

Selma Symbolized Black Oppression to Dr. King

By CORETTA SCOTT KING

My husband had chosen Selma, the county seat of Dallas County, the heart of the black belt of Alabama and, therefore, the symbol of black oppression, as the target for our demonstrations around voting rights. It was a medium-sized town, situated between Montgomery and Birmingham.

Right after New Year's Day, 1965, shortly after he returned from Oslo, Martin went to Selma with some of our staff. Their first step was to test public accommodations. Black people went to all the hotels and restaurants in Selma to ask for service. Martin had been warned that there was likely to be trouble—and that he might not get out alive. But there were no incidents on this day, and our people were served.

A week or so later, Martin returned to Selma. All during the first day he was there, a white man followed Martin around the streets, waiting to speak to him. No one seemed too alarmed, because he looked and talked like a reasonable person. At one point, he followed Martin into the Hotel Albert, and as Martin was registering, the man came up behind him and said something. Martin turned around to answer, and the white man hit him as hard as he could in the head.

MARTIN STAGGERED and almost fell, but members of his staff supported him and others grabbed and held his attacker until the police arrived to arrest him. Though Martin was not seriously injured, he did have a terrible headache for some days after, and we were all made very aware of how easy it was for an assailant to get close enough to injure my husband.

Around the first of February, Martin and Ralph Abernathy led a march of 250 blacks and 15 whites from Brown's Chapel AME Church to the Selma Courthouse to protest the difficulty of registering Negro voters. They were all arrested. Most of

them were released on bail, but Martin and Ralph refused to put up bail. They were put into the same cell—an improvement, at least, over the last Alabama jail experience of solitary confinement Martin faced so bravely but dreaded so much. (He was in jail five days.)

On Friday, March 5, Martin flew to Washington and spent two and a half hours with President Johnson describing conditions in Alabama and urging the President to expedite the new voting rights bill and make sure that it provided for federal registrars of voting applicants.

On his return, he announced that on Sunday, March 7, demonstrators would march 54 miles from Selma to Montgomery. Gov. Wallace promptly issued an order prohibiting the march.

MARTIN TOLD THE people of Selma, "I can't promise that you won't get beaten; I can't promise you won't get your house bombed; I can't promise that you won't get scarred up a bit, but we must stand up for what is right."

At the last moment, Martin was persuaded not to lead the march himself. It was SCLC strategy for the leaders to avoid arrest in the opening phases of a campaign, because that would leave an army without generals. Martin did not really foresee any violent conflict that day. He thought Gov. Wallace would have all the demonstrators arrested, so he asked Hosea Williams and John Lewis to lead the marchers.

Almost anyone who can read or look at a television screen knows what happened in Selma that sunny, bloody Sunday afternoon—over 500 black men and women and a few white people walking out of town, up the four-lane Highway 80; Sheriff Clark and Col. Al Lingo of the Alabama Highway Patrol with 60 state troopers and some cavalry confronting them just beyond the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which was to become almost as famous as the bridge at Concord, Mass.

The marchers were ordered to halt and given two minutes to turn back. At the end of less than a minute of dead silence, during which the troopers put on gas masks, Maj. John Cloud shouted, "Troopers, forward!" His 60 men charged into the defenseless column of demonstrators, clubs swinging.

Twenty people were knocked flat; others knelt to pray. The troopers charged again, throwing tear-gas grenades. Then Sheriff Clark shouted to his mounted posse, "Get those goddam niggers! Get those god-

dam white niggers!" The horsemen charged with shrill, wild rebel yells.

THE WHOLE NATION was sickened by the pictures of that wild melee. Tear gas, clubs, horsemen slashing with bullwhips like the Russian czar's infamous cossacks, and deputies, using electric cattle prods, chasing fleeing men, women, and children all the way back to Brown's Chapel. Sixteen people were hospitalized; 50 others were hurt.

All during that brutal attack, the whites, watching the show from the sidelines, their faces distorted with hatred, called out, "Get those niggers. Kill them. Get the SOB's." And worse.

A white nurse told later how she watched a trooper swinging a bullwhip at a young boy, screaming hysterically, "March, nigger. You wanted to march and now I'm gonna help you!"

The tear gas was so bad that elderly people lay helplessly vomiting while the troopers charged right over them.

If the country was horrified, Martin was aghast. "If I had known it was going to be like that I'd have gone myself," he said. He announced that Tuesday he and Ralph Abernathy would lead another march. Alabama officials got a temporary federal injunction against it.

