

NOBEL PEACE PRIZE: In 1964, award to King stirred a storm

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Europe treated the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. like royalty in October 1964, when he won the Nobel Peace Prize. But in his native Atlanta, the civil rights leader was almost without honor.

Plans for an interracial banquet in tribute to King caused a tempest in a still-segregated city and had everyone guessing who was coming to dinner. And it took a blunt warning from the city's most influential industry to eventually set things right.

"The black community in Atlanta was just quite thrilled and proud," said Jesse Hill Jr., then a young insurance executive.

Some whites, however, were outraged that the peace prize had been awarded to someone they considered a rabble-rouser.

The Atlanta Journal published a letter from a Doraville man who said King "has caused more racial strife and human misbehavior than any group leader in history."

Sen. Herman Talmadge (D-Ga.) said he was shocked to see high honors given to people who advocated lawbreaking.

"The climate was not what it should have been in Dr. King's hometown," said Hill, now 76. "America received Dr. King's becoming this recipient in such a magnificent way, and of course, Atlanta and much of the South were not as gracious."

King was controversial. Reaction to the news from Norway was divided. "Those of us who agreed with what he was doing and thought he was wonderful were thrilled," said Janice Rothschild Blumberg. "The other people weren't. It's as simple as that."

Her late husband, Rabbi Jacob Rothschild of The Temple, was among a small group of religious and civic leaders who urged Atlantans to celebrate King's achievement. At age 35, King was the youngest person ever and the first Georgian to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Mayor Ivan Allen Jr. declared King "fully deserving of the honor" and vowed to support the tribute.

The prize thrust image-conscious Atlanta into the international spotlight. The city's leaders knew they must avoid snubbing the Nobel Peace Prize winner. "There was a strange mixture of feeling in the white community," Coretta Scott King recounted in "My Life With Martin Luther King Jr.," her 1969 memoir. "Some white people were very proud that a hometown man had won this great honor and felt a sense of identification with him. Others were still afraid to honor him." Nearly a decade earlier, King had helped spark the nonviolent civil rights movement when he led a successful effort to integrate city buses in Montgomery. His impassioned oratory mobilized people to dismantle segregation throughout the South and gain equal rights for black people.

Protest in Atlanta traditionally had been off-limits for the organization he headed, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. But in late 1964, the SCLC began picketing the Scripto Co., a pen and pencil manufacturer, over alleged discrimination against black workers.

"As a result, there was considerable controversy in the white community as to whether Atlanta should take any official notice of my husband's winning the prize," Coretta King recalled in her book.

Accolades abroad

Soon after the Nobel announcement, King supporters began discussing a celebratory banquet. Rothschild asked his wife to suggest a gift.

"My first reaction was, not silver -- Coretta's got enough to do without polishing it," said Blumberg, now 78 and living in Washington. They settled on an engraved Steuben glass bowl.

In early December, King and his entourage of about 30 traveled to London, where more than 4,000 people packed St. Paul's Cathedral to hear the Baptist preacher speak.

King was greeted in Oslo, Norway, site of the Nobel ceremony, by hundreds of people, including children bearing floral bouquets and members of the Nobel committee. The next day, he accepted his award in the presence of King Olaf V. Back in Atlanta, a storm was brewing.

More than 100 city leaders had received a letter inviting them to a dinner in late January in King's honor. It was signed by Rabbi Rothschild, Mayor Allen, Roman Catholic Archbishop Paul J. Hallinan, Morehouse College President Benjamin E. Mays and Ralph McGill, publisher of The Atlanta Constitution.

But the power elite in the city had not been consulted about the banquet, and some were not happy. Replies were slow coming in. Though a good number of people accepted the invitation, others refused it. The New York Times reported that one high-level banker made phone calls to discourage participation. Andrew Young, then a young aide to King, recounted in his memoir "An Easy Burden" the arm-twisting that ensued:

"J. Paul Austin, the chairman and CEO of Coca-Cola, and Mayor Ivan Allen summoned key Atlanta business leaders to the Commerce Club's eighteenth-floor dining room, where Austin told them flatly, 'It is embarrassing for Coca-Cola to be located in a city that refuses to honor its Nobel Prize winner. We are an international business. The Coca-Cola Co. does not need Atlanta. You all need to decide whether Atlanta needs the Coca-Cola Co.' Within two hours of the end of that meeting, every ticket to the dinner was sold."

A quick about-face

Among the city's white elite, there was a last-minute scramble for tickets, Blumberg said.

"Dick Rich [owner of Rich's department store] called our house looking for tickets, and Rabbi said, 'No, I don't have any.' He called King Sr., but . . . Daddy King was out looking for tickets himself. I don't know how the Riches got tickets, but they got what they needed."

More than 1,500 people -- the cream of Atlanta's business, civic, political and religious communities -- jammed the Dinkler Plaza Hotel downtown for the three-hour affair. Outside, police were on hand to control picketing that never materialized.

Sam Massell, then vice mayor, recently recalled an incident he said was sad in the wake of "such an auspicious occasion."

As people poured from the downtown hotel and crossed the street toward a garage, some expressed fear of violence from "ultraconservative groups that opposed anything that was interracial." Still, the 75-year-old Massell said, the event proved a success.

"We saw what men and women of goodwill can do in bringing about change," he said.

In 1963, the year before King won the Nobel Peace Prize, Linda Mulla went to work at Atlanta City Hall as one of Ivan Allen's secretaries. She now is senior executive assistant to the former mayor, who is 91 and growing forgetful. Mulla vividly remembers the mayor's behind-the-scenes maneuvering and how

"the city too busy to hate" responded when King won the Nobel Prize:
"It was one of the turning points in our city."