



UVA ARCHIVES



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

# They Died for Freedom

By Jan Gardner

**I**n 1965, only 12 of the 12,000 blacks in Lowndes County, Alabama, had been allowed to register to vote, even though the US Constitution guaranteed that right. To dramatize this situation, Martin Luther King, Jr., organized a 50-mile march on March 7 from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery. The segregationist governor, George C. Wallace, vowed to stop the march.

As the marchers left Selma, state troopers ordered them to disperse and then charged into the crowd with billy clubs. Millions of people watched the savagery on television, and a few of them were moved to act. Two white Unitarians—James Reeb, 38, a minister in Boston, and Viola Liuzzo, 39, a housewife in Detroit—joined King's voting rights demonstrations that month. Though they didn't know each other, they had a few important things in common. Both were friendly but driven people who tried to live according to their religious values. And both ended up giving their lives for freedom.

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UUA president the Rev. Dana Greeley (second from right) and other clergy march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, in 1965.

The day after the first Selma march ended in violence, King called on the nation's clergy to join him on a second march. The Unitarian Universalist Association passed King's plea on to Reeb, who was working for the American Friends Service Committee in Boston. Reeb knew he had to go.



Over the preceding 12 years, Reeb had grown increasingly committed to direct action. After his ordination as a Presbyterian minister in 1953, he served as a chaplain at a Philadelphia hospital. There, he grew more interested in helping people and less comfortable with Presbyterian theology. In 1957, he hired on as youth director at a local YMCA and continued examining his religious beliefs, eventually entering the Unitarian ministry. In 1959, the Rev. Duncan Howlett at All Souls Church, Unitarian, in Washington, DC, hired him as assistant minister. Three years later, the church promoted Reeb to associate minister. As an officer of several fair housing groups in the neighborhood around the church, he became heavily involved in urban problems, yet something still didn't feel right to him. He wanted to devote himself entirely to the problems of poor people and the challenges of integration.

In the fall of 1964, he found the perfect job. The American Friends Service Committee hired him to direct its efforts to improve housing for blacks in Boston's inner city. He liked the emphasis on working with people. Reeb, his wife, Marie, and their four children—John, Karen, Anne, and Steven—moved to Boston. The Reeb family bought a house in a poor section of the city and sent their children to the substandard public schools. By living among the people he aimed to help, Reeb reached a deeper understanding of their problems.

In late December, four blacks died in a fire that swept through a five-story Boston tenement. Reeb worked around the clock to resettle the 25 families left homeless. He also embarked on a major investigation of the city's building and fire code enforcement. The report—with recommendations for the city—was almost finished when King issued his call to come to Selma.



Reeb took the 11 pm flight to Alabama on the day of King's call. The next day, Tuesday, March 9, the march ended shortly after it began, when 2,000 marchers, including Reeb and about 50 of his fellow UU ministers, dispersed after praying and singing in front of state troop-

ers blocking the road. Hoping that a court injunction against marching to Montgomery would be lifted soon, Reeb decided to stay in Selma. He set off to dinner with the Rev. Orloff W. Miller, director of the UUA's Office of College Centers, and the Rev. Clark Olsen, minister of the Berkeley (California) Unitarian Fellowship. From the restaurant, Reeb called his wife to tell her of his plans. Then the three ministers left for the chapel where King was to speak that evening.

As the trio walked up the street, four white men approached, shouting, "Hey niggers!" The assailants swung a three-foot club at Reeb's head and pummeled the other two. "Jim was moaning," Olsen recalls. Olsen and Miller got Reeb up on his feet and sought help nearby. An ambulance took Reeb to an infirmary, where the doctor determined that the wound was more serious than he could handle and sent Reeb to the hospital in Birmingham. A few miles out of town, the ambulance got a flat tire, and a car full of whites stopped. They made threatening gestures. A terrified Olsen remembers saying, "Please don't." Reeb was transferred to a second ambulance, arriving at the hospital at 11 pm. He had suffered a massive skull fracture.

Up in Boston, the Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, then the Reeb's minister at the Arlington Street Church, rushed to the Reeb house to notify Marie. By 7 pm, Thursday, March 11, Reeb had died. "There's just no question that Jim Reeb's death—because he was white and he was clergy—had an incredible impact on the non-African-American community," says Mendelsohn, who chronicled the contributions of Reeb and Liuzzo in his 1966 book *The Martyrs: 16 Who Gave Their Lives for Racial Justice*. He recalls talking to Massachusetts Lt. Gov. Elliott Richardson: "All of a sudden Elliott was very quiet, and then he turned to me and said, 'This is all about the right to vote.' Suddenly it had hit home."

