# Viola Liuzzo Papers

15.25 linear feet 1953-1998 (bulk, 1965-1983)

Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI

Finding aid revised by Alexandra Orchard on July 30, 2015. Finding aid written by Eric Fritzler on July 16, 2008.

**Accession Number:** UP001745

**Creator:** Viola Liuzzo

**Acquisition:** The papers associated with Viola Liuzzo and the courtroom proceedings

of Viola Liuzzo, et al. v. the United States were placed in the Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs by Anthony Liuzzo, Jr. in October 1999 and

opened for research in July of 2008.

**Custodial History:** Twelve telegrams from Box 3, folder 10, and the entire contents of Box 3,

folder 31 were returned to the family. The originals were replaced with

photocopies in the collection.

**Copies:** Portions of the collection have been digitized and are available as PDFs or

TIFs in the Reuther Library's digital repository. Photocopies of the

originals have been placed within the collection.

**Language:** Material entirely in English.

**Access:** Papers are open for research.

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**Related Material:** Several photographs, VHS videotapes, and audio recordings were

transferred to the Reuther's Audiovisual Department.

#### History

Viola Liuzzo was born April 11, 1925 in California, Pennsylvania and for much of her early life moved around the Southern United States. In 1941, her family relocated to Ypsilanti, Michigan. At eighteen, Viola was married to George Argyris and lived in the Metropolitan Detroit area. During the course of their marriage, the couple had two children, Penny and Mary. In 1950, George and Viola mutually agreed to a divorce. While working as a waitress at the Olympia Bar in Detroit, Viola met Anthony James Liuzzo, a Teamster business agent, and the two married in 1951. From 1951 to 1959, James and Viola Liuzzo had three children, Thomas, Anthony, and Sally.

In 1961, Liuzzo enrolled in the Carnegie Institute to become a medical technician and graduated with honors in 1962. From 1962 to 1965, she intermittently attended classes at Wayne State University and during the 1965 spring semester traveled down to Alabama to participate in civil rights protests in Selma and Montgomery. On March 25, 1965, Liuzzo marched with other civil rights workers and lent her car to transport demonstrators between the two cities. After several trips, Liuzzo headed back again to Selma with another civil rights worker named Leroy Moton. There, on Highway 80, Viola and Leroy were followed and shot at by members of the Ku Klux Klan. During the attack, Viola Liuzzo was shot several times and died at the scene. Moton pretended to be dead after the automobile crashed into a roadside fence and the Klansmen moved on.

The impact of Liuzzo's death was felt across the country. Condolence telegrams poured into the Liuzzo household. President Lyndon B. Johnson televised his outrage at the racially motivated murder and vowed to bring those responsible to justice. Her funeral included attendants such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Jimmy Hoffa, William Milliken, Roy Wilkins, and Walter P. Reuther.

Due to the presence of FBI informant Gary Thomas Rowe in the Klansmen's vehicle that night, the perpetrators of Liuzzo's murder were found surprisingly fast. Rowe had been an FBI informant since 1960, reporting on the activities of the Bessemer Klavern of the Ku Klux Klan. Soon after the Liuzzo shooting took place, he notified his contact of the crime and which Klansmen were in the automobile. This led to the arrest of Collie Leroy Wilkins, William Orville Eaton, and Eugene Thomas. Despite Rowe's eyewitness testimony at the trial of the three Klansmen, none of the men were found guilty of murder. They were later convicted for violating the civil rights of Viola Liuzzo.

In the late 1970s to early 1980s, interest in Gary Thomas Rowe was rekindled. Two civil rights workers (Bergman and Peck), brought tort claims against the U.S. Government for being assaulted during their participation in the Freedom Riders demonstrations. They alleged that the U.S. Government acted negligently since Rowe notified the Birmingham FBI Bureau Office that racially motivated violence was imminent and the Bureau did not take any preventative action. Moreover, Rowe engaged in violent activities against the civil rights workers and incited others to commit violence in the course of his work as an informant. Likewise, the Liuzzo Family filed a lawsuit for damages and liability, under the Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA) and court proceedings were initiated from 1981 through 1983. Through a number of requests and litigation, the Liuzzo family was able to secure FBI documents related to Rowe's conduct, payments, and handlers via the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act (FOIPA). Based on

these documents, they alleged that the FBI acted negligently because they did not have Rowe sufficiently under control. Also, since he was present during the crime, Rowe either actively participated or did nothing to prevent the murder of Viola Liuzzo.

