

# SELMA AND SHARPEVILLE



*Stereotypes of brutal power*

**DANIEL BERRIGAN**



One had the sense, rightly or no, of having landed here before. It was not merely the red ground underfoot, swirling in the hot wind, kicking up a red cloud around cattle and men and cars. Nor the earth coming to life again, after winter in July, or winter in January. Nor the plain that ran flat to the horizon in both places, far as the eye could reach; dogwood, magnolias, Spanish moss on the buttonwood and scrub pine. One had seen all this before; but one had seen something more, something that clung to the heart and almost defied the reach of words.

It was in the air. It held the eyes of people to a stranger's eye—too long or too briefly for comfort. It was in the air; it was in the shuffle of the Negroes, it clung to the unpaved streets, the open garbage, the children playing in the dirt. It could almost be touched; it was pervasive as memory; something terrifying and obscene. It lingered around the troopers, played and played back from faces too alike to be entirely human. It was death, and violence, and years of terror.

It was the memory of Sharpeville. More than eighty had died in a burst of vicious, pure, unpremeditated violence. It was in the air of Selma; the air bore it like a groan—the memories of some twenty years. Through these town roads, the body of a black man, roped like a venison to the sheriff's car, had been driven into the Negro area. Go slow—slow. Let them see who's in

charge here. It was in the air. Fifteen years ago a black man, arrested "for talkin' back" on the word of a cranky white woman, had been murdered in Selma jail. "An unknown policeman" had entered his cell and shot him. His body was dumped off on his family. No verdict, no investigation. But the town has not forgotten.

It is still in the air. Jimmy Lee Jackson, shot in Marion for defending his mother against a trooper's club, died in Good Samaritan Hospital here. He had powder burns on the skin of his belly. The barrel had been pushed to its closest range, and fired twice. The Negroes remembered that night. When they tried to send hearses from Selma to Marion to pick up the wounded, lying untended in the streets, their answer had come from the sheriff's office; come in here, you'll get what the rest got; I'll dump you in the river.

Could the Whites forget, in Selma, or in Johannesburg? In Johannesburg they can, or almost. Once, Sharpeville had been a bitter memory; in '61, the economy was on the verge of a panic. Investors had taken their money elsewhere. There was talk that blood and revolution would follow on the deaths of the blacks. Small countries had begun a boycott; the British Commonwealth had expelled South Africa. But the great powers, and especially the United States, came to the rescue. In one year, 1961, we contributed almost the entire amount needed in foreign exchange to push the trend up once more; some 150 millions poured in to stop the crisis.

The slump was not only eased; it was entirely reversed. By June of 1963, with continued U.S. help,

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South African gold and foreign exchange reserves had more than tripled, to reach a record high. The boom was on. And no one, not even the hardheaded, cares to say where it will stop.

Time, they say, is a slow healer. Money, one thinks, works faster. One American business man calls South Africa "tantalizing" to investors. "We know the people and the government and we back our conviction with our reputation and our dollars."

But money has not come into beleaguered Selma. In the short weeks since Negroes and Northern Whites declared non-violent war, business has dropped by fifty per cent. And time the healer has not arrived yet. He is kept at bay; the false peace is interdicted. The Negroes have seen to that; from Martin Luther King to the farm hand who shows up to march on Tuesday with Monday's bandage still bloody on his head. Indeed, the trooper is right when he cries, zooming like a tortured gaddy on his motorcycle from end to end of the marchers: "I've never seen anything like this in all my ---- life!"

Neither has the nation. Neither has the Church. Who ever heard of a Church, North or South, that has rung, day after day, week after week, with the unending songs, the prayers, the sermons; a Church that spilled into the streets a people ready for whatever hell the troopers are ready to bring down on them: dogs, horses, whips, tear gas, billies? What liturgy prepares men and women and children for Lingo and Clark and Connor? What faith arms men by forbidding them arms, tells them to march when they can, to kneel when they cannot, to face the oppressor—maybe even to convert him? The questions are fierce, and for the moment (for White Americans) unanswerable. But the point is clear; the questions are real questions, as real as the broken bones and the blood; as real as the new hope.

*Monday, March 15.* We came in, thirty-five strong, from New York, in time for the memorial service for Reverend Reeb. We were from Harlem and Manhattan and Brooklyn, Negroes and whites, layman and priests. Selma was quiet as a mill pond; but the quiet was ominous; the pin had been pulled, the depth charge dropped. Children wandered in the sun, the stores were open, the fresh tourist-signs were out: Welcome to Selma . . . Shannon Hotel. Then, we approached. Browns Chapel, the reality of Selma hit like a tight fist.

