

ROBERT PENN WARREN BOX 6 ROBERT MOSES February 11

Mr. WARREN: Now, if you will just announce yourself and the name of your organization, we'll get at the start - This is Robert Moses -

Robert MOSES: I am with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee -

RPW: SNIC, it is, isn't it?

RM: SNIC, right.

RPW: In Jackson, Mississippi. This is February the 11th. Just as a kind of warm-up, where were you born? Mr. Moses?

RM: Well, in New York City, ^{in Harlem,} and I was raised in upper Harlem - apartment houses - went to the schools in Harlem until high school, and then I went to Stuyvesant High School, downtown.

RPW: What accounted for that shift - that school shift?

RM: That was a special school - we took an exam - a city-wide exam, and so that was an opportunity to get a fairly good high school education.

RPW: What was the ratio of Negroes to white in the Stuyvesant school at a given time?

RM: I think I was usually the only Negro in my class. I think maybe out of a graduating class of a few thousand, not more than a handful were Negro.

RPW: Did Negroes try for it, or was this just seemed something not worth trying for?

RM: Well, I - I'm not sure about that. I know that in - I was - at the same time I went to junior high school they first started

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these special classes in - at least in the Negro schools - and we were encouraged to take, you know, these exams.

RPW: These were cram classes, or special classes for - aiming to Stuyvesant?

RM: They were special ~~exam~~ classes aiming to rapid advancement, two and a half years instead of three years in junior high school, and they tried to get people from the elementary schools who were - had shown some ability or some - the test scores or something like that were good. But over a city-wide basis I'd - my impression would be that there would - there was usually no - no effort, really, in the Negro, say, junior high schools, to prepare people for the tests and to encourage them to take it.

RPW: Was there also a considerable apathy or sense of the uselessness of the effort among the students - the kids?

RM: I think there would be - you know, that they would have had the feeling that they - that they wouldn't have been able to pass, you know - that they - you know - wouldn't be able to qualify, that that would be something out of their range.

RPW: I have heard it said here, in the last few days, that part of the problem of voter registration is the fear of not passing, not the fear of reprisals in many cases. A fear of being incompetent for the tests for registration.

RM: I think that - what that fear is, is the fear of being embarrassed. That is, that at the registrar's office that - being in the position which the Negro is very often in, of not knowing the answer

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and therefore thinking that it's - you know - their fault and being embarrassed.

RPW: Let's cut back to your earlier career - at the Stuyvesant High School - at what date was that, by the way -

RM: That was in - I graduated from Stuyvesant in '52, so it's four - it's three years - '49-'52 - and then I went to Hamilton College -

RPW: Yes - In New York -

RM: In New York State - and I graduated from there in '56, and went on right to graduate school at that time - I went to Harvard to - in philosophy - and stayed there for a year and a half. I picked up an M.A. at the end of my first year, and then we had family - my mother died in the next year, and my father was hospitalized and I dropped out. Then I got a job teaching at Horace Mann - and that was in '58 - I stayed there three years - and then came down here.

RPW: Were you ambitious academic when you went to Harvard - you wanted to go into teaching philosophy?

RM: Well, I wanted to get the doctorate - I wanted to - I was interested - I liked philosophy, so I wanted to study. I wasn't sure what I would teach - whether or not - but there wasn't anything else at that time that I really wanted to do, so then I - I did want to study, so I just was in that degree program.

RPW: Now, how did you make the shift to active participation in civil rights? operations?

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RM: In the shift it was really a big break - I wasn't active at all in any kind of civil rights organization while I was teaching until 1960, the second year, when the sit-ins broke out, and that attracted my attention. It seemed to me there was something different - something new - and if - I had a feeling for a long time that -

~~RM~~ RPW: Before this you had the feeling?

RM: Yes - certainly that there was a continual build-up and frustration in - back I guess as early as high school - and then in college and graduate school - and then in teaching - of confronting at every point the fact that as a Negro - I mean, first that you had to be treated as a Negro and you couldn't really be accepted as an individual yet - even at any level of the society in which you happened to penetrate.

RPW: You wouldn't have felt it, you think, if you had continued your work at Harvard and taken your doctorate as planned, and then gone out to some good college or university to teach? Do you think you would still have had this as a personal experience - not as an observed thing, but as a personal experience?

RM: I think that - well, I don't know if I would have. The fact - and I really didn't project it like that - the fact was always that at any given moment in whatever experience you were in, it always cropped up, and that - gradually I got the feeling at least that no matter what I did that it would always be there, that at that time it was impossible, even though there were a lot of things

that were much better and much different than, say, from my father's time, but in terms of my own expectations and what I had grown up with, it was impossible to be accepted fully as an individual.

