

Staughton Lynd

Transcription: James Sutherland

00:00:37 SL: Oh absolutely, and not only that, but there's a fellow in Birmingham named Jim Douglas, do you know him, a former Catholic priest? He's writing a book about the assassinations of Kennedy... both Kennedies, King, and Malcolm, and he knows stuff about the King assassination, for example, that I had never heard of. King had never stayed at that motel before, he was sort of channeled to it and so...

00:01:11 DM: Yeah.

00:01:14 SL: And uh... You know the FBI may have done much worse things than badmouth Howard Zinn.

00:01:25 DM: Sure, sure. Yeah the King assassination, he'd never stayed there before, they were saying what room he was staying in, on the radio...

00:01:35 SL: The, the day after they cut down all the shrubbery on the hillside across the way, and um...

00:01:42 DM: Yeah, that's a whole like...

00:01:45 SL: And I myself um... when President Kennedy was killed, the Snick research director, Jack Mennison wrote, wrote an article that was published in the New Republic and was one of the two first articles to say "there's something fishy about this lone assassin story, it doesn't quite make it."

00:02:09 DM: Yeah.

00:02:10 SL: And I'm still convinced of that.

00:02:13 DM: Yeah, completely different ball of wax, but you know...

00:02:21 DM: We're rolling.

00:02:23 DE: If you guys are ready...

00:02:26 DM: So we should start with how you came to meet Howard Zinn.

00:02:32 SL: I was a graduate student at Columbia University in 1959, 60, 61, and in 60 of course, early 60, the sit-ins began in the South. And our oldest daughter attended a summer program um... I think you could say in Harlem, and New York City just the western extremity of Harlem, and there was uh... a black boy that she got to know, and we had a picnic in Central Park with this young man, and his mother. And his mother said to me "you know, you should teach at a negro college," a term which had almost no meaning to me. I said "Oh?" She said "Oh yeah, they're really looking for people with PHDs." "Well gee wiz, that might be a way to hook

up with this activity that's been beginning in the South." And so I informed all my advisors at Columbia University "No, I'm not interested in that scholarship at Princeton, and that special program at Harvard, I want you to write a letter to the Eastern Alabama Episcopal Methodist Training College for African Americans," or whatever. They said "Staughton, you're out of your mind!" I said "I know, but it's my life, my livelihood." And so it came to pass that they weren't completely unperceptive, and in December 1960, I attended an event that you may be familiar with, the so-called "Smoker" of the Columbia University History Department at the American Historical Association, otherwise known as the "Slave Market," where graduate students go to try to make connections with persons who might hire them. And in those days the, the market for graduate students in history was favorable to the student, it was very different than it is today. But in any event, along about midnight, here comes Bill Luchtenberg, who it turns out had been one of Howard's professors at Columbia, and likewise, although I didn't know him well, one of mine. And with him ambles this tall, jet-black haired uh... man with the crooked smile who uh, introduces himself as Howard Zinn. And it turns out that he is more or less the social studies department, the history department, the East Asian program et cetera, et cetera, at um... Spelman College, and would I be interested in teaching there. And I didn't know him from Adam, but it seemed like exactly the kind of thing that, that Alice and I had been hoping for. And so Alice went down and cased the situation, and we had an apartment on campus quite near to um, the Zinn's apartment on campus. And thereafter we set up the Vaudeville team of Zinn and Lynd, or Lynd and Zinn, which performed in various uh, formats, um... for several years.

00:06:47 DM: You guys are one of a few professors that went and lived within a black community.

00:06:58 SL: Well you know, I wonder about that, I read in yesterdays' Times, the obituary of a Harvard dean, I can't call up his name, who in 1967 or 68, gave up everything he was doing at Harvard and went to Miles, M I L E S, College in Alabama, spent the rest of his professional life there. So I'm not sure it was all that unusual but, but you know, we weren't beaten down by the stampede of professors seeking to work in this – I'll give you another example, a, a friend of mine named Herb Shapiro, um, who was retired from teaching history at the University of Cincinnati, he came to Morehouse, a year or two after I, a young man named Mindy Samstein, who quit and became a full time Snick organizer, so there were, there were a number.

00:08:03 DM: How did that, teaching in the South, well you and Howard obviously... how did teaching at a black college, living in a black community and I'm sure you and Howard and Alice and Ros all like, spoke about that effect of how you saw things, and history.