The church was ringed with Clark's troopers. They lounged in the open cars, feet hung out of doors and windows, eyes half closed in the sunlight; helmets, billy clubs, a stereotype of sleepy brutal power; the day of the iguana. Our car circled the church for blocks—no way in. Finally, we parked and walked through.

The church was packed. The TV cameras, the newsmen were there in force, tired out but still there. The nation needed to see this; better, since Sunday, it even wanted to see. A shabby backwater church, that had sheltered and comforted generations of Negroes, and had rung with the passion and anguish of a trodden people, was for this week, the heart and focus of America. In it, the most astounding ironies were being taken for granted. Black store-hands and field-workers sat beside distinguished theologians. Hawaiians met New Yorkers, believers shook hands with the unchurched, beatniks sang along with nuns. Men who differed in every conceivable respect—faith and race and culture—found themselves bewildered by a sudden unity whose implications went far beyond the unpredictable days they were enduring together. But they knew beyond any doubt that they would never again be the same men who had lived Before Selma.

Light by light, individual purpose was fused in the incandescent arc of Negro courage and Negro passion. Free-e-e-dom. Free-e-e-dom. They sang it together, the skilled and the ignorant, the neophyte and the victim. Some of them knew what they sang. But the others were learning.

The speeches began. Walter Reuther, an Orthodox Bishop, a Catholic Bishop, two Ministers, and finally Martin Luther King. The words ranged from noble to bathetic, and back again. King's voice was ragged with exhaustion, the strain of vigils and of decisions, the killing round of the weeks, from courts to streets to meetings and back again, with the responsibility of sending the crowds out to face Jim Clark.

One thing was clear. This was the Negro's day. We were, at long last, at his side. But even the newsmen were not sure why we were there. They were not even convinced that we knew why; one of them asked us, in words that were not especially flattering: why have the Catholics gotten into the act? We were not sure either, in a way that could easily be formulated. But it was something like an ethic of the guts; some things cannot be disposed of, in peace, by moral ties over headlines, even in 1965.

Almost everyone one could think of was there: men of concern, men of theology, nurses, teaching nuns, writers, rabbis, artists, students. Where's so and so? He was either there (one would meet him or see him in the crowd) or he was on his way or he had stopped and gone. And all week long, the vigils, the prayers, the Negro hospitality (our money was no good, anywhere) the cheerful enduring faith, the contrast of ascetic purity and puritanism on the rampage, of birth pangs and the desperate lunges of moral death, the swift free calls

to prayer and song and march, and the knowledge that slavery hemmed us in—what is the Church, anyway? is it where we came from, or is it here, being created by Negroes and their white acolytes?

In any case, it was the black man's day, his week; one might say, his week of creation. He had been conceived and born at Bloody Bridge, at all the bloody crossroads of the nation, weeks and years before Selma. Could he, this week, bring us over that Bridge, to birth? He might; love is a marvelous midwife.



*Johannesburg, the Black township, Good Friday, 1964.* The Gospel of Saint John was read in Zulu. And they crucified Him there; it was about the third hour . . . The sea of color, the immobile intent faces, men, women, children, hundreds strong, seated on the earthen floor. What could a white man say to them? what could a white priest say? He could say something surely; he might even say a new thing. He might say that Christ had died for all men, even for white men. He could take up his cross, hammered together by fate, propped up, waiting, visible to all. In South Africa, his cross was simply the fact of being a white man with some remnant of conscience. He could say in public, while the Special Branch Police lounged against the walls taking notes, that he was unworthy of his black brothers; that some day, the white man might conceivably leave off being their executioner.

*Monday, March 15, Selma.* The long memorial service is almost over. Hardly any discomfort is evident; Negroes are used to standing, kneeling, waiting; and the whites are learning. The weather outside is Alabama springtime, a frayed and dusty glory. Dogwood and magnolia are coming to flower. The benediction has been pronounced over the memory of Reeb. Flowers bank the speakers' stand. Someone has pinned to the front of the pulpit a drawing from a Northern newspaper; it shows a wreath of thorns fastened to a gravestone, the tomb of James Reeb. Martin King has spoken. And then, the announcement comes; the march is permitted by court order. Three by three, in silence, we are allowed by the courts of Alabama to march on the

courthouse of Selma. It is to be a memorial march for James Jackson and James Reeb. Prayers at the courthouse are permitted; we can even sing.

Whites and Negroes, after all the bitter years, after black heroism and white anger, after Birmingham and Marion and St. Augustine—after all this, both sides are fused together by one fact, a bitter event which neither side wanted, but which each side knew in its heart must come to pass. Each side now had a martyr.

