

out of 'her place'



VIOLA GREGG LIUZZO

1925-1965
Killed by Klansmen while transporting marchers, Selma, Ala.

"We (pray) for rest, peace and light to Mrs. Liuzzo. Maybe she has finally found a life free of prejudice and hate."

On the evening of March 25, 1965, while civil rights marchers were making their way back to Selma after the climax of their three-day march, a white man who participated in the beating of James Reeb sat in the Silver Moon Café talking to a group of Klansmen. "You boys do your job," the man said. "I already did mine."

The Klansmen, a select group from a klavern near Birmingham, had been sent to Selma with orders to keep the marchers "under surveillance." After leaving the café, they headed out of town toward Montgomery. At a stoplight, they noticed a green Oldsmobile with Michigan license plates driven by a white woman with a young black male passenger. That car



symbolized for them the two most despised aspects of the Civil Rights Movement: outsiders and race mixing. The Klansmen had found their target.

Viola Liuzzo, a 39-year-old white mother from Detroit, was still full of energy after three long days of shuttling marchers between Montgomery and Selma. A stranger when she arrived in Selma six days earlier, she had become known as a

tireless and cheerful worker. A priest from Chicago who had been on the march said, "Her energy, enthusiasm and compassion were contagious and put many of us to shame."

Mrs. Liuzzo sang strains of the civil rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome," as she turned her Oldsmobile back toward Montgomery for another carload of marchers. LeRoy Moton, a young black man, was riding with her to help drive. Moton was surprised at her nonchalance when they discovered they were being followed by a carload of white men. "These white people are crazy," Mrs. Liuzzo said, and pressed the accelerator.

Soon both cars were racing down the highway at 100 miles per hour. About 20 miles out-

LeRoy Moton grabbed the steering wheel and hit the brakes, and the Oldsmobile crashed into an embankment. The Klansmen came back to inspect their work, and Moton feigned death while they shone a light in the car. As soon as they left, Moton flagged down a truck carrying more civil rights workers. Moton was terrified but uninjured. Viola Liuzzo was dead.

A REMARKABLE WOMAN

Viola Liuzzo, by all descriptions, was an extraordinary woman. At age 36, with five children at home, she went back to school to become a medical lab technician. She graduated with top honors but worked for only a few months before she quit her job in protest over the way female secretaries were treated. With the encouragement of her friend and housekeeper, Sarah Evans, she became one of the few white members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

On March 7, 1965, Viola and Jim Liuzzo were watching the 11 o'clock news when they saw the first film clips of state troopers attacking Selma marchers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Tears rolled down Mrs. Liuzzo's face as she watched the brutal attack on television. She brooded over the scene for days. Then came the news reports of the death of James Reeb. She got in her car and left for Selma alone, despite her husband's concerns.

After Viola Liuzzo was killed, Jim and the children also became victims. They



were besieged with hate mail and phone threats. The Klan circulated ugly lies about Mrs. Liuzzo's character, and these were repeated in FBI reports. Though they were proven false, the rumors fueled sentiment among some that Mrs. Liuzzo was out of "her place" in Selma, that she should have stayed home with her children. *A Ladies' Home Journal* survey showed that only 26 percent of readers approved of Mrs. Liuzzo's mission in Selma.

Mrs. Liuzzo's friends knew her as a caring person who gave of herself without regard to public opinion. Her children were fiercely proud of their mother and were devastated by the unjust attacks on her. Mrs. Liuzzo's home diocesan newspaper chastised those who criticized her character: "We cannot wish mercy to those who have passed a judgment of hate upon her. They have found the only possible way to alienate a forgiving God... We (pray) for rest, peace and light to Mrs. Liuzzo. Maybe

she has finally found a life free of prejudice and hate."


President Johnson was enraged at Mrs. Liuzzo's murder, and he ordered Congress to start a complete investigation of the Ku Klux Klan. That investigation uncovered a series of Klan crimes and led to a curtailment of Klan violence.

Three Klansmen — Eugene Thomas, William Orville Eaton and Collie LeRoy Wilkins Jr. — were indicted for the murder of Viola Liuzzo. The state had a strong case: The fourth Klansman in the car, Gary Thomas Rowe Jr., was an FBI informant, and he had seen everything. (Later, it was suspected that Rowe himself might have been the triggerman.) The Klan's attorney defended his clients by delivering a violent harangue against the murder victim herself. The case ended in a hung jury. During the retrial, a second all-white jury deliberated less than two hours before finding the Klansmen not guilty.

Many people, including some

federal officials, were becoming frustrated at the consistent failure of Southern juries to convict civil rights opponents. In an unusual move, the U.S. Justice Department decided to bring federal charges against Thomas, Eaton and Wilkins for conspiring to violate the civil rights of Mrs. Liuzzo. A federal jury found the Klansmen guilty, and Alabama federal district Judge Frank M. Johnson Jr. handed down the maximum prison sentence of 10 years for each defendant.

The conviction of the Klansmen, the first in a civil rights murder, was a landmark in southern racial history. It was also the first time the federal government successfully prosecuted a case of civil rights conspiracy.

In 1991, the women of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference dedicated a stone marker at the site where Viola Liuzzo was killed on U.S. 80. After several instances of vandalism and defacement, they erected a fence around it. 

OPPOSITE PAGE

Viola Liuzzo tried to outrun the Klansmen who were following her car. When they caught up with her, they fired a .38-caliber pistol through the window, killing her instantly.

BELOW

Four of Viola Liuzzo's five children grieve after hearing of the death of their mother. They are (left to right) Anthony, 10, Sally, 6, Penny, 18, and Tommy, 13.

