

VIOLA LIUZZO'S RELATIVES TRY TO REBUILD LIVES

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The clubs that fell on the heads of civil rights demonstrators at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Ala., 20 years ago echoed loudly in the northwest Detroit home of a family named Liuzzo.

Those echoes led **Viola** Liuzzo on a journey that ended three weeks later in a ditch next **to** an Alabama highway, her **life** ended by a Ku Klux Klansman's bullet.

And they led her children on a longer odyssey through libraries, law offices and government bureaucracies **to** a bitter, frustrating defeat in a federal courtroom in Ann Arbor in 1983.

In the process, **Viola** Liuzzo became a martyr **to** the civil rights movement, and the circumstances of her death a symbol of abuses committed by the FBI during the 1960s.

IN 1965, Liuzzo was a 39-year-old housewife and part-time college student, married **to** a Teamster business agent and the mother of five young children, who was chafing at the restrictions imposed by that role.

"She was one of the first feminists," says her son, Tony. "It was never really recognized."

Like millions of other Americans, Liuzzo sat in front of her television on March 7, 1965, and watched news films of the bloody confrontation at the bridge in Selma.

Like many Americans, she was horrified by the violence Alabama state troopers used against the demonstrators.

She decided **to** do something about it. Some friends from Wayne State University were planning **to** go down **to** Alabama **to** join the demonstrations, and she decided **to** join them. On March 16 she called her husband from a campus pay phone, piled her friends into her 1963 Oldsmobile and headed south.

WITH 5,000 OTHERS, Liuzzo spent several days tramping down U.S.-80 on the 50-mile march from Selma **to** Montgomery, protected by federal troops and marshals. She stood in front of the state capitol on March 25 and listened as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's soaring oratory brought the march **to** a triumphant conclusion.

That night, Liuzzo volunteered **to** ferry demonstrators back **to** their homes in her Oldsmobile. She loaded the car with marchers from the Selma area, drove them home, then headed back **to** Montgomery with a 19-year-old marcher named Leroy Moton.

Half an hour later, **Liuzzo's** car was in a drainage ditch, and she was dead from a fusillade of shots fired from a carload of Klansmen who had pursued her down U.S.-80 at speeds of up **to** 90 m.p.h. Moton escaped.

The next morning, as a nation awoke **to** the news of the shooting, a visibly angry President Lyndon B. Johnson announced the arrests of three of the four men in the car -- Collie Leroy Wilkins, William Orville Eaton and Eugene Thomas -- and denounced the Klan as "a hooded society of bigots."

The fourth man in the car, Gary Thomas Rowe, was an FBI informant. He testified in court that he had only pretended **to** fire at Liuzzo while Wilkins had fired the fatal shot. A state court acquitted the three Klansmen of murder charges, but a federal court convicted them of violating **Liuzzo's** civil rights and sentenced them **to** 10 years in prison.

ROWE'S VERSION of **Liuzzo's** death went unchallenged for a decade. But in the mid-1970s, as a result of congressional investigations and their own examination of federal records obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, the Liuzzo children learned that:

- * Rowe had been an FBI informant since 1959 and was suspected of participation in numerous acts of violence against civil rights demonstrators.
- * Rowe, by his own testimony, had over the years reported **to** the FBI dozens of incidents of planned violence against civil rights activists, but the bureau had acted **to** prevent only two of those incidents.
- * On the day of **Liuzzo's** death, Rowe had called his FBI control agent **to** report that a violent mission was being planned for that night. The agent told Rowe **to** go along and observe. The agent took no action **to** prevent the incident.
- * Beginning on the morning after **Liuzzo's** death, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover embarked on a campaign **to** slander the dead woman by spreading gossip that she had been "necking" with Moton and had been found with needle marks on her arm.

IN 1977, the Liuzzos filed a \$2 million lawsuit against the government, charging that the FBI had known that Rowe and his companions were embarked on a mission of violence but took no action **to** prevent it.

After ruling in favor of the Liuzzos on several important preliminary issues, U.S. District Judge Charles Joiner ruled in May 1983 that the government was not responsible for **Liuzzo's** death and dismissed the suit.

Joiner also ruled that the Liuzzos were liable for the government's court costs, which the government estimated at nearly \$80,000. Joiner later reduced the amount the family must pay **to** \$3,645. His entire ruling is being appealed.

TONY, the family member most involved in the lawsuit, says he doesn't regret suing the government because he thinks it helped expose the FBI's misdeeds and clear his mother's name. But he's not sure he'd do it again.

"I lost a lot. I gave a lot," he said in an interview last week. "It took its toll in my personal family. I got so obsessed with it, I neglected some things. But we're real tight and together now."

Tony said the oldest of his two sons, 10-year-old Shadrick, is beginning **to** ask him questions about the case. "He's getting into history in school, and Grandma's name comes up," he said.

Tony is working as a long-haul truck driver and "just trying **to** lay low and stay out of it. . . . We're all just trying **to** take things in stride and put our **lives** together."

LATER THIS MONTH, on the 20th anniversary of his mother's death, the Attic Theater is holding a memorial reading of a play called " **Viola** " by California writer Jim McGuinn. Proceeds are **to** go toward costs of appealing Joiner's decision.

But Tony says he's not sure he'll be there. Taking the day off from work would cost him \$250, money he says he needs for his wife and children.

"I can't lose any more money over this thing. I lost so much work and so many jobs. Let someone else," he said.

"I don't think that's cold. Maybe it is. But that's the way I feel. Maybe I've earned the right **to** think of myself for a while."

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