00:08:27 SL: Well it, it had a very dramatic effect on, on me, which I'm, I'm still thinking about it, to tell the truth. Because I wrote my masters and PHD theses on the American Revolution in the province of New York, in particular, the masters essay was on tenant farmers in the Hudson Valley, and the PHD thesis was on artisans in New York City. And what I feel I discovered, and have been unable adequately to communicate to uh, close friends like Al Young, is that these folks were not ideologically motivated. In southern Dutchess county, I studied one county, for the tenant farmers, all the tenants were flaming patriots. In northern Dutchess county, they were Torys. Why? It all depended on the politics of your landlord. If your landlord was a Tory, a supporter of the crown, then you became a patriot. Because you thought "if that son of a bitch

loses, I might get my farm.” And 50 miles to the north, exactly the same reason people made the opposite political choice, because the landlords were all patriotic livingstons, and so they thought “wow, if the King wins, I might get my farm.” And I don’t think that’s ignoble, but it wasn’t what I was expecting. And I found essentially the same thing with the city artisans. There’s this bifurcation in the history of the American Revolution, some people write about before the Revolution, some people write about after the Revolution. Before the artisans, or the Sons of Liberty, they support non-importation agreements, they throw tea in Boston Harbor, and so forth. After the Revolution, they all support Alexander Hamilton and the Constitution of 1787. Why? Because in each case, what mattered to them was the threat to their livelihoods represented by importing British manufacturers. And before the Revolution you dealt with that by throwing the stuff in Boston Harbor, after the Revolution you dealt with that by trying to get a strong central government that could impose a real tariff on imports. And the reason I go into all of this, is that I came south, somewhat jaded with an enthusiasm for the role of the masses in history. And so what I was confronted with of course was, these kids, some from the north, but many from very... difficult backgrounds in the South who, put it all at risk, for the sake of... something that was certainly not in their immediate personal self-interest. Because had they been guided only by their immediate self-interest, they would have aspired, speaking of Spelman young ladies, to become the wives of black ministers, and black dentists, and black funeral home directors, and so on. And of course to give a famous example, I don’t know if Howard has told you about this but, one evening... I was reading a stack of blue books in the usual bleary-eyed state in which one reads blue books, and I came to a particular examination and I said “oh well that’s... that’s pretty good, that’s B+ or A-,” and then I said to myself “well it has to be A- because of the way it’s written.” And I went to Howard and I said “Howard, do you have a student named Alice Walker?” And he said “Yes! And she’s just written an essay on Tolstoy and Ossietzky that you wouldn’t believe.” And so we consider ourselves the co-discoverers of Alice Walker. And my mother was then teaching at Sarah Laurence and we assisted Alice in transferring to Sarah Laurence and the rest is history.

00:13:27 DM: As to Howard, it says that someone else he showed it to said she didn’t write that?

00:13:32 SL: Is that right? I don’t remember that.

00:13:34 DM: Right, right. And he said somebody else had said “oh she didn’t write that.” And I was laughing when he told me and I said “if you could drag someone off the street to ride it with that kind of style. Um, in that...”

00:13:48 SL: So and, and, in addition, of course, um... this was a time when American historians were still celebrating the consensus achievements of uh... whoever. And... I think that, that, those of us who went south, had a role in thrusting slavery into the faces of the American historical profession in such a way that um... it could not be avoided. I must say they’ve overreacted, because they’ve now decided that the white working class is incurably racist, so we might as well all stay at our Ivy League jobs because nothing’s going to happen anyway. But, I mean I think if someone like my colleague Edmund Morgan at Yale, who wrote a whole book on racism and I think I had something to do with it, but, because “well you know there’s something about what Staughton is saying, I’ve just gotta deal with this.” And of course Howard, with his book on Snick and otherwise, um... had the same effect.

00:15:07 DM: And the Southern Historical Association had a little bit at Burlington when you guys are talking about, that was a... if I can read you guys correctly that was a conservative group that...

00:15:20 DE: I, I, I need to just stop for a second, I'm getting all of that in your lap.

00:15:26 SL: Where do you want it?

00:15:27 DE: Just like, if you can just put it down by the side of your leg here that'd be fine.

00:15:33 SL: How about that?

00:15:34 DE: I really like that a lot better, it'll make me stop fidgeting. Thank you.

00:15:39 DM: They, the Southern Historical Association pretty much... at the time that you went there follow the um... oh what were they called the um... Redeemers, am I correct?

00:15:55 SL: I suppose so, this was Chattanooga, maybe? I remember going with Howard...

00:16:03 DM: And it was like in a segregated building and then it say that you, you, you made a resolution to...

00:16:08 SL: I'll tell you, the only thing I remember about that, memory is so curious. I remember sitting in – I'm pretty sure it was Chattanooga, in the Chattanooga airport with Howard, and he was explaining to me based on his experience as a bombardier, that the really dangerous moment in a flight is not landing, but taking off, something about the weather or... yeah but we, you know, to the best of our ability we... fought the good fight in a variety of forms.

00:16:44 DM: Howard has a great way of – what was... one of the things we wanna get at, his house was very, very open to students, right?

00:16:52 SL: Right.

