitelné. Neobyčejná odvaha a statečnost s jakou čelily všudypřítomné hrozbě násilí a nejrůznějším typům zastrašování, a také mimořádný soucit, které měly s těmi nejobyčejnějšími, nejchudšími a nejutlačovanějšími obyvateli Spojených států amerických.

Resumé (Summary in English)

This thesis shows the history of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States of America from the most outstanding women's point of view. Each of these women enriched the Movement in her own distinctive way and devoted herself to various issues. Some of them involved themselves in the educational sphere. Others fought against the segregation of public services and facilities and there were also female activists who believed in the power of the vote to right and get political leverage. At the end of the nineteen-sixties and the beginning of the seventies more radical activists began to turn up who thus followed the militant direction in which the Movement started to set off at that time. The aim of this work was to prove that women played a crucial role in the struggle for civil rights too and that their contribution to the Movement was immense.

Resumé v češtině

Tato diplomová práce se dívá na historii Hnutí za občanská práva Afro-Američanů ve Spojených státech Amerických z pohledu jeho nejvýznamnějších žen. Každá z nich obohatila Hnutí svým osobitým způsobem a věnovala se různé problematice. Některé z nich se angažovaly ve vzdělávací sféře, další bojovaly proti segregaci veřejných služeb a zařízení a jiné věřily v sílu volebního práva a politickou moc. Na konci šedesátých a počátku sedmdesátých let se začaly v Hnutí objevovat i radikálnější aktivistky, které tak následovaly militantní směr, kterým se Hnutí v této době vydalo. Cílem této práce bylo dokázat, že i ženy měly důležitou roli v boji za občanská práva a jejich přínos pro Hnutí byl obrovský.