For the Negroes, the irony is very nearly complete. They have had to wait and wait for the whites—when will they stand with us, or march with us? And the whites have waited for a death, before they could be moved. For the Negroes, martyrdom was nothing new at all; it was old as their American history. It had begun with lynchings and disappearances and bodies pulled from rivers. Most of the Negro martyrs were nameless. But one of them, otherwise obscure and humble, had died in Selma; and Selma, by a convergence of happenings beyond all prediction, had exploded.

The explosion was triggered by a white man's death. The blow had been launched by whites; they had struck down a minister of the Gospel. It was a wound with a difference; it lay on the body of the white community.

Time indeed might heal it. Give us time . . . you can't push this thing too fast. . . . But no time was allowed. The Negroes granted time no place. They had been clocked too long by whites; Clark and Lingo had had too much time; time for troopers, time for gas, time for Bloody Bridge. The end was there in sight. We started out.

*The Gospel of Saint John, in the Zulu tongue, so strange to American ears;* sibilants and the clicking of tongues, with only the names Jesus, Mary, Peter, John, coming through. And about the third hour, they crucified Him. . . . A white priest, in the pulpit of the black church; my fellow Christians. He can hardly remember what he had to say to them. But at the end, the veneration of the Cross. A great wave starts forward: mothers with children, young men, the very old. Three priests move among them, holding the crucifix to their lips. And spontaneously, as is the way with Africans, the chant starts; first, as one voice, hardly rising above the sough of bare feet, that sound which above all sounds is like the sea, on a mild evening. The song is the Zulu dirge for a fallen warrior. They are bearing Him homeward to his village after battle. His name is Jesus, great King, black Warrior. Easily, with infinite delicacy and naturalness, the song breaks into harmony; two parts, then four, then eight, as a yolk divides, or a cell . . . Jesus, great Warrior, we mourn you. O the beauty, the

youth, the empty place. Who shall plead for us, who shall lift our faces, who shall speak wisdom?

The Zulus have a saying: he who is behind must run faster than he who is in front. Even to the Cross. Even when the Cross is held in white hands. Shall the white man time us, even to the Cross? Does he any longer even know the way?

*The strangest thing about the march to Selma courthouse, was the utter silence in town.* That, and the faces of the troopers. There was a trooper for every marcher, someone said. Almost, but not quite. The three hundred who left the Church were joined, like streams to a great river, by those who had arrived outside, and were waiting; some two thousand in all. The town had gone silent, as though a great hand were clapped to its mouth, at five o'clock on a work-day evening. Traffic was lined up at corners, storekeepers in their doorways; the troopers' cameras were clicking in the faces of the clergy. (Good to know we'll be in Jim Clark's scrapbook!) But mostly silence. Except that all along the route, the transistors kept telling us and the nation what it was like, what it could never be like again, in Selma on a spring evening.

The breakthrough had come, irresistible as spring. You could see it, whoever you were, trooper or housewife, white or black. You could hate it like the approach of death, or feel it in your bones like the nudge of Christ on Lazarus—but it was there, for all the world to see. In the dusk around Courthouse Square (that's Jim Clark's courthouse—but no more, no more) the big TV lights went on in a wink, punctual as dawn, the lights no Negro had dared hope to see. The prayers began; for the dead, for the living, for the persecutors. Martin King laid at the glass doorway a purple wreath: "for James Reeb," the crepe said, But at that moment, the worried, porcine face of Jim Clark was peering through the glass. Jim Clark, framed in a burial wreath; beyond the mild ghost of James Reeb, the death of Southern power and conscienceless law. For the Negroes, it was a moment delicious beyond words; *requiescat Jacobus.*

*In the African reserve, it was autumn;* but the autumn had come on so gently it might have been an Alabama spring. Passion flowers and magnolias and wild roses, the last of them. But under the dusty clouds that followed cars and men like their shadows, hardly a flower or a blade of grass. We were in the last of the old city reserves, marked by the city for bulldozing. The serpentine alleys, the crazy shacks, were to come down. One thought; it wouldn't take much of a push to bring all this to the ground.

Coming up: a government plan, complete to the last nail and brick. New dormitories for the black city work-

ers, male and female dwellings side by side, housing for some sixty thousand. (But as usual, when the Verwoerd government plans for the Africans, there's a hidden card. The workers are in fact country people, up from the impoverished reserves to seek jobs. Some sixty per cent of the men are married, by conservative estimate; the government understandably supplies no figures. Many have young families started. They leave wives and children behind; and the pass laws lock them in the city. The government is in fact promoting and legalizing the breakup of African families, and easing the blow by providing easily available prostitution.)

In the reserve in Johannesburg, everything is inside the fences: the schools, the stores, the church and rectory and convent. They were all to come down. The families would be moved some twenty miles out, into paved streets and brick homes. (The finest in Africa, the government declares. Where else in our continent does each black family have its own home, constructed by the state, with a yard and space for a tree or two? A family can even buy its own home on credit. . . . But a family can never own the land on which the home stands.)

