

SUMMARY: Ben Bagdikian, a well-known journalist who in the 1960s “spent a lot of time in the Deep South” reporting stories on the civil rights movement, talks about his experiences there with two German Jewish refugees who were among the 50 or so teaching at black colleges after the war. Recalling discussions with Ernst Borinski (1901-1983), a sociology professor at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi, Bagdikian describes him as bringing both intellectual discipline and personal experience to black students in the segregated South: “No question he saw what the basic issues were in integration but he also had a sensitive human perception of all things,” and did not demonize those who confronted civil rights activists but saw the possibility for positive changes in behavior and opinion. Brown University later adopted Tougaloo as a sister institution, and recognized Borinski as “a great asset” to the college, Bagdikian said. He also tells a story about another German Jewish refugee professor at Talladega, a black college in Alabama. After a high school student named Brenda was arrested and put in prison, the professor “found a sympathetic official,” told him his own experience under the Nazis, and secured Brenda’s release. He drove to the prison with Bagdikian and Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee activists James Forman, Bob Moses and Chuck McDew, retrieved Brenda and took her to a SNCC safehouse. Bagdikian, who could not recall the professor’s name, said it “took great guts on this man’s part to help engineer this thing.” Of the broader story of these refugees and their impact, Bagdikian concludes: “At the very least, maybe fundamentally, it’s a compelling human story; these people who had gone through the perils of being anti-Nazi, or being the targets of Nazis, coming here to their country of salvation and imperiling themselves again. And that leads to more than just the human story, which is the power of a social perception, one’s role, because many people fled Hitler but most of them didn’t become activists.... But these people ... had a strong personal and philosophic view, and they brought to these colleges a level of sophistication and worldview that was absent before.”