RPW: Had your father had aspirations and ambitions like your own?

RM: Probably yes. He was caught - he was caught in the depression with two families - at first, his own family hadn't grown up - his father became sick - and then he got married, and so he got - and he had - he finished high school - he hadn't gone to college - there was no money - there was no money for anyone - and then he decided - he got a job working in the armory - national - well, that's part a state employee - and then he decided to keep that and really - I don't know - we had a long, long talks, and we had discussions as we were growing up about - talks which I can see now as talks really about the question of opportunity, and the question of discrimination, but which then were questions, you know, generally revolving around whether or not he was satisfied, and whether or not, you know, his whole purposes in life - what were they, were they frustrated, and - anyway, he decided to put most of his energies into his personal family. There were three of us, and he wanted to see us all through school and college, and most of his sacrifice went in that direction. And, for whatever reasons, he decided that there - at least that there wasn't opportunity I'll say in the general world.

RPW: It sounds as though you were very close to him.

RM: Yes.

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RPW: When did you make the actual step to leave teaching and to move into this world?

RM: In the summer of '60 I decided to come down and see what it was like, and I went down to Atlanta. SNIC was just organizing then, and so I worked for them for a while. Actually, I came down to work with SCLC - Dr. Keane - but they were in the process of reorganization and changing executives, so there was no place to fit in.

RPW: Since we're on that point, let me read you a quotation from Dr. Kenneth Clark on Dr. King, and see how you respond to it. On the surface, King's philosophy of fears reflect health and stability, while black nationalism - he had been talking about the Muslims - ~~instability~~ betrays pathology and instability. A deep analysis, however, might reveal that there is also an unrealistic if not pathological basis in King's doctrine. The natural reaction to injustice is bitterness and resentment. The form which such bitterness takes need not be overtly violent but the corrosion of the spirit involved seems inevitable. It would seem, then that any demand that the victims of oppression be required to love those who oppress them places an additional and intolerable psychological burden upon the victim.

RM: We don't agree with King's philosophy - I mean, in that sense. Most - you couldn't find any other students who would do anything but - I guess they would ridicule and usually most of them - the majority of them are not sympathetic to the idea that

they have to somehow love the white people that they are struggling against. There are a few within the group, say, who have a very religious orientation -

RPW: In SNIC, you mean?

RM: In SNIC - who would - who preach this, and the constant dialogue and discussion at meetings about non-violence and the meaning of non-violence, and that kind of thing.

RPW: But non-violence for SNIC is practical non-violence, is that it?

RM: Well, most of the members in SNIC are tactical, and it's a question of being able to have a method of attacking rather than to always be on the defensive, and having to wait until something happens to you and then try and do something about it. But instead, you know, just go right out and do something about it - be able to launch an attack - and this is - this would not be possible to organizing for violence attacks or anything like that.

RPW: What about the effect that King has had at moments of crisis where violence seemed imminent - general violence, as in Birmingham - the effect that he has been able to exert on people who are not avowed followers of his?

RM: Well, there's no question that he has a great deal of influence with masses of people. I don't know - and certainly I don't think that effect is in that direction - love. I think the effect is in the direction of practical steps - that is, that whatever you believe you simply can't afford to have a general breakdown of law and order.

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RPW: This is a matter, then, of a tactical non-violence, and a looking forward to the society to be created, is that it?

RM: I think that is a strong argument. I think that's - I mean, the argument that somehow that the question of that in the end everybody has to live together, and the local people - Negroes - understand this very well and they're the first to tell you this, that they put it in terms of when they all are gone, we'll still be here, and we have to live with the people here.

RPW: You all being the ~~proprietarian~~ workers who come in and then may go away next week, maybe.

RM: That's - yes - except that we try very hard to heed that problem and to - especially in the work in Mississippi to - the idea has been to send in workers in the communities where they stay and live and work, so that ~~that~~ there isn't this moving in for a brief time and moving out again, so that the concept has been to work with some of the students and to prepare them to the point where they are ready to take a year off from school and some of them have taken longer, and go and really live in these communities and work and stay there.

RPW: The attitude you attribute to report from the local people - when you are gone we have to stay here, to live here - offhand that might have either of two meanings - one, we have to pick up the pieces and bear the burden of reprisal or difficulties that are left; the other one being some vision of a society which was lawful in itself. That is, one could be a negative argument - positive argument - the real vision of a law-

abiding and humane society.

