

WHY REPARATIONS?

By Sylvia Metzler

Why should I help pay reparations for slavery and Jim Crow? “Me and my family didn’t own slaves.” “How could descendants?” “I hear that reparations would just make racism worse!”

Well What are reparations anyway? Google it. “The making of amends for a wrong one has done by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged.” What exactly was the wrong? Exact numbers are hard to come by but the official UN statistics say that 17 million African people were brought to the US and put into chattel slavery – where slaves were actual property who could be bought, sold, traded or inherited with no rights to them or their descendants. This is very different from debt or punishment slavery practiced in other parts of the world. How long did the enslaved people endure humiliation, exploitation, suffering and murder in the US? TWO HUNDRED FORTY-SIX YEARS from 1619 to 1865. That was followed by another 100 years of Jim Crow - followed by Mr. James Crow Jr to the present.

Thanks to my daughter’s good genealogy work, I was able to learn what my family was doing in 1865. When the slaves were freed that year, my great grandfather on my Dad’s side was a property owner living in South Carolina with his intact family, good education, comfortable job and lifestyle.

Have I benefited from his position whether he was a slave owner or not? If I were the descendant of a newly freed slave in 1865 who was landless, uneducated, poverty stricken, and probably separated from his or her family, what could my life be like today? And I can’t forget the effect of 100 plus years of discrimination in education, employment, housing and the criminal justice system not to mention the terror of groups like the KKK. Whatever happened to the promise of ‘Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?’

I googled reparations and was presented with a big list. I will share three of them now to help make my point about “Why Reparations?”

So it’s important to start with the Holocaust in Germany when six million Jews were murdered and where countless others suffered in ways beyond imagination. Between 1933 and 1945, two thirds of Europe’s nine million Jews died from genocide. Germany has made a formal apology and paid reparations of over \$70 billion dollars to the survivors of the Holocaust for the physical and emotional damages inflicted upon the Jews. Hardly enough.

In 2013 the US finally apologized and paid reparations to the Japanese survivors of the WWII internment camps. More than 110,000 people of Japanese descent (62% US citizens) were put in camps from 1942 to 1946. Along with the official apology, 82,210 survivors or their next of kin were compensated with \$20,000 checks. The US has also paid reparations to some Native Americans and Black farmers in the South.

I'll close with the city of Chicago and Police Commander Jon Burge's torture center where he and his police tortured confessions out of over 200 prisoners between 1972 and 1991. In 2015 the city of Chicago created a reparation package for those victims. It included an apology, a \$5.5 million fund, creation of a permanent memorial recognizing the victims, an agreement to teach public school students about the case, free city college tuition and job training to victims, their immediate family and their grandchildren, and funded psychological, family, substance abuse and other counseling services to victims and their immediate families.

In 1989 Rep John Conyers began to yearly introduce HR 40 (think 40 acres and a mule) which calls for a commission to study the issue of reparations for slavery and to make recommendations. Here at the Philadelphia Ethical Society, members of the Ending Racism Task Force have thanked Rep. Robert Brady for being a co-sponsor of the resolution and successfully lobbied Rep. Dwight Evans to add his name to the 35 co-sponsors in the House.

"Why Reparations?" I hope I have made the case for all the readers of this article – and especially for those readers at the Philadelphia Ethical Society – to do some research of your own and then hopefully join in calling for the long overdue apology and reparations for centuries of slavery and discrimination.