

# James Reeb: Civil Rights Martyr

by Homer A. Jack

Twenty-five years ago in March, James J. Reeb—American Friends Service Committee worker and Unitarian Universalist clergyman—became a civil rights martyr at Selma, Alabama. This one white activist became a catalyst for visible racial progress in the 1960s.

On March 7, 1965, television viewers on the ABC network watched the Sunday night movie, *Judgment at Nuremberg*. The show was interrupted for news scenes of “Bloody Sunday” as



James J.  
Reeb

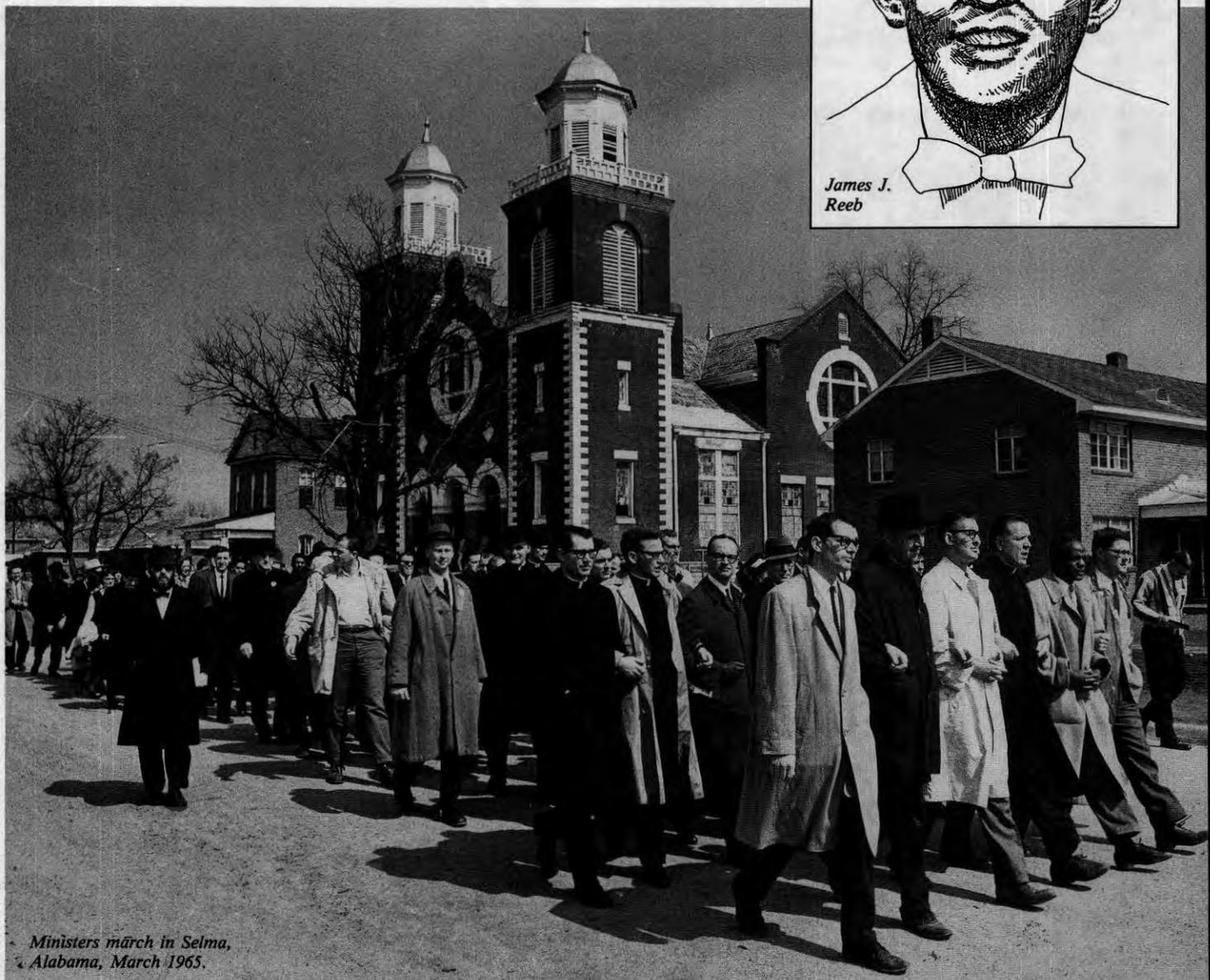


Photo courtesy of Unitarian Universalist Association

Ministers march in Selma,  
Alabama, March 1965.

Alabama state troopers on horseback, armed with bullwhips, brutalized 500 black marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge outside Selma. Martin Luther King, Jr., immediately sent out telegrams calling on "clergy of all faiths . . . to join me in Selma for a ministers' march to Montgomery on Tuesday morning."