We toured the reserve. Hopelessness, torpor, the crime rate soaring. But the priests are welcome. They are the only whites who can move in and out with a measure of safety or the hope of a greeting, in all this jungle. We returned to the rectory. Out of the darkness of the yard, a man and child emerged. They had waited there for an hour "to see the priest who spoke this afternoon. Everyone is saying: he spoke for us, he said something for us. I wanted to thank him; I brought my small daughter to meet him."

*Selma, Tuesday afternoon, March 16.* Jim Clark's troopers have raced into Montgomery. A march was undertaken there, and violence has erupted. We in Selma will march also, in sympathy and protest. The wounded are lying in the street of the capital, after a mounted charge. There is a call for doctors and nurses; two nuns get up and leave the church.

Jim Clark has had another frustrating day. Without troopers, he had to keep some hundreds of marchers off the streets, with only his posses and a few men in Conservation Department cars. Baker is not in evidence; he seems to know that Clark cannot do much harm without his bullies. But Clark races up and down Sylvan Street, in front of Browns Chapel, his white Chrysler careening like a dreadnought under fire, stopping the line at one end, then at the other. He swings around to a halt, races from the car ("man, he'll end up dead; he's too fat for all that runnin'"), confronts the line at the north end; on signal the marchers turn south. Back to

the car on the run, down to the other end. But the marchers turn once more, facing center. The line breaks at the middle; those in the center turn at right angles, into the housing project yards. Too narrow for the Chrysler; Clark has to take the long way round. And by then, some are almost to the Court House. Frantic, sweating, he turns them back.

Into the church again. We pray briefly, a Southern Conference minister leading; We ask You that the black belt may become a belt of light. . . . We stand where the law has been misused, where the innocent have been struck down. . . . Be with us and our leaders. . . .

A young Negro in overalls speaks to us. "Clark's not going to tell us we can march one day and not march the next. We're going to keep moving. They're bludgeoning people in Montgomery this afternoon, charging them with horses. We're going to reach our courthouse, and pray there." Another Negro approaches the speaker, and whispers the news. Clark has the Church ringed with police; he's gotten them back into town. "Now this is the worst thing of all. He's trying to keep us in here,

against all law. So we're goin' out. We want the priests and ministers to lead; if we're to be beaten, they ought to take it first. Will you go?"

We will. We strike up a song, and start. This might be it.

It was worse, and better, than one had imagined. It may have been all the clerics, the white faces among the black. But there was no charge of the helmeted ring; they stood there, they didn't give an inch; but they didn't move in either. And in Selma, after the past week, that was something new.

In front, the white priest, the rabbi and the Negro minister confronted Clark. The newsmen moved close, the TV took it all in; five minutes of passionate exchange, then the decision. A cleric in front turned to the line, spoke quietly, and knelt. Men and women and children went down on knee, as though under the pressure of some sudden wind. The TV commentator said it into his mike, stepping among the crouching figures to get his pictures. But we already knew it: "It looks like another long night in Selma."

## THE ETHICS OF SELMA



*Thoughts of a recruit in an unlikely army*

**MAX L. STACKHOUSE**

At 10:30 Monday, March 8, I received a phone call from the New England President of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference requesting that I see about organizing some ministers and faculty from Harvard Divinity School to go to Selma to participate in a demonstration to be held on Tuesday. By noon, two other members of the faculty agreed to go, and others to support us. By 6 p.m. six students volunteered as representatives of the Student Social Action Committee. By eleven, we were airborne to Alabama. By Wednesday morning at 10:30, we were safe and secure in an academic setting and middle-class homes. Yet the impact of those few hours has made an indelible impression upon all who went and presented us with a crucible in which explicitly ethical decisions had to be made.

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One could write of this experience in terms of the momentary flashes that touched the emotions and the sensitivities at all levels—of the disorganized yet disciplined character of the proceedings, of the rednecks trying to force an old Negro into the march, telling him that it was for niggers and nigger-lovers and why wasn't he there, of the grimness of walking past four ambulances and three hearses at the foot of the bridge, of the tears of joy from mothers whose teen-age children returned unharmed, of the triumphal re-entry into the city after what would normally be seen as defeat of the intention of the march. One could write in terms of the chronicle of events or of the disparity between our attempts at home to teach our children that police are our friends, and our fear of Alabama patrol cars. One could even write in terms of the atrocities and indignities of the whole situation. But Selma shall remain in our minds primarily for the sustained period of ethical reflection to which we were driven by the simple question of whether to walk across a bridge or not.