

San Francisco International Film Festival 2004—Part 4

Viola Liuzzo: martyr in the struggle for social equality

“She wanted equal rights for everyone, no matter what the cost!”

By Joanne Laurier
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This is the fourth and final part in a series of articles on the 2004 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 15-29.

Home of the Brave, directed by Paola di Florio

The voting rights march from Selma, Alabama to the state capital of Montgomery in March 1965 was one of the high points of the struggle for civil rights in the US. On the notorious “Bloody Sunday,” March 7, 1965, some 600 marchers got only six blocks when they were assailed on the Edmund Pettus Bridge by state and local police with billy-clubs and tear gas and driven back into Selma.

Two days later Martin Luther King, Jr., led a “symbolic” march to the spot where the protesters had been attacked. On March 21, about 3,200 marchers set out for Montgomery, walking 12 miles a day and sleeping in fields. By the time they reached the capitol on March 25, they were 25,000 strong.

The event had a tragic denouement. While ferrying marchers back and forth from the airport on March 25, Viola Liuzzo, the 39-year-old wife of a Detroit Teamster official and mother of five was gunned down on a stretch of Alabama highway by a carload of Ku Klux Klan members, one of whom was an FBI informer, Gary Thomas Rowe. Liuzzo was the only white woman killed during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.

Not only was Liuzzo murdered in cold blood, to cover up its culpability in the crime, the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover launched a smear campaign against this extraordinary fighter for equal rights within days of her death. As the Liuzzo family was to discover, Hoover’s agency produced three times more paperwork on the Michigan housewife than it did on the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). For two decades, the family fought to uncover the truth about her murder and the role played by the FBI in her death, culminating in a failed lawsuit against the federal government. This accumulated tragedy took an immense toll on Viola Liuzzo’s children and husband.

Director Paola di Florio began filming her remarkable documentary, *Home of the Brave*—inspired by the 1998 book *From Selma to Sorrow: The Life and Death of Viola Liuzzo* by Mary Stanton—in 2000. “I wondered about Viola’s children,” di Florio writes. “How did they survive all of this? What were the personal consequences of their mother’s self-sacrifice? Did they inherit her passion for human justice and civic duty? Or had they become disillusioned and embittered from seeing their own mother become villainized?”

“It hadn’t occurred to me before making this film that reckless collection of data, inconsistent accounts of the incident, and flat out lies about Viola Liuzzo could all be part of ‘official documents.’ As I began

to meet with leaders in the field of government, politics and history, I realized that this was quite common, in fact. What happened to Liuzzo could happen to any of us. The deeper I investigated this story, the more my own innate sense of fairness got riled up. It drove me tenaciously to stick out the grueling process of making the film,” asserts the documentarian in the film’s production notes.

The film lays out Viola’s life principally through the recollections of those of her children who participated in the project. The documentary’s highlight is a road trip undertaken by daughter Mary to trace Viola’s fatal journey. *Home of the Brave*’s production notes explain, “Mary needed to resolve questions that lingered about her mother’s character, as a result of the slander against her. ‘The seed of doubt that was planted as a seventeen year old girl gnawed at me...’ Mary explained.”

By all accounts, Viola Fauver Gregg Liuzzo was an extraordinary woman. Born on April 11, 1925, in California, Pennsylvania—a coal-mining town in the southwestern part of the state—Viola was the daughter of a miner who lost his job when his hand was taken off in an accident. The family subsequently lived in Tennessee and Georgia and other parts of the South. Having lived as a child through the Depression when blacks who held jobs were the targets of racists—lynchings in the South dramatically increased between 1932 and 1935—Viola knew from “personal experience what segregation, discrimination, and hatred were all about.” (*From Selma to Sorrow*)

During World War II, Viola’s family moved to Ypsilanti, Michigan, where Ford Motor Company had recently opened up the Willow Run Bomber Plant. The automotive company hired 42,000 people between 1941 and 1945. In 1943, the year after Viola arrived in Detroit, widespread racial rioting broke out. At that time, Detroit was one of the most segregated Northern cities.

“We didn’t know my mother as a civil rights activist. Her response to the movement just flowed naturally from how she felt about everything. She loved nature, children, adventure, other people—it was all one piece to her ... She questioned and challenged *everything*,” Mary Liuzzo told author Stanton. Viola was fascinated with the dialogues of the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, and read essays by American philosopher Henry David Thoreau to her children. (In 1845 Thoreau had refused to pay taxes to the federal government to protest the Mexican War and its enforcement of slavery.)

