

## **A tale of two Selmas, 50 years apart**

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They both crossed that bridge when they came to it — the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama — each in their own way.

Lyla Miklos crossed it with her friends following her on Facebook, and her smartphone selfie-ing a video/audio record of her whole experience as it happened.

Reverend Gerry Elliott crossed it, 50 years earlier, with Martin Luther King and the world following on network television.

At the end of their respective marches, each listened to a remarkable figure make a great speech. In Gerry's case, it was MLK Jr. In Lyla's, it was Barack Obama, a man people could scarcely have imagined in 1965 when black Americans could hardly cast a ballot, let alone get elected as president.

I wrote a column for March 4 on Lyla's then-upcoming trip to the 50th anniversary march. A member of First Unitarian Church of Hamilton, she wanted to be there, to pull taut the thread of our local historical connection (and the broader Unitarian one) to Selma.

When Gerry read that column, he called to say he'd been there, in 1965. So the three of us got together at Albright Manor in Beamsville, where Gerry, 86, now lives with wife Edna.

"We got there (Selma) on March 17," says Gerry, who was minister at St. Andrew's United at the time. "I remember because I thought this was a strange way to celebrate St. Patrick's Day."

He had just arrived, with five other Hamilton clergymen, including Rabbi Eugene Weiner of Beth Jacob synagogue (the trip was his idea, the rabbi being a great admirer of MLK). They were bused to a church where they were briefed in the realities of marching.

"I was told, 'If police attack you, fall to the floor in a fetal position,'" Gerry recalls.

Even now, a kind of surprised smile plays across his animated features as his memory retrieves the details of that historic time.

"I thought to myself, 'What are you talking about (police attacking)? I'm here for a peaceful march.'"

There was a lot of security, and guns everywhere, says Gerry. "But I didn't feel in danger. I didn't sense that there was much hostility (from local Selma people)."

One state trooper, he recalls, mumbled to him, knowing he was Canadian, "Why don't you go back and take care of your Canadian Indians?"

Little did he know that Gerry, before getting on with St. Andrew's, ministered at Six Nations. He answered, "Does four years on the reserve count?"

(He loved his time there and picked up much of the language. He says something, then translates: "God is the love of one another.")

Gerry says much of his time in Selma was spent waiting in the small hospital building where he was billeted.

"Every morning we'd line up to march, but the police wouldn't let us," says Gerry.

Finally, after four days, they did.

The marching was very quiet, solemn.

"I heard the shuffling of feet" along the bridge.

And at the end, MLK's speech.

"It was impressive," says Gerry.

Lyla shows Gerry her pictures from her trip and the video she took of herself crossing the bridge, eloquently expressing what the experience meant to her, the bond it forged with history.

She tells Gerry that her march was full of sound: people singing, chanting, clapping hands. It was joyous and she was often overcome with emotion.

"Some of us were brought to tears."

Gerry tells Lyla that he preached about the experience from the pulpit after his return and gave several talks about it at women's clubs in Hamilton.

His overall impression of his time there?

Gerry thinks about it for a moment, then says matter of factly, "It was the greatest experience of my life."