RM: Exactly. Well, I think that as they express it when they talk to you about the workers, it's largely in that negative sense.

RPW: In the negative sense.

RM: But in an appeal, since they use that language, in an appeal about the community afterwards, that that can be an appeal which they understand - that is, that in the end, Negroes and the whites are going to have to share the land, and that the less overlay of bitterness that you have, and - or the less marks of violence that you have to overcome, the more chance of what you're looking for really is a way to bring about these changes and without - with the least amount of this kind of/ ^{bitterness -} that is, you're constantly trying to find different ways in which, you know, you can get real change, but still not leave such a legacy that it's not possible to have some reconciliation and people working -

RPW: I talked, back in November, to a non-violence conference at Howard - at lunch I sat beside Miss Lucy Thornton, who ^{at} is/the law school there and has been through the jails and picket lines and so forth - she's second in her class - a very, very brilliant girl - and she began the conversation by saying she had hope - a real hope of a reasonable society in the South, she said, because the Southern white man and the Southern Negro have a shared history. There has been a long history of human recognitions and relations, even though these relations sometimes are bitter and violent ones, but at least there was a human context. She said, we have all been

on the land together - the same land together, and this means something. She then said, I am pessimistic - or I am frightened - I forget the exact phrases - of the big Northern city - of the adjustment to come out of a big Northern city - these would be much more difficult there, she said. Now, she is from - she was raised on a farm in the back country of Virginia, she told me. Does that make any sense to you, or not?

RM: Well - I really don't know. The country has such tremendous problems - I mean, when you start to talk like that then you - I mean, every time that problems which we've run into now is that everywhere you go to try and get a breakthrough in, say, the Negro problem, you run into a tremendous problem with the country as a whole to face.

RPW: The United States as a whole?

RM: Right - the question of jobs, the question - the whole question of education. All these things are tied so deeply into problems that run into the major - run deep into the major institutions of the country, and the whole question of the automation and - run right into the question of peace - and armament, and how much of the resources of the country are diverted - you know - into that area, and how much are needed in this area, and so that always you get back to economic and political questions, and they're intertwined with these kind of questions which he raises about human values and historical questions. And then I get lost - I mean, I really do. I don't see - I can't see far ahead as to what the

shape of this country will look like ten years - I mean, going through some, as I understand it, fantastic changes - that is, will be as deep as, say, the Industrial Revolution.

RW: It's fantastic - the technological revolution is fantastic. There's another person who says that - let me change the subject a little bit - you hear it said now and then - I think that Baldwin writes this - that there's no such thing as solving the Southern problem without solving the Northern problem. The Northern problem, that is, the race problem in the North is really ~~in~~ in a sense prior in its implications to the Southern problem, or at least parallel to it and cannot be postponed till after a solution to the Southern problem.

RM: I agree with that, and one thing that I thought - I was very impressed by the Supreme Court decision in the fact that it wasn't until the whole country has sort of been pounding away at the South about ~~the~~ desegregating the schools, that you began to get some action in the North about desegregated schools. I remember I was at Hamilton, and a law professor from NYU came up and talked about the schools, and I told him that it has just dawned on me that I went to segregated schools all my life as far as public and junior high schools were concerned, and that most of the Negroes students in New York City went to segregated schools, and that was - of course was something that he psychologically didn't accept, that the schools weren't really segregated, it was a question of the housing background, and the North has gone through this time and

again - in Boston and other places - there's a big battle with people to see whether or not they do have segregation, and of course they want to say that it's not in the area in which they're concerned, and the educators don't want to say they're sponsoring segregated schools - that's a problem of housing. The housing people say it's a problem of a class problem or the people being prepared and having jobs and things, and then you get back to the people who employ people and they tell you it's an educational problem, and it's a vicious circle and it's -

RPW: What do you think of the school - or struggle in New York right now - the attempt to use buses to balance schools? Does that make sense? Or is it tactics? I've had people give the ~~the~~ North - or have Negroes in the North say I don't believe this - it's stupid - but it's a tactic - it's a weapon.

RM: Yes - it's a weapon, - to use.

RPW: Do you have any convictions about that

RM: I haven't been - you know, I've been so removed from that - and of course the whole question is that the whole school system around the country is poor, inadequate, doesn't meet the needs and the times, and the problem is to find a way to bring the whole thing up and it doesn't seem - you never get - you can't ever psychologically have any people take them from something - some place up here and ask them for the good of the barrier of integration or something like that, to drop down to this level, and - what you have to do is to find a level up here that both can be moved up into so that they both have a feeling that they're moving.