Daughter Penny told Stanton: “Well, she had a million interests, that’s for sure. She used to take me and my sisters to the symphony and to the art museum downtown, and she went rock collecting and camping with my brothers. I sat in on her college classes once in a while—she’d always

be telling us about what she was studying, talking about what was going on in the world, and in the next second she'd be out there rescuing stray animals, feeding the bums and giving them spending money."

In 1951, after two previous failed marriages (one at 16 lasted only a day), Viola married James Liuzzo, a Teamsters union organizer. At 35, a high school dropout, she returned to school, the Carnegie Institute of Detroit, and trained as a medical laboratory assistant. A year later, in 1963, Viola enrolled at Wayne State University—an unusual feat at that time for a 36-year-old working class housewife. That same year she wrote: "I protest the attitude of the great majority of men who hold to the conviction that any married woman who is unable to find contentment and self-satisfaction when confined to homemaking displays a lack of emotional health." Through her close black friend, Sarah Evans, Liuzzo also began to get seriously involved in the civil rights movement, becoming active in the Detroit chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Around this same time she left the Catholic Church and became involved with the Unitarian Universalist Church.

Alabama

According to her family, the events of "Bloody Sunday" convinced Viola to join the Selma-to-Montgomery march two weeks later. On March 8, 1965, the day after the attack on the bridge, Viola decided to go to Selma. A week later, after attending a rally at Wayne State in sympathy with the voting rights marchers, she called her husband and told him that there were "too many people who just stand around talking" and that she was going to Alabama for a week. She asked Evans to explain her absence to the children. Evans reportedly warned Viola that she might be killed. She replied, "I want to be part of it."

Liuzzo participated in the March 21 protest rally of 3,000 to the Edmund Pettis Bridge and the last leg of the march to Montgomery four days later. After she and Leroy Moton drove five passengers back to Selma, Viola volunteered to return him to Montgomery. She was murdered on this trip.

One of *Home of the Brave's* most heart-rending sequences is a piece of television footage shot in the Liuzzo home shortly after Viola's assassination. The media has descended on the family. Fourteen-year-old Tommy addresses the reporters: "She wanted equal rights for everyone, no matter what the cost!"

The Liuzzo family discovered that the campaign to discredit their mother had been instigated by FBI director Hoover. The FBI spread rumors that Viola was a drug addict, that husband Jim was involved in organized crime and that a sexual relationship had taken place between Viola and Moton.

For decades, Hoover's FBI infiltrated and disrupted left-wing and protest movements. According to Coretta Scott King, whose husband, Martin Luther King, Jr., was relentlessly hounded by Hoover: "The FBI treated the civil rights movement as if it were an alien enemy attack on the United States." (*From Selma to Sorrow*)

The trial of the three KKK killers fingered by FBI informant Rowe ended in a hung jury; the second, in an acquittal. The three Klansmen were finally convicted in a third trial on charges of violating Liuzzo's civil rights and sentenced to 10 years in prison each.

Rowe was implicated in or admitted to taking part in a number of crimes while working for the FBI, including a violent assault on Freedom Riders at the Birmingham, Alabama, bus station in 1961 and the bombing that killed four black girls in a Birmingham church in 1963. Rowe, described by Hoover as the best undercover agent "we've ever seen," also claimed he killed an unidentified black man in a Birmingham riot in 1963. The FBI helped Rowe cover up his involvement in these incidents.

In video taped depositions, two Birmingham policemen testified that Rowe told them that he had killed Viola Liuzzo, for which he was indicted in 1978 by a Grand Jury in Alabama. The KKK members with

whom Rowe was riding also claimed that Rowe had pulled the trigger. They passed lie detector tests, Rowe failed. After becoming aware of the FBI informer's role, the Liuzzo family filed a lawsuit in 1979 against the US government under the Federal Tort Claims statute asking for damages for their mother's death.

In May 1983 a civil trial ended with a judge dismissing the plaintiffs' claims, ruling that "Rowe did not kill, nor did he do or say things causing others to kill. He was there to provide information, and his failure to take steps to stop the planned violence by uncovering himself and aborting his mission cannot place liability on the government."

The family was ordered to pay court costs of \$79,800, in addition to legal fees which amounted to more than \$60,000. Eventually the government award was appealed and reduced to a negligible amount.

"[Gary] Tommy Rowe slipped back into the Federal Witness Protection Program. He, unlike the Liuzzos, was financially secure," reveals author Mary Stanton.

What happened to Viola's family? When husband Jim died in 1978, there was not enough money for him to be buried in the same cemetery as his wife. The oldest son Tommy was committed to a Michigan state mental institution in 1980 and after his release disappeared into the Alabama hills near where his mother was murdered. Son Tony eventually became second in command of the Michigan Militia and went underground after September 11, 2001. Daughters Mary, Penny and Sally settled on the West Coast.

