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ANNALS OF HISTORY

Iakovos in Selma

Carl Scovel

Fifty-three years have passed since a band of men, women, and children walked from Selma, Alabama to the state capital of Montgomery as witnesses to the black Americans' right to vote. This march, memorable for all Americans, has special significance for Orthodox Christians in this country. One of our own, an archbishop even, walked with Martin Luther King, Jr. at the head of the procession—the one Orthodox leader to join that witness.

Archbishop Iakovos (Koukouzis) has explained that the story of his participation started when he was growing up. Iakovos was born on Imbros, a small island near the Turkish coast. He was ten years old when the Turkish army swept across the country, assaulting and killing Greeks by the thousands, burning their homes, and sending the survivors into exile. A year later, this same army occupied Imbros and made life so miserable for the Greek inhabitants that that over fifteen thousand of them left for Greece or other countries. Iakovos himself was conscripted and forced to serve in a military hospital for eigh-

teen months. As a seminarian and a young deacon in Constantinople, he was subjected to abuse, deprivation, and humiliation during his thirteen years in that city.

He came to New York at the age of twenty-eight and later became an American citizen, but he never forgot the oppression he had seen and experienced as a young man. It is not surprising, therefore, that on March 7, 1965, when King called on American religious leaders to join him in Selma on March 9, the Archbishop knew he had no choice but to join the march to Montgomery.

Already Alabama state troopers had turned back two demonstrations with clubs and tear gas. Already a young black man, Jimmie Lee Jackson, had been shot trying to defend his mother from the troopers' clubs. By the time Iakovos arrived in Selma, three Unitarian colleagues—all friends of mine—were attacked and one, James Reeb, was killed. Archbishop Iakovos, prominent in his black attire and headgear, was one of many who addressed

¹*The Complete Works of His Eminence Archbishop Iakovos*, ed. Demetrios J. Constantelos, vol. 2 (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), 198–199.



the congregation at Reeb's memorial service at an A.M.E. church in Selma. He spoke of "this God-given cause" and added: "The ways of God are not always revealed to us, but certainly His choice of this dedicated minister to be the victim of racial hatred and the hero of this struggle . . . to die, so to speak, on this battlefield for human dignity and equality, was not accidental or haphazard. . . . Let his martyrdom be an inspiration [to us]."¹

Six days later, President Lyndon Johnson ordered the state of Alabama to stand aside and to let the march begin. On March 21, three hundred marchers, now protected by federal edict and National Guardsmen, crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where two weeks before they had been gassed, beaten,

and pursued by state troopers. Iakovos was with them, and during the next five days shared the hard journey of fifty-four miles. A photograph shows him at the head of the procession with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. King described that journey on the steps of the Montgomery courthouse: "We have walked through desolate valleys and across the trying hills. We have walked on meandering highways and rested our bodies on rocky byways. Some of our faces are burned from the outpourings of the sweltering sun. Some have literally slept in the mud. We have been drenched by the rain."² All this the Archbishop shared.

I did not share those privations, but I joined a group of Boston clergy who gathered at the old Logan airport in Boston at 1:00 AM on March 25, the last day of the march. A chartered American Airlines plane took us to Montgomery. We arrived at sunrise. Our hostess thanked us for flying with American Airlines and wished us a wonderful day in Montgomery. We hooted with laughter, partly from nervousness. We knew that we would be protected by guardsmen, but who knew when some disaffected onlooker might risk a pot shot at us?

Buses took us first to the homes of locals, all African Americans, who fed us breakfast. The buses then took us to the outskirts of the city, where we met the main group of marchers, whose number had now swelled to two thousand. We newcomers naturally walked at the end of the procession, but as the first group passed, I was surprised to see an Orthodox clergyman walk by with Dr. King, and right after them my father-in-law, Dana Greeley, then the president of the Unitarian Universalists.

² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March" (1965), in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Kris Shepard (New York: Warner Books, 2001), 119.

Passing small groups of sullen spectators, we walked to the steps of the state courthouse, where Dr. King addressed us. The words of his speech can be read online, but no print or even voice recording can convey the power of both his words and the presence of men, women, and children who had suffered oppression, threat, contempt, and danger for far too many years. Through the presence of those listeners, Dr. King's words gained special lity when he declaimed his famous litany of hope, each line beginning "How long? Not long!" and continuing with the recitation of a promise. These lines concluded with the now well-known mantra, "The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice."³ To have been there and heard those words and stood with those brave people was a privilege, one I have not forgotten. And the Archbishop, who as a boy had been a victim of hatred and abuse, must have felt this as much as anyone.

He did not return from Selma to unqualified praise. He said, "Upon my return some called me a traitor. Others said I should be ashamed of what I had done. Some said that I was not an American, some that I was not a Christian. I know that civil rights and human rights continue to be the most thorny social issues in our nation, but I will stand for both civil rights and

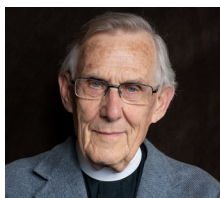


human rights for as long as I live. It is a Christian's duty."⁴

Archbishop Iakovos brought a Christian witness to Selma. Alongside others, he too testified to the creation of each and every human being in God's image. He too testified to God's uncompromising love for each and every human soul and body. Imagine, if you can, where he would be, with whom he would stand, and what he would say to us and to our country at this time. ✱

³ Ibid., 131.

⁴ "Archbishop Iakovos Reflects on Joining Dr. King to March on Selma," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IP5THeO-6eXc>.



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