MARTIN AGONIZED because it was against his principles to flout federal law. He made a nationwide appeal to clergymen and lay people to join him on Tuesday for the march from Selma to Montgomery.

Black and white people began pouring into Selma from all over the nation to support the march, including clergymen of all denominations—ministers, priests, rabbis and nuns.

That Tuesday 1,500 people marched out of Selma, more than half of them white. There were 450 clergymen and a contingent of Catholic nuns.

The procession crossed the famous bridge and came to the rank of troopers. The order to halt was given. Fifteen hundred men and women knelt in the roadway and prayed. Realizing the imminent possibility of a violent confrontation resulting in needless death, Martin told the marchers to turn back. He was criticized for this action, but to have gone on would have produced a confrontation before we had assembled our maximum strength.

Martin always believed it wrong to pursue action with small numbers. He constantly emphasized that the presence of masses is both proof of support and a discouragement to violence. We had far more behind us than the hundreds there that day; indeed, we had the sympathy and support of the majority of America as later events demonstrated.

DESPITE THE speeches, the marches, the singing, and all the brave words, the Selma movement dragged on. People continued to march and to be arrested. After two murders and nearly 3,800 arrests, only about 50 Negroes had been registered to vote.

But suddenly everything changed. The

injunction against a march from Selma to Montgomery was lifted. Martin called for a massive march. Since Gov. Wallace still forbade it, President Johnson federalized the Alabama National Guard and committed 4,000 regular army troops to Alabama. Now we would march under the protection of the U.S. government.

On Sunday, March 21, only two weeks after the brutality at the bridge, Martin marched out of Selma on Highway 80 at the head of about 5,000 people of both races. They crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge and continued for eight miles. There, by agreement between Martin and federal officials, all but 300 left the column. The rest continued on to Montgomery.

BUSLOADS, trainloads, and plane loads of people were coming into the city to join us—I can't even guess how many. We were 50,000 people in all, by the time everyone got there. They came from almost every state! They represented every race, religion, and class. They knew there were risks, but a genuine love of justice drove them on and a human torrent of brotherhood engulfed the "cradle of the confederacy."

Now 10 years had passed. We had desegregated the buses; we had desegregated public transportation, interstate as well as intrastate. Our right to use public accommodations had been guaranteed. We had progressed toward school integration.

Most important of all, there was more national awareness of our problems than there ever had been in the whole history of the black struggle.

Next: That Afternoon of April 4, 1968.



This is another in a series of 12 articles excerpted from "My Life With Martin Luther King Jr.," written by the widow of the slain civil rights leader. The book is copyrighted by Mrs. King and published by Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc.

Suspended Sentences

MUNICH, Germany (AP)—Three Arabs found carrying pistols aboard a Yugoslav airliner last Feb. 17 have been given suspended jail sentences by a Munich court, authorities announced yesterday.

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Terrorists Sentenced

GAZA (AP)—An Israeli military court yesterday sentenced four Arab guerrillas to life imprisonment at hard labor for committing acts of terrorism in the Gaza Strip. Charges included throwing grenades in crowded areas and killing and wounding Gaza Arabs.

Dear Mr. Kosygin:

As we, the Jewish youth of Cleveland, approach the celebration of Passover, which commemorates our people's liberation from slavery in Egypt, we cannot help but be aware that the freedom of all of our people is not yet secure. Today, as we rejoice in our religious freedom, we recall the sorrows of our people's persecution, past and present.

We are deeply disturbed and dismayed over the plight of our fellow Jews in the Soviet Union. We recall that in 1956 there were 450 Synagogues in the Soviet Union. In April, 1963, there were 96. Today, less than 70. We are terribly shocked by this situation. We are aware that these Jews are not allowed to study their religion, culture, language or literature—that there is not a single Yiddish school throughout the Soviet Union, nor a single class where Hebrew is taught. Soviet Jewry cannot publish a Bible, prayerbook, or religious calendar; cannot produce Jewish ceremonial objects and cannot have formal contacts with their Jewish brethren abroad.

This year at our Seder, Mr. Kosygin, an empty place setting will remind us of the emptiness in the lives of three million Soviet Jews. On our Seder plate the matzoh will symbolize the indestructible link that exists between us and the Jewish people of your country.

We remember and mourn our people's six million martyrs. We shall not remain silent in the face of possible spiritual genocide of another three million. We call upon you, Mr. Kosygin, to give our people the freedom to live, as Jews, or to LET OUR PEOPLE GO!

Respectfully yours,

Paul Henfield and Stewart Reingold
Peter Zaas

Paul Henfield and Stewart Reingold
Peter Zaas, President
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