Soon, Congress was calling for government intervention in Alabama. President Lyndon B. Johnson was deluged with phone calls and telegrams. A delegation of clergy, including Mendelsohn and Howlett, met with the president. "I'll never forget sitting in the Oval Office with 30 other leaders talking to LBJ about the next step, and we all agreed it was the civil rights bill," says Howlett, author of the Skinner House book *No Greater Love: The James Reeb Story*.

Four days after Reeb's death, the president presented the voting rights bill before a televised special session of Congress. "It is wrong—deadly wrong—to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote," he said.

Over the next week, prayer vigils, marches, and services in Reeb's honor were held across the country. At Boston's Arlington Street Church, Reeb's boss, John Sullivan, said, "His life can speak to us. It says: come in out of the suburbs and revive the dying city. It says: don't flee from the sinking schools—get in them and work on them. It says: don't settle for nice houses in the suburbs and rotten houses in the ghetto—change it through every appropriate way: community organization, legislation, code enforcement. . . ."

Howlett says, "The great thing about James Reeb is that he is an exemplar of all that we believe—his progression from old-fashioned Christianity to a broad outlook on religion, his progression to activism, the fact that

the part of the ministry that gripped him was applying the ideals of theology to the living of life. His death is not what made him great—it's what called our attention to him."

The Rev. J. Ronald Engel, social ethics professor at the Meadville/Lombard Theological School, who interned at All Souls Church in 1962, adds that Reeb influenced him mightily in the three years that the two men knew each other. Days after his arrival at All Souls, Engel accompanied Reeb on a weekend outing with the church youth group. "I was hardly prepared for the nonstop pace of 60 hyperactive teenagers, the biggest and most active of whom seemed to be Jim himself," Engel related in a lecture delivered to the UUA's General Assembly.

"He certainly helped to solidify my earlier interest in racial equality," Engel says. Reeb motivated him to enter the field of social ethics and undertake an urban ministry. Among Reeb's most impressive qualities, Engel says, was his ability to communicate with people from a wide range of cultural backgrounds. "He really did respect and make contact with the person in other people," Engel says. In April 1965, a grand jury indicted three men—William S. Hoggle, 37; his brother Namon O'Neal Hoggle, 30; and Elmer L. Cook, 42—for Reeb's murder. In December, a jury deliberated 90 minutes before finding the three suspects not guilty.



Tears rolled down Viola Liuzzo's cheeks as she watched the 11 o'clock news with her husband one Sunday night in March 1965. Police officers had again used tear gas, whips, and clubs to beat back the civil rights marchers in Selma. Such brutality and the death of James Reeb the previous week weighed heavily on her. She had become close with the Episcopal chaplain at Wayne State University, where she was enrolled, and he had told her about his participation in civil rights demonstrations in the South. Perhaps this personal connection added to her identification with the events in Alabama.

The next week, Liuzzo phoned the family from school to announce that she was driving down to Selma. Her husband urged her to come home and talk it over. He offered to buy her a plane ticket. She stood firm.



Liuzzo had a history of acting impulsively and taking unpopular stands. Her marriage at 16 to a man more than twice her age was annulled after one day. Two years later, she married again. She had two daughters, Penelope and Evangeline, before divorcing her husband in 1950, after seven years of marriage. That same year, she married Anthony J. (Jim) Liuzzo, business agent for a Teamsters local and a staunch Catholic. She converted to Catholicism. With Jim, she had two sons, Thomas and Anthony, Jr., and a daughter, Sally.

In March 1961, Liuzzo, who had dropped out of school in the ninth grade, enrolled in night classes in the hope of becoming a medical assistant. She graduated the next year, tied with a classmate for top honors. Her first job, at a medical center in Detroit, ended shortly after she took up the cause of a worker who she felt had been unjustly fired.

In another fight for social justice, she took her sons out of school and taught them at home to pressure the Detroit school board to increase from 16 to 18 the age at which students could drop out of school. Forty days later, she was summoned to court. She pleaded guilty.

It was from Sarah Evans, the family's maid and one of Liuzzo's closest friends, that Liuzzo learned about the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and other civil rights organizations. On March 29, 1964, Liuzzo joined the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit, though her family strongly disapproved of Unitarian Universalism, and that spring Liuzzo and Evans went to New York City to attend a United Nations seminar sponsored by the UUA.



