AJC delegation arrives at the Montgomery airport to join the civil rights march. Marvrous Harrison, Charles Wittenstein, Murray Raim, Theodore Ellenoff, Orin Lehman, Irving Levine, Harry Fleischman, Eleanor Ashman.
Foot Soldiers for Justice

"Everyone always asks if I was excited but, I tell you, it was scary, because everybody looked mad. Looked like they hated us because we were there." Marvlous Harrison, 97 and bedridden by advanced cancer, recounted for me what she remembered of the 1965 Civil Rights march from Selma to Montgomery. As director of the AJC Archives, I had often looked at the photo of Ms. Harrison, an AJC secretary, standing with other members of AJC’s New York delegation in front of their plane, holding signs reading: “Freedom is Everybody’s Business,” and “One Citizen, One Vote.” Marvlous Harrison traveled to Alabama with a select group of AJC staffers and Orin Lehman, AJC’s national secretary and grandnephew of the famed New York Governor Herbert H. Lehman.

I met with Ms. Harrison, twice in early 2012, just a few weeks before she passed away. The interviews had been prompted by my recent discovery of two detailed accounts of the March on Montgomery written by Brant Coopersmith, director of AJC’s Washington office. The reports had remained tucked away in gray archival boxes for decades until a visit by a professor from the University of Alabama caused me to pull the files. While Marvlous Harrison speaks to us as an African American demonstrator, Brant Coopersmith played a vital behind-the-scenes role in the march. The recollections of both participants illuminate a pivotal moment in the civil rights movement and AJC’s participation in it.

Mr. Coopersmith flew into Selma on March 19, two days before the start of the Selma to Montgomery March, along with Walter Fauntroy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. There Brant Coopersmith coordinated information about trains and buses arriving with demonstrators, and also made arrangements for the most noted Jewish participant,
Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who flew in for the first day of the eleven-mile march. Mr. Coopersmith noted that the fifty-eight-year-old rabbi was “out on his feet at the end of the day.” (Heschel himself later affirmed, “I felt my legs were praying.”) Heschel was far from the only rabbi there. Brant Coopersmith noted:

There were always rabbis present at all places of significance. There were rabbis among those people who stood out in the rain in Selma day and night. There were five rabbis who were arrested in Selma and as a matter of fact, Jewish religious services were conducted in their place of detention. The rabbis moved about so well and so often that there was an impression that there were a far greater number than there actually were.

One of the rabbis had ordered in a thousand yarmulkes (kippot or "skull caps") which were renamed “freedom caps.” Mr. Coopersmith explained:

The adoption of the Yarmulke by individuals in the civil rights movement goes back to Birmingham when one of the rabbis there was asked, “Why did they put the Yarmulke on when they went inside a church?” The rabbi answered, “Because you always cover your head in the presence of the Lord.” James Bevel [a SCLC leader] responded, “Give me one of those because wherever the movement is, that is where the Lord is.”

After helping to get the march started, he headed to Montgomery to prepare for the climax, when the marchers would finally wind their way to their destination on March 25. From the steps of the state capitol building, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. would address the crowd of approximately 25,000, along with millions more via radio and TV. At the Montgomery headquarters Mr. Coopersmith worked directly with march coordinators Meryl Ruos and Hosea Williams.* “My task,” he wrote, “was to pick up all such things as had to be done that Williams and Ruos were not doing.” As it turned out, the most pressing problem was that not a single person in the Montgomery office had ever managed public relations for such a large event. “It fell to me,” Brant Coopersmith noted, “to establish a PR operation to deal with the situation. Here AJC rendered great service to the March.”

*Hosea Williams, of the SCLC, was an advisor to Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. Meryl Ruos served on the staff of the Diocesan Commission for Christian Social Relations of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles.
He immediately hit the phones in search of a public relations director and found Henry Santiesteban, Director of Information Services for the Industrial Union of the AFL-CIO. To work with Santiestevan, Brant Coopersmith recruited two additional communications professionals, Lenore Kahn of AJC and Paul Morris from the United Auto Workers. With this team in place, he proceeded to the next hurdle, space and equipment. “It is quite a difficult task,” he recalled, “to get telephone lines in less than five working hours, to find space in a hostile community and to find even a limited amount of equipment, typewriters, mimeograph machine, etc. It was very difficult for us to rent anything like that in Montgomery. Nobody there wanted to have anything to do with us.”

Right up to his last day in Montgomery, he remained mindful of the possibility of violence. The evening before the final push, thousands gathered at the campsite at the City of St. Jude, a Catholic complex of buildings on the outskirts of Montgomery. Those who had marched and marched, nursing aching feet and sore limbs, must have welcomed the Stars for Freedom Rally that night. Celebrities such as Sammy Davis Jr., Tony Bennett, and Peter, Paul and Mary had flown in to entertain and encourage the crowd. Brant Coopersmith never got to the concert but did have indirect contact with the cast.

At 1:00 A.M. he learned via a radio communication that the entertainers were hungry and had boarded a bus, asking to be taken to a restaurant. This simple request raised a major security issue. “We wanted them in their hotel rooms off the streets,” Brant Coopersmith recalled, but the celebrities had no intention of retreating. He not only had to find a restaurant open at that hour, but also had to communicate the information in a secure fashion. Radio transmissions could be intercepted by the Klan or other hostile individuals. He described his solution in his AJC memo:

The only restaurant open at that time was the Regal Restaurant in the Negro community (I found someone who told me that Dr. King had eaten there so I assumed it was O.K.) Our second [security] problem was partially resolved because Sergeant Dumas of the Montgomery Police came into the office because we had had a bomb threat about 25 minutes earlier and he was available to help with a police escort. While the stars stewed in their bus, we told
the people on the radio to get to a phone and call us so that we could tell them where to go. We were not able to tell them directly by radio because we knew the enemy was listening. This delayed the stars a few more moments before a runner could be found to get to the phone five minutes away, get the address, and return back to where the bus was. This ten minute time gave the police an opportunity to arrange for an escort.