Sarah Evans, Viola's closest friend and guardian of the Liuzzo children after their mother's death, recounted that Viola would say: "Sarah, you and I are going to change the world. One day they'll write about us. You'll see."

Participating in the making of *Home of the Brave* enabled Viola's children to gain perspective and better appreciate their mother's legacy. Of daughter Mary's trip to the south, di Florio comments in the production notes: "Part of her still wondered what Viola was doing down there [Selma]. The permission to feel her mother's presence again—after years of burying her emotionally—was central to Mary's personal journey to Selma. 'I'm tired of apologizing for who she was—I just want to love her. I want to remember her life, not her death.'"

Tony Liuzzo told the director: "I've always felt it's my job to be fearless, so my family will stop living in fear. What kind of man would I be if I didn't defend our rights, when my mother gave her life for them?"

Democratic traditions

Viola Liuzzo was a remarkable personality, embodying the finest democratic aspirations and traditions of the American working class. She was an energizing force whose profound commitment to social justice was not merely the product of intuition and class instinct. Viola's uncommon cultural thirst was nurtured in the midst of social convulsions; her imagination and intellect stimulated by philosophers and writers, such as Plato and Thoreau. From Socrates' *Protagoras* she would quote: "No one who either knows or believes that there is another possible course of action, better than the one he is following, will ever continue on his present course when he might choose the better. To 'act beneath yourself' is the result of pure ignorance, to 'be your own master' is wisdom." (*From Selma to Sorrow*)

In its sympathetic and humane honoring of Viola Liuzzo, *Home of the Brave* treats the fate of a woman who was, according to director di Florio, "murdered, slandered and deliberately forgotten in history."

Over 750 people attended the burial service for Viola Liuzzo on March 30, 1965. The guests included Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights leaders. Also present were Teamster union president Jimmy Hoffa, as well as Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers. Hoffa and Reuther's attendance at Viola's memorial was the full extent to which the heads of the two most powerful unions in the country involved themselves in the Liuzzo case.

The trade union bureaucracy's abandonment of the case, entirely in line with its general abstention from the mass civil rights movement, allowed the forces that helped murder Viola—and then slandered her—to isolate the Liuzzo family and weaken its legitimate battle to expose the crime and its perpetrators.

The *Bulletin* newspaper (a forerunner to the *World Socialist Web Site*) spoke with Tony Liuzzo in 1983, after the family lost its lawsuit against the federal government. Among other things, Liuzzo revealed something about the reprehensible response of Hoffa, a colleague and personal friend of Jim Liuzzo, to what Tony describes as his mother's "execution."

The following is an excerpt from the 1983 interview:

"I'm disgusted with the judicial system. We proved negligence without a doubt. We're not allowed to have a jury trial. The government wouldn't hear it ... That stinks. They withheld thousands of pages of documents of all the other informers informing on Rowe and his activities.

"What they're saying is 'well, you shouldn't beat people,' the federal judge just said that, but when it comes to murder, the fact is, they're terrified. They're terrified to admit they're murdering American citizens. And that if one judge admits it, what are they going to look at next? They're going to start looking back in history. They'll start wondering a hell of a lot more about King, Kennedy and so on, and how other countless assassinations that we don't know about were caused by their informants. It's terrifying to them.

"I'm really convinced now that if they picked one person in that march to execute, they couldn't have picked a better person than Viola Liuzzo. Her husband was a top official in the Teamsters union here. At that time Jimmy Hoffa had just donated \$18,000 to Martin Luther King, and I'm sure Hoffa wasn't just sympathetic to the civil rights movement, Hoffa was looking at the labor organization down there and trying to organize. I'm sure of that. Boom, they blew her away. Hoffa backed right off. He gave King \$25,000 more and that was it, not another penny.

"I think she was executed. I don't know whether she was pulled out of the car or not, I don't know if they just nonchalantly came up because they knew who they were supposed to hit and who they were supposed to follow, or were driving down the road and nonchalantly went to pass and Rowe, being the marksman that he was—marksman in the Marines—just pulled up and one shot nailed her.

"The federal judge intervened last year when Rowe was indicted for murder and said the FBI granted him immunity. He could not be prosecuted. We proved that they were protecting him in the courtroom. We proved that he was a racist. By their own admission, he was a racist. By his own handling agent's admissions he was a racist; a wild, uncontrollable racist. I defy anybody to control Gary Thomas Rowe. So are they going to shred some more documents now?"

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