In May 1983, Judge Charles W. Joiner entered a judgment in favor of the U.S. government and claims made by the Liuzzo Family were dismissed. In addition, they were ordered to pay the court fees for the lawsuit, totaling more than \$80,000. Through an appeal and assistance from the American Civil Liberties Union, the fees were later significantly reduced.

In 1996, the United States Congress created the Selma-to-Montgomery Historic Trail on Highway 80, which included a marker memorializing the life of Viola Liuzzo. Speculation about the exact nature and circumstances of Liuzzo's murder continues.

## **Scope and Contents**

The collection contains much of the material necessary to reconstruct the events surrounding the murder of Viola Liuzzo and later litigation on behalf of the Liuzzo Family. The collection contains the FBI murder investigation files and investigation of the suspects and victims, legal precedents to the 1980s lawsuit, related legal motions and proceedings, correspondence, and deposition files from FBI handlers, expert witnesses, and eyewitnesses.

The collection also contains the fulfilled FOIPA requests for documents that encompass Rowe's interaction with the FBI, various Klansmen, FBI policy, information about the Liuzzo Family, and a portion of documents related to the Freedom Riders.

## **Important subjects:**

Bergman, Walter and Frances
Civil Rights—United States—History
Federal Bureau of Investigation (U.S.)
Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA)
Freedom Rides, 1961
Hate Crimes
Informants (Criminal Investigation)
Ku Klux Klan (1915-)
Liuzzo, Viola, 1925-1965
Liuzzo, Anthony, Jr.
Peck, James
Rowe, Gary Thomas

#### **Important correspondents:**

Joiner, Honorable Charles W. Langer, Elizabeth Liuzzo, Anthony Jr. Novik, Jack D. Robb, Dean A. Robertson, Ann

#### Series I: Liuzzo v. United States Proceedings and Correspondence, 1965-1998

FBI investigation of Liuzzo Murder; Liuzzo v. U.S. precedents; legal notes, trial and supplemental briefs, pleadings and interrogatories, notices and motions; Bergman and Peck pleadings; condolence telegrams, family and legal correspondence, and case-related clippings.

## Series II: Witness Files and Deposition Transcripts, 1959-1983

Files on the deposition or notes related to a majority of witnesses and participants called in the original set of trials (1965-1966) and subsequent civil suit against the government (1978-1983). Of special importance, there is extensive documentation on Gary Thomas Rowe and his FBI handlers and their respective superiors—J. Brooke Blake, Jr., Thomas J. Jenkins, Barrett G. Kemp, Burke Marshall, Byron McFall, James L. McGovern, Clement L. McGowan, Michael Shaheen, Neil P. Shanahan, and Joseph A. Sullivan.

# Series III: Freedom of Information and Privacy Act Requests, Documents, and Notes, 1961-1983

The series begins with information gathered by the FBI on the Freedom Riders, which is particular pertinent to the Bergman and Peck lawsuits that preceded the Liuzzo Family lawsuit. Included are many volumes of FBI documents acquired via FOIPA requests, which are primarily related to Gary Thomas Rowe, the Ku Klux Klan, the Liuzzo murder and its aftermath. Also relevant, the FOIPA forms, deletions, and notes on the many documents created by Robb and his legal associates are present. Several prominent Bureau alphanumeric assignments are used:

BU 44-28601: Viola Liuzzo, murder investigation, Liuzzo Family

BH 170-9 or 137-698: Gary Thomas Rowe BH 44-1236 or 157-569: Eugene Thomas

BH 157-1159: Collie Leroy Wilkins

Additional alphanumeric assignments can be found in box 14, folders 41-44.

## Arrangement

The Viola Liuzzo Papers are arranged into three series – Series I (Boxes 1-3), Series II (Boxes 3-7), and Series III (Boxes 8-14). Series I is arranged by subject and then by chronological order. Series II is arranged by alphabetical order by the name of witness. Series III is arranged according to volume of FOIPA documents as delivered to the Liuzzo family and their legal representation.

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