

On the occasion of the opening of the 29th Black International Cinema festival on May 7, 2014, at the Rathaus Schöneberg. This opening is dedicated to the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's visit to both West and East Berlin in 1964.

I am here today on behalf of American Voices Abroad Berlin. We are a political group founded in 2003 as Americans in Berlin Against the War – the Iraq War. We are independent of all political parties, both in the United States and in Germany.

What I would like to tell you today is not about American Voices Abroad. I would like to briefly tell you about my own recollections of the Civil Rights movement and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to whom this evening is dedicated. As a young white woman in the northern United States, I was shaped by these events.

When I started college in 1962 at the age of 18, James Meredith was about to be the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi. The rioting of white students on campus in Oxford, Mississippi, prompted President Kennedy to send in troops to protect Meredith and enforce the law. At this turning point in U.S. Civil Rights history, as I was quietly starting college in New Jersey in the fall of 1962, James Meredith could finally claim his constitutional right to attend the University of Mississippi.

In 1963 we all heard Dr. King's 'I Have a Dream' speech. I was 19 years old then, and there is no better time in your life to hear a speech like that. And by then, in August of 1963, we all really needed to hear that speech. Earlier in the summer, Gov. George Wallace was infamously 'standing in the schoolhouse door' at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa to prevent the admission of black students. On the very next day we learned that the civil rights leader Medgar Evers had been assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi.

Not long after Dr. King's speech, four little black girls were murdered in the bombing of a Baptist church in Birmingham, Alabama. That was just two months before the assassination of President Kennedy on November 22, 1963.

In June of 1964, in Philadelphia, Mississippi, three civil rights workers were brutally murdered – James Chaney (who was Black), and Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner (who were white). They had been working during the 'freedom summer' in a voter registration drive. This hit particularly close to home for me because Goodman and Schwerner were Jewish kids from New York, and Andrew was just my age.

In 1964 Dr. King received the Nobel Peace Prize, which we all saw on TV. I can remember the television set where I saw the Oslo ceremony as Dr. King said that "civilization and violence are antithetical concepts."

In 1965 came the voting rights campaign and the marches from Selma, Alabama, to the state capital in Montgomery. And then we all watched as President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act.

Dr. King began to speak out against the Vietnam War as early as 1965. But it wasn't

until 1967, when he spoke at the Riverside Church in Manhattan, that I understood what he meant when he said it was time to “break the silence.” This criticism of U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam was so important to him that he defied his own advisors, most of whom saw the war issue as a distraction from the Civil Rights Movement. But for me this speech brought to light the connections between domestic policy and foreign policy, between violence at home and violence abroad. Dr. King had exposed – to put it in his own words – the “moral roots common to both” the civil rights movement and the peace movement.

That was when I realized, as a young woman of 24 by then working as a schoolteacher in Washington, D.C., that Dr. King was expanding our idea, my idea, of what democracy really was. And that I was included in this expansion. I was beginning to understand that civil rights – meaning voting rights, fairness in housing, desegregated schools – and the war in Vietnam were related.

Dr. King’s organization of the Poor People’s Campaign in early 1968 again expanded my understanding of democracy. I remember that he spoke at the National Cathedral not only about civil rights, and not only about war, but about poverty in general. I understood that real democracy was more than voting, that it had to be extended to the economy as well. In this last major speech before his assassination, Dr. King spoke of the challenges of overcoming racism, war and poverty.

To understand how radical this was, we have to remember that for so many decades, the power structure in the South – and not ONLY in the South – was able to *hold* power, and *withhold* power, by presenting as opposed the interests of white and Black Americans. By speaking out against the war, and then with the Poor People’s Campaign, Dr. King was making it clearer than ever that these interests cannot be separate.

They were not separate in 1968 and they are not separate today. Today we still hear that the interests of black and white people, of the middle class and the poor, of immigrants and the long settled are distinct, and in each case we are told that the interests of one group run counter to the interests of the other. But Dr. King’s legacy reminds us that democracy means that we are in this together, that our well-being is connected to the well-being of our brothers and sisters, and that violence in all its forms is antithetical to civilization.

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