In his report to AJC, Brant Coopersmith summed up his work on the day prior to the march's culmination: "On Wednesday evening, March 24, from about 11 P.M. until 4 A.M. ... I think it would be safe to say that I made every executive decision for the MOM [March on Montgomery]. Meryl Ruos was out cold with exhaustion. Walter Fauntroy had to be with King and his executive group at one of their many, many strategy meetings which were always held, for security reasons, in unidentified private homes. I now believe that I can run an army."

While Brant Coopersmith manned the offices, fellow AJC staffer Marvlous Harrison experienced the march on the streets of Montgomery. Arriving on the morning of March 25, the final day of the demonstration, Ms. Harrison found a city pulsating with the energy of the demonstrators but at the same time sullen and withdrawn. "They had closed up all the restaurants down there, so we couldn't get anything to eat. You couldn't get anything to eat all day long," she recalled. "The people there, well, everybody looked angry. Even the National Guard, who were there to protect us, looked angry."

Decades later, Marvlous Harrison had no clear memory of exactly where she joined the demonstration or how far she walked. What she did remember were her aching feet, but she said the pain receded when she heard Dr. King's voice resonate through the crowd. "The end we seek," he declared, "is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience.... I know you are asking today, how long will it take? I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long."

After King's buoyant words, what came next was a severe letdown. "When we tried to get back to the airport, where our plane was, the cabs just kept going by," Ms. Harrison recalled. "No driver would pick us up." Finally, a cab stopped, but the driver made it clear that
he wasn’t taking any chances. Marvlous Harrison could get in the cab only if she would sit on the floor of the back seat and stay totally out of view.

The initial relief the AJC group felt when arriving at the airport did not last long. “They wouldn’t give us the steps to get back on our plane,” Ms. Harrison told me. “It was just plain meanness. That’s all, plain meanness.” There was little choice but to sit and wait. Already tense due to the delay, she became even more anxious when word began to filter through the airport that a civil rights worker had been shot and killed. Finally, at around midnight, the steps were rolled out to the plane and Marvlous Harrison and her fellow AJC delegates boarded, glad to be heading back to New York.

Brant Coppersmith’s journey out of Alabama would also become etched in his memory, albeit for a very different reason. He was driven to the airport by a civil rights volunteer, Viola Liuzzo, a white 39-year-old mother of five from Detroit. The next morning he turned on his TV to learn that hours after leaving him at the airport Viola Liuzzo had been shot and killed by a Klansman.

AJC’s 2012 Global Forum in Washington, D.C., opens with a theatrical performance based on Brant Coppersmith’s recently discovered reports and my interviews with Marvlous Harrison. It is a tribute to these AJC foot soldiers of the civil rights movement and to everyone who marched, made signs, taxied workers and volunteers to and from airports, manned the offices, and helped move a nation forward.
From: Murray E. Ortof

MESSAGE: The Staff Advisory Committee decided yesterday to support the Selma-to-Montgomery March headed by Martin Luther King, and scheduled to start Sunday, March 21st, at 1100 P.M.

Enclosed is a copy of the text of the plan for the March submitted by Dr. King to the Court. As you will note, the long middle stretch of the March is in Lowndes County where U.S. Route 80 is but a narrow lane in stretch, and shores here. However, to Selma and the last day's march to participants, the last day of the March, the late arrival of the final March meeting in

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

INSTITUTE OF HUMAN RELATIONS 160 E. 61 ST. NEW YORK, N.Y. 10021 212-995 4000

FOR RELEASE WEDNESDAY PM, MARCH 24, 1965
THURSDAY AM, MARCH 25, 1965

AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE DELEGATION FLYING TOMORROW TO MONTGOMERY MARCH

Gein Leeman Heads Group Joining Marchers from Other Parts of U.S.;

Dr. King to Receive Committee's Liberties Award

New York, March 22, 1965 (UPI)--Gein Leeman, Secretary of the AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, heads a delegation of members and staff of the pioneer human relations agency who will leave early tomorrow morning (from Marine Terminal, LaGuardia Airport, 5 A.M., Thursday, March 25, via Butler Aviation) on a charter flight to Montgomery, Alabama.

The delegation will meet AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE members from other parts of the country and join in the final leg of the historic march from Selma. Frank CooperSmith, Washington Area Director, headed the Committee's group that took part in the first leg of the march, starting in Selma earlier this week.

Among those on the flight with Mr. Leeman will be Harry Fleischman, Race Relations Coordinator; Theodore Ellenoff, Chairman of the New York Chapter's Civil Rights Committee; Irving Levine, Murray Hale, and Marvin Morris of the New York Chapter staff; and Eleanor Ashman, Joyce Kaufer, and George Salomon of the national staff.
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. leading the Selma to Montgomery March, 1965.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, second from the right, participated in the first day of the five day march. The leis worn by those in the forefront were given to the marchers by a group from Hawaii.
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in front of the Alabama State Capitol, addresses the estimated 25,000 civil rights demonstrators who followed him on the last leg of the Selma-Montgomery Civil Rights March, on March 25, 1965.