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RPW: You mean that the level of education is the key problem and not that a percentage of white children bussed into a Negro school - is that it?

RM: Right - that somehow that really millions and millions of dollars have to be put into Negro education as it exists, at the same time as you're moving to integrate and to find ways in which ~~tax dollars can be used~~ the students can live together and study together, but also the whole question of housing and jobs has to be tackled.

RPW: Do you think that's prior really to - or is it just a circle?

RM: Right now it's just a circle - I mean that as far as for the mass of the people, for their - some - ten percent - fifteen, maybe - that it's not a circle any more, but for the mass of people it's just a circle, and it looks like it's getting worse - I mean that the national percentagewise the Negro earns less now - percent of white income today than he used to, and that 's decreasing all the time and it seems that the gap will increase between the two because of the fact that the jobs available are for skilled people and there really is no - there's no national effort and politically it's impossible to lodge one at this time to bring all the people up, and not just the Negro poor but the white poor also.

RPW: They're tied together then - the races tied together?

RM: And they're tied together politically, because they both put out a voice - I mean they're people who don't have a real voice in Congress -

RPW: You mean the poor who are outside the umbrella of the strong labor unions?

RM: Right. I mean to say, for instance, the labor unions do not - they really don't - I mean, the labor unions are concerned, as far as I can learn, with protecting the jobs of people who already have them, and they figure - and this problem seems to them overwhelming - that is, they can't really cope with that -

RPW: With automation.

RM: Right. Organized the people who don't have jobs so that they have political voice and power and can work for an overall solution.

RPW: Do you see the possibility after you experience it in the South for cooperation between the poor white and the Negro?

RM: I don't know. I was just reading Keyes' chapter in his book on the Mississippi Delta and the hills, and he was going through the neo-populism in and so forth and pointing out that there was always - besides the race issue - an underlying issue which people had to hit in order to get elected even in a place like Mississippi, and - but I just don't know - we've had some contact with some whites and what seems - I'd think what's different now is that most of the poor whites have moved into cities, and they've gotten jobs in industry on the basis of Negroes not being able to get these jobs, and it seemed to me that they would want to hold onto them and that no appeal on that concrete basis - if you point out to them that - well, he has this big industry or this which will move in if you drop this thing, but I just don't see that kind of breakthrough at this point.

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RPW: Nobody is going to resign a job to give it to somebody else, when it comes to personal -

RM: This is the problem right now in the North - these construction industries, where the people are laying down in the streets and asking - literally asking people to give up their jobs ~~me~~ so that some - move over and make room for us - and nobody is going to do that - nobody, I mean, that - that kind of struggle has to be taken into a wider struggle in which everybody demands for more jobs for everybody. You get these people together and work to say that everybody has to have jobs. Now, whether in the South - there isn't that much unemployment among the white people as I understand it.

RPW: In the South now?

RM: In the South now.

RPW: Not even in Mississippi?

RM: Not even in Mississippi, as I understand it. I don't really -

RPW: Back to your personal experiences, have you been the object of violence? in Mississippi? Do you mind telling me about that? Some of the details?

RM: Well, the - it happened when I first came down in '61 - what happened was, that summer in '60 I came down and then made a little trip through the South and in Mississippi found a person - *Mamsy* Moore - who wanted to work on registration - on the Delta -

RPW: Up in Cleveland?

RM: In Cleveland.

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RPW: Yes, I met him last night.

RM: ~~Mansy~~ and I sat down in '60 and plotted out a voter registration drive for the Delta, and that state - that is, the need for it - and showed the county breakdown and things like that, and I went back to teach for a year and came back in '61. Well, then, I couldn't get started in Cleveland and I came down and in the course of that drive, the farmers from the neighboring county - Amy County - came out and we began taking people there and one -

RPW: The farmers - the Negro farmers?

RM: The Negro farmers, and once I was attacked on the way to the court house. There were two farmers and myself -

RPW: With people to register?

RM: We were going to register, and walking on the main street in town and three white young fellows came up and one of them began to pick an argument and began - they singled me out and began to beat on me, and I had about eight stitches on the top of my head.

RPW: With their fists, or -

RM: Well, apparently - it turned out later that he had a knife which was closed.

RPW: Using that as a kind of a bludgeon?

RM: We went to trial and a couple of days later he was acquitted.

RPW: Was it a jury trial?

RM: No - yes - there was - it was very interesting. We came by -

RPW: In two days you had a jury trial?