After three days of driving, Liuzzo arrived in Selma. She spent the next six days chauffeuring civil rights workers between Montgomery and Selma and staffing the hospitality desk at a local church. She called home every night.

On March 25, the last day of the five-day, 50-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, she phoned her husband, seeking money for the trip home. He wired \$50. Meanwhile, Liuzzo joined the 30,000 people walking the last two miles of the march.

After a closing rally at the state capitol in Montgomery, Liuzzo drove back to Selma with LeRoy Moton, a 19-year-old black active in the voting rights drive, and other marchers. During the drive, a car filled with whites nudged Liuzzo's bumper several times before passing.

After dropping off her passengers in Selma, Liuzzo and Moton headed back to Montgomery to pick up more marchers. For 20 miles, a car followed them on Highway 80. Liuzzo sang "We Shall Overcome." The car full of white men pulled alongside Liuzzo's car, one them aiming a gun at her. A bullet struck her head, killing her instantly.

Back in Detroit, Jim Liuzzo watched the news coverage of the historic march. At midnight, the phone woke him. His wife had been killed. The next day the president appeared on television and radio to announce the arrests of four murder suspects, all Ku Klux Klan members—Eugene Thomas, 43; William Orville Eaton, 41; Gary Thomas Rowe, Jr., 34; and Collie LeRoy Wilkins, Jr., 21. Johnson told the nation Liuzzo had been "murdered by the enemies of justice." Later, it was learned that Rowe was a paid FBI informant. The FBI had known he was armed and headed to the march but failed to notify local authorities.

Liuzzo's death didn't attract the tributes Reeb's had. In fact, the FBI embarked on a campaign to smear her name, releasing her psychiatric records and implying she was a loose woman.

Many people criticized her for leaving her family to join the march. Liuzzo's son Tony, now 40, was 10 at the time of his mother's murder. "She was a white woman helping the black people of the United States, and that was taboo at the time," he says. Crosses were burned on the family's lawn. Bullets shattered their windows. For two and a half years, armed guards protected the family. The pain was so

great, Tony says, that everyone in the family sought escape. His father, who died in 1978, drank heavily.



In May, a mistrial was declared after the jury in the Liuzzo murder trial could not reach a verdict in the case against Wilkins, the youngest suspect. In the second trial, Rowe again testified that he'd seen Wilkins shoot Liuzzo. In less than two hours, the jury acquitted Wilkins. Thomas and Eaton were also acquitted of murder charges in Liuzzo's death.

That summer, the Voting Rights Act, the most sweeping voting rights legislation in the nation's history, became law. It banned tools of discrimination such as literacy tests and poll taxes and provided federal protection for those who wished to register to vote.

In December 1965, a federal jury in Montgomery deliberated 13 hours before convicting Eaton, Thomas, and Wilkins of conspiring to violate Liuzzo's civil rights. They each received the maximum 10-year sentence.



In 1979, Tony Liuzzo, on behalf of his siblings and himself, filed a \$2 million lawsuit against the FBI for its complicity in his mother's murder. Yet it was justice, not money, that he wanted. The FBI fought him at every turn.

On Easter Sunday 1982, Tony addressed the congregation at his mother's old church. "That was one of the most emotional services of my life," says the Rev. Rudi Gelsey, then minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit and now minister of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of North River Valley in Blacksburg, Virginia. "What I took away was his sense that the death of his mother was in vain, that she had not been appreciated for her supreme sacrifice."

Tony Liuzzo and Gelsey vowed to educate the people of Detroit. They convinced the City Council to name a park near the former Liuzzo home in her memory. The council also proclaimed the week of June 1-8 Viola Liuzzo Commemoration Week. That year, Tony helped organize a motorcade to Washington, DC, to demonstrate for the renewal of the federal Voting Rights Act.

The following year, Liuzzo's suit against the FBI went to trial. Though the FBI admitted it had shredded 10,000 pages of documents pertinent to the case, somehow it prevailed. Says attorney Dean Robb, who represented the Liuzzo family, "What we accomplished more than anything else was that she became a hero of the civil rights struggle, a martyr."

Tony, who lives in Westford, Michigan, with his wife and their sons, remains dedicated to improving race relations and to spreading the word about his mother's contributions. He remembers the rose that bloomed in the family's backyard in February 1965—and his mother's explanation. The untimely flower showed the power of the family's love, she said. □

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*Jan Gardner is a writer and editor living in Cambridge, Massachusetts.*