

# MY COUNTRY TIS

*By Roosevelt Fitzgerald*

Adolph Hitler was dumb but he was not altogether stupid.

When Jesse Owens went to the Berlin Olympics and high hurdled Hitler's views of racial superiority, dashed his Aryan arrogance into his face in the speed events, Hitler learned a very important lesson: "If you give a person an equal chance, they will generally do an equal job." It was perhaps the most meaningful lesson he ever learned.

Hitler discovered that if he wanted to pull off his racial superiority scam, he had better not permit those he felt superior to, to compete. Only by so doing could he merchandise his Aryan fallacy.

A few years later, while on tour in Europe,

Marian Anderson was denied an opportunity to sing in Berlin. She had given concerts throughout the continent. She had been greeted by kings and queens, duchesses and dukes, princes and princesses. Throngs cheered her wherever she went and wherever she went she was treated like royalty. Everywhere except Germany. There Hitler did not wish to risk her upstaging his frauleins and thereby risk having yet another fallacy forever destroyed.

Yes, Germany of the 1930s was not a place for decency, honor or ethics. Germany was a place symbolized by a madman leading a bunch of scared, weak, bigoted, no good, dirty, low down, yellow bellied

sapsuckers who were themselves mad for following him.

So Marian Anderson came home to the United States in 1939. As her ship steamed off to the Western Hemisphere, her thoughts were probably not on her triumphs in Europe but of her humiliations in Germany.

It is part of human nature to forget the good and dwell on the bad. This is so not because we are self-destructive but because hurts linger much, much longer. The events which awaited Marian Anderson on her return to the states would remain with her. She never dwelled on it but it did leave its scars.

What happened to Marian Anderson when she returned? First, she went on tour of the country and only per-

formed at those places where both blacks and whites could attend without segregation. Her tour was successful and she was scheduled to perform at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C.

Everything went well until the Daughters of the American Revolution created a flap over her upcoming concert. It was their feeling that since the Hall came under their jurisdiction (really?) and because of her skin color she would not be permitted to give a concert there. Little did they realize that black soldiers had fought for independence for the country as had whites and that Marian had as good a chance of being a "Daughter" of the American Revolution as they.

Nonetheless, they were uneducated and adamant in their views and thereby prevented her appearance at the Hall. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the President of the United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, protested their actions and when the DAR would not relinquish, she withdrew her membership from the organization.

Subsequently, through the President, she was able to get Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes to allow the use of the Lincoln Memorial for a concert to be given on Easter Sunday morning.

Her opening song was "My Country Tis of Thee." It was her quiet way of saying that even though her country had turned its back on her, she would not turn her back on it.

A large portion of Black America suffered along with her. All black people had suffered but some were unaware — those who were too young to understand and those who were so "out of it" that they did not even realize what was really going. Around the country, black people not only empathized with her dilemma but they also

had concerns about the effects that that denial would have on them.

You see, there is always a portion of the population which is anxious to use anything as an excuse to put black people "in their places." Some people were of a mind that her audacity would rub off on other black people. Simultaneously, some black people were certain that somehow they would be punished for her audacity.

In Atlanta, Georgia, in

For all of those days before, it had just been a song like any other of a thousand songs. A song to be sang and stored away until it needed singing again and nothing more. That was all it was. It had no special meaning nor any special significance to either he or any others. It was just a song.

Suddenly, it meant something. Suddenly, each and every day that he heard it at school and sang it at school and heard it course through



Marian Anderson

1939, when Marian was humiliated, it was talked about among black people as much as it was in Washington, D.C. One of the homes where it was discussed was that of Martin Luther King, Sr.

1939 was a time when children were seen and not heard. Martin Junior heard. He heard grown-ups talking about it and what Marian had done. Her choice of the song: "My Country Tis of Thee," struck a chord with him. It stuck in his mind. It was a song which he and other children, all over the United States, sang on a daily basis in their schools. Perhaps it was second only to the National Anthem. Never before, however, had it carried such a meaning for him.

his mind, it caused him to remember that "grown up" discussion around the supper table that he had heard that Easter Sunday evening in 1939.

Day in and day out he remembered and day in and day out he was reminded that Marian Anderson had been humiliated in her own land while treated like royalty abroad. He was reminded that she had been put in her place and that, except for Mrs. Roosevelt, no one stood up for her. He was aware that there were other black people who were being humiliated, day in and day out as she had been.

There was something wrong with that. Even as a child he realized that there was something wrong with that. Marian



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