00:16:54 DM: And, could you explain a little bit of how it was, your own probably too, but how Howards' house was like a center for activity, and... here's another thing that all of his friends say, and we worked it in, at the beginning of our documentary fairly well, of Ros's importance. And, maybe something about how their household was open, the kind of activity that was going on there to the students from Spelman.

00:17:28 SL: Well... it was students at Spelman but it was also... uh Snick, remember that the Snick office was... hm, 3/8 of a mile from Spelman campus. And for example when Joan Byes came to sing, she then came over to the Zinns' apartment and everybody in the movement crowded in. A particular memory I have is that I... Howard and I used to play tennis together and dropped in on each other, so I dropped in on him one day, and he was tape recording, uh, the

experience in jail of Cordell Reagan, who later became Bernice Reagan's husband. And maybe Charles Shirod. And I have to be honest... I think I was already using in my classes a book called *Lay My Burden Down*, which was based on oral histories of slavery collected by the WPA, the kind of work that George Rowick later did. But I hadn't done any oral history, and here I was suddenly exposed to it, and, you know Alice and I have done two or three books of oral history since then. So it was, it was not just... a social meeting place, but it had um... an intellectual dimension, at least to me, um... and it was part and parcel of the fact that Howard was not concerned with a scholarly audience for the things he wrote, he was relating to a movement outside academia, and hoping to communicate something about that movement to... other people outside academia.

00:19:49 DM: You were talking about, um, a little earlier when we were discussing the differences of Howard, of you know, how he writes for a general audience rather than... I'm diverging a little bit, but since you brought that up, um... writes for a more general audience. His, his, his books are... oh, well for people to use.

00:20:08 SL: That's right. And um... you know I'm sure that that... way of taking hold of things has its minuses as well as its pluses. But what stands out for me is that I think through the People's History and otherwise, Howard has had more influence on... on, radicalizing the historical imaginations of, of young people than the rest of left academia all put together, myself included. And... I vividly recall when I first arrived at Spelman inquiring, in the manner of graduate students in history what scholarly papers he was writing, and what panels he was planning to be part of, and what conventions he would next be appearing at, and he looked at me as if I was speaking a foreign language. That's just not what he was into. He was reading books like *Catch 22*, and writing things like his booklet on Albany, Georgia, for the, um... whatever it was called, the seven human relations council, and not uh, poring over the latest book reviews in the academic journals.

00:21:50 DM: And, um... not to talk about the blatant racism, but to point to the Ku Klux Klan and all, what were some of the pressures you think that the president and other people of Spelman who were paid were getting with their students out, protesting Howard and yourself being a part of this Atlanta movement, and... the pressures that they received from this frankly, from these white professors working with students, I've never really asked Howard that question and I thought that, I mean you... witnessed the same thing but what were kind of those pressures that white people from the north...

00:22:48 SL: Well forgive me if I... try to speak of this as an historian, because I think that too much of the history of those days has been made into melodrama, with good guys and bad guys, and I think... one needs to visualize the... the world view of the administrator of... a college for African Americans in the South. And it's not just Spelman, of course, you can read Ralph Allison's novel *Invisible Man* about Tuskegee. Same atmosphere. I think that... such administrators view themselves as the commanding officers of a besieged city. This little enclave, that the black community has now put together and sustained. In the case of Spelman College, with the help of the Rockefeller family. And... there was a sense that everything outside conspired to endanger this enterprise, particularly if those under your care whom you stood in local parentis, were young women. And so, I think all African American adults looked at the

student demonstrations with mixed feelings. On the one hand they were extremely proud, on the other hand they were extremely frightened, and if they were college administrators they were frightened in a second sense, that... bad things would happen to these young people, and they would be blamed, they would've betrayed their trust. And so... I mean it's amazing how, how... I mean I was there, continuously but, but... you have such fragmentary memories of things. Spelman young women, in large numbers, went to downtown Atlanta, and picketed outside... department stores, for example, where black people were not welcome at lunch counters, and in many cases were arrested. They then came back to a campus situation in which they had, from some points of view fewer rights than on the streets of downtown Atlanta. There's a famous story of, of, people of course had compulsory chapel, which they attended in their bathrobes underneath their black Spelman gown, and uh, Alice, my wife, has a clear memory that Alice Walker was disciplined for having her light on at 2 o'clock in the morning reading French poetry. Alice Walker has no memory of this. But... there was a... a repressive atmosphere when it came to disagreeing with college policies. And Howard was very much involved with a sub-generation of Spelman students who had graduated when we arrived, um... Hershel Sullivan, um... am I calling the right name, um, Marion Walker Edelman...

00:26:58 DM: Marion Wright Edelman.

00:26:59: SL: Marion Wright Edelman, um... I'm confusing her with Alice Walker. And then, still at Spelman when I was there, a young woman named Lana Taylor, I don't know if you've been able to find her, somehow I have a sense that she may have been the storm center of... some of the controversies.