James Reeb on Monday morning received a telephone call, asking if he could join the march at Selma on Tuesday morning. Reeb, then community relations director of the Boston Metropolitan Housing Program of the AFSC, asked Unitarian Universalist headquarters in Boston if he were badly needed in Selma. "Badly," came the reply. Reeb asked his wife, Marie, about his going South. She preferred that he not go. Reeb declared that he "had to go." The next morning he was in Selma, along with hundreds of clergy from many denominations from all over the country.

There was a long wait through lunch at Brown A.M.E. Chapel, while Martin Luther King, Jr., and his associates negotiated with federal, state, and local authorities. Then King, followed by priests, ministers, and rabbis, led the delayed march. Reeb, as the other marchers, repeatedly sang, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round." Nobody did, and they got across Pettus Bridge and, in a compromise with officials, then returned to Selma.

The hundreds of marchers then went to whatever restaurants they could find for their postponed lunch. A number crowded into the black Walter's Cafe. When Reeb and two other Unitarian Universalist clergy left the restaurant, they were chased by white thugs and called "niggers." Reeb was hit by a pipe or club and soon became unconscious. He was taken to a nearby funeral home, where its ambulance took him to the distant University of Alabama Medical Center in Birmingham for a delicate operation.

For two days and nights, 38-year-old Reeb hovered between life and death. Marie Reeb was brought from Boston to Birmingham in a government jet on orders from President Johnson. She waited, as did Martin Luther King, Jr., and the escalating, irate civil rights movement. The restless president waited, as did much of the attentive world. On

*Homer A. Jack, a Unitarian Universalist clergyman and in 1965 a denominational official, was the person who told James Reeb that he was badly needed in Selma.*

Thursday night, March 11, death came. That long weekend, memorial services for Reeb alternated with demonstrations throughout the country. Civil rights workers in Selma prayed and then rallied, while 25,000 persons massed in front of the Unitarian Arlington Street Church near Boston Common as a Quaker official spoke inside.

The funeral of James Reeb on Monday, March 15, at Selma was a nationwide, televised event. National religious, labor, and political leaders participated in services both at Brown Chapel and, after a federal court order, on the steps of the Dallas County Courthouse. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered two eulogies.

That evening 70 million Americans watched President Johnson as he presented a carefully negotiated voting rights bill to a joint session of Congress. The president mentioned Reeb and then said the previous week in Selma was, like Lexington, Concord, and Appomattox, "a turning point in man's unending search for freedom." He declared that he wanted "to be the president who . . . protected the right of every citizen to vote in every election." Johnson then surprised everybody, perhaps even himself, and brought tears to many, by uttering the movement's slogan: "We shall overcome."

James Reeb's death made a difference. The movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr., triumphed. By August, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, providing federal protection for all who wanted to register to vote.

Who was James Joseph Reeb? Born on January 1, 1927, in Wichita, Kansas, he moved to Casper, Wyoming, then graduated from St. Olaf's College in Minnesota. He finished Princeton Theological Seminary in 1950 and then became a Presbyterian chaplain at Philadelphia General Hospital. Reeb left Presbyterianism to become a Unitarian Universalist clergyman and worked as assistant minister of All Souls Church in Washington, D.C. There he founded the University Neighborhood Council, bringing together representatives from All Souls Church and Howard University. Reeb wanted to establish an inner city ministry of his own, but the Unitarian Universalists at the time had neither the imagination nor the money. The Quakers did, and in September 1964 Reeb and his wife and four children moved to the run-down Dorchester sec-

tion of Boston, while his Quaker office was a store-front on Blue Hill Avenue in all-black Roxbury.

Reeb's death energized the Unitarian Universalist denomination to give race relations higher priority and hire additional staff for this purpose. It may even have led to the formation subsequently of the Black Caucus in that denomination. Reeb's selfless life and death inspired a whole generation of laypersons and clergy—Unitarian Universalist, Quaker, and beyond. Reeb became one of the post-1960 models for the development of clergy who unapologetically work outside traditional church structures for social justice.

Immediately after Reeb's death, his friends tried to answer the recurring question: why the public focuses on the white martyr, Reeb, when black martyrs

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have been neglected for centuries? At the time, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a black man killed in Marion, Alabama, never received the recognition given Reeb. Racism, ironically, is one explanation. Reeb was white, yet he identified with the black poor, as well as trying—with great difficulty—to prod his fellow whites, including white clergy.

In September 1962, James Reeb said that "we must all be surprised from time to time by those who have suffered from the greatest inequities bringing forth a faith and an energy into life for which one can find no reasonable explanation." Jim Reeb suffered martyrdom "for which one can find no reasonable explanation." Yet a quarter century later, his story and his memory still bring forth "a faith and an energy" into the life of many U.S. citizens. However, they find racial justice in inner city or outer suburb just as elusive today as in the brief years of James Reeb. □