RM: Yes. We came back in town - the town's reaction was interesting, because it was this little town - Liberty - a town of maybe a thousand people -

RPW: Which town is this, now?

RM: Liberty -

RPW: Liberty, Mississippi.

RM: Amy County. And it has a long and vicious history. In fact, just last week one of the farmers down there was killed on and -

RPW: He was killed - he had been a - he had consented to be a witness in another murder trial, hadn't he?

RM: Right. And in fact, the other murder trial was a trial which grew out of the voter registration that summer in '61 and there were several acts of violence. The first was my getting beat up. A week later another one of the workers got beat, and then we called off the drive and about a month later this farmer was killed, which led to Lewis' participation in the trial and he had to testify, and he wanted to tell the truth and he told the truth to the FBI, but the local authorities - he told them what they wanted to hear, and -

RPW: Excuse me - he told the local authorities what they wanted to hear? But told the FBI the truth?

RM: Yes, and we believe that the FBI leaked it to the local authorities, and the sheriff - the deputy sheriff came out, you know, and told him - Lewis - what they had learned.

RPW: This being Lewis Allen again?

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RM: Lewis Allen - yes. And they have been picking at him ever since - that was in September '61. At one point the deputy sheriff broke his jaw and that deputy is now sheriff - and then they killed him -

RPW: How was he killed?

RM: With a shotgun, and they - laid in wait for him in some bushes next to his wife - and it was in the nighttime, and he was coming back - and he had to get out of the truck to unhook the fence and ~~through~~ when he got out they just shot him, and -

RPW: Has there been any arrest on that?

RM: No arrest - and I doubt that there will be.

R PW: Do you believe in the possibility that the leak was intentional?

RM: Well, I believe that, and ~~many~~^{we} said as much to the Justice Department and have said so before.

RPW: Is that your only experience of that sort?

RM: ~~When~~^{Where} I myself was attacked - yes. Except - well, no - I forgot, we were - last year in Greenwood we were driving along just out of town at the end of February, and some white people had been circling the town for about three or four carloads of white people. One of them followed us out of town - there was three of us in the car, sitting up front in the middle seat, and they opened up about seven miles out of town - just bullets rained just all through the car - the driver had a bullet in his neck, and he was slumped over into my lap, and we went off the

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road. We had to grab the wheel and stop the car, and then he almost lost his life - he had a .45 that was lodged just about an inch from his spine, and none of the rest of us were - just shattered with glass - we weren't hit at all, but that I think is interesting because Beckwith - the fellow who killed Medgar - is from Greenwood, and the people who -

RPW: Beckwith?

RM: Yes. The people who - well, no - the people who shot us that the police arrested - there were some arrests on that case - and they answered to the same general description, that is, they were middle aged, middle class white people, sort of - just as Beckwith is. Now, they've never been brought to trial.

RPW: The same general type as Beckwith?

RM: Yes - I think that there was a whole conspiracy up there - and we wrote letters to the - telegrams to the Civil Rights Commission - stating this and asking them to investigate. Of course they say that there are no grounds justifying - no grounds -

RPW: You're recently married, aren't you?

RM: Yes

RPW: What view does your wife take of your hazardous occupation?

RM: Well - that's hard to say because she doesn't - I guess it's - what you do is that you don't really confront her - I mean you just go on living - I mean I've found that it's literally impossible to confront that even after that kind of narrow escape -

R PW: You take it day by day?

RM: Yes - otherwise it's not - there is no real way to confront that except to - within yourself you try to - you have to overcome that fear, and that took for me, you know, quite a while.

RPW: Can you put your philosophy to work on that? Did the Harvard seminar help you any?

RM: Not the Harvard seminar. It went back a little further when I was in college I had a French professor who did a lot of work in 20th century French lit and read a lot of *Comus* -

RPW: That's an interesting connection.

RM: And I picked it up again. I just finished, while I was in jail this last time, I read through *The Rebel* and *The Plague* again, and -

RPW: Where were you in jail then?

RM: This was in burg -

RPW: Just now?

RM: This was about a week and a half ago.

RPW: Yes - just this last business - so you read in jail?

RM: Yes. And - well - I think, you know, that the main essence of what he said was what I feel real close to - closest to -

RPW: Will you state that -

RM: Well, that it's important to struggle, that is, the sense of working against some of these forces, that it's important to recognize in the struggle certain humanitarian values and to recognize that you have to struggle against the - for people in that sense, and that at the same time if it's possible you - there's some -

