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Winter, spring 1964 Life in Mississippi XIX "The Canton Road"

Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia was arrested and released by the Jackson police the same day. He left Mississippi heading for New York on his way back to India the next morning. That night he saved our lives. May 29, 1964, was another Freedom Day in Canton, part of the voter registration drive in Madison County. There were numerous arrests and several beatings during the day. Several of us from Tougaloo College went up for the mass meeting in Wesley Methodist Church at which I spoke. The pastor of the church, the Rev. ^{James} Joel McRae, was a friend and a leader in the civil rights movement. The police had placed a curfew on the town and no Black people would be safe on the streets after nine o'clock. The mass meeting adjourned at 8:30 p.m. As we came out of the church (which had been watched by police and by other local white men all evening) we noticed a group of white men staring at us. A block or so away there were more white men in street clothes. Some of them carried wooden clubs; they were talking with uniformed policemen, who also carried the same kind of clubs. The police knew me well -- and certainly knew I was at the mass meeting and would have to drive the 20 miles back to the campus after dark. The FBI must also have been well aware of the situation. When we left the church it was twilight. We were already afraid before we got into my Rambler.

I asked another teacher to drive since I was sure the police would follow us and afraid they would jail me on some false traffic charge. This teacher was Hamid Kiselbasch, Director of the Social Science Institute, and a citizen of Pakistan. He was a young man of about 25 whose skin color was not very dark; he did not look like a Southern Negro. The other people in the car were also white: two students, Eli Hochstedler and Joan Trumpauer, and Jeannette, my wife.

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All of us were active in the Movement. Hamid was the only one who had not been jailed -- and even he had been stopped by Jackson city police on traffic harrassment business. Three of us were native Southerners, Eli was from Indiana. We four Americans had all faced violence from the police and other white citizens. We had also been very involved in attempts to reach white moderates in Mississippi and in the campaign to desegregate the white Christian churches. We Americans knew that the life of any American, Black or white, who was a threat to Mississippi could be exterminated and the American government in Washington would not help us. Hamid Kiselbash, in that naive way of foreigners, thought that among the rights of American citizens was Life, as well as other things. But Hamid did agree that the police would love to jail Ed King on some false charge; he willingly took the keys to my car and we started, cautiously, to leave town.

There are only two roads from Canton to Tougaloo. We took the shorter route out of town, leading to a new interstate highway. We had only driven a few blocks when a car parked beside the road pulled in behind us. It was full of white men. I was sitting on the back seat, between Jeannette and Joan, hoping no one could see me. Eli and Hamid were in front. As soon as the men appeared I instinctively reached out my arms and locked the doors on both sides and told the men in the front, "Lock your doors. They plan to kill us." To me it was obvious that the white car was waiting for us. I assumed that they wanted to do the usual thing -- try to run us off the road or force us into an accident. In any case our doors had to be locked. Joan and Jeannette immediately agreed with me about what was happening. Eli wasn't sure; but he locked his door. Hamid said we were all too nervous; none of us noticed that he failed to lock his door. Then a second car load of white men, waiting at an intersection, pulled in behind us. We were driving very slowly and they could easily have moved out in

front of us. Now Eli had no questions. On the opposite side of the road there was a pick-up truck with more white men. They joined our caravan and Hamid had no questions. They were going to kill us. I then realized a strange thing and commented about it. There were no police cars following us. That was amazing. Then I remembered another summer night, almost a full year earlier, when, for the first night in several weeks, the Jackson police did not follow Medgar Evers' car as he drove home from a Movement meeting; he was killed. And I knew that soon I would be dead. My only thought was the hope that there would be no pain. There was no point worrying about the others, all of us would soon be dead. There was no point in talking about this. Jeannette knew it, Joan knew it, Eli knew it - - and Hamid could not believe it.

We did talk about what was practical - - how to keep control of the car when attacked in various ways. The first thing was to try to keep the men behind us until we could get on the big highway, only two miles off. If anyone did try to pass us they would probably do one of two things - - either shoot at us (so we would all crouch down as best we could) or try to drive us off the road. Several times it seemed the car behind would try to pass but Hamid kept ahead of him. Then we came to the place where we had to make a sharp left hand turn onto the uphill grade of the entrance to the interstate road. We had to slow down. Two cars suddenly shot towards us from the back and forced Hamid to drive off the road.

There was no accident. Hamid was a good driver - - and we had warned him to expect just this kind of attack. There was no shooting. But we were surrounded. One white car pulled in front of us; another parked beside us; the truck pulled up behind us. Twelve to fifteen white men poured out of the cars and rushed towards us. We were absolutely calm, and, in a strange way, almost peaceful. We were

ready to die.

Joan, Jeanette, and I had been forced to think about death many times in the Movement. Since I had become a leader we had all known I might be killed; that could have happened any time in the past year. There had been times when death seemed close. Many of us in the Movement had talked of the people who could die in the Freedom Summer Project. I had helped recruit northern students and ministers to work in Mississippi. I was sure some of these volunteers would be killed. But I was always honest with these people (but still thought they could never really believe or understand the things I said); I never asked anyone to risk anything that did not also face Jeanette and me. Bob Moses and I had talked about the people who ^{would} die in the Freedom Summer -- and the greater number who would die if we did not have some massive nonviolent confrontation with the forces of death in Mississippi and in America. At some vague time in the late winter or early spring I slowly realized that I both knew I would die that summer and that I had accepted the fact. I was ready. This had to be. And I was not alone. Bob Moses would also die that summer. Bob was ready. Jeanette was ready. Many of our friends in the band of brothers would die; and some brothers we had never known, volunteers in the beloved community, would also die. As the Klan (for so I assumed they were) followed us down that Canton road I thought of some of these things. For a moment I could almost step aside and look at the picture. I knew it was not normal for us all to be so calm; yet there was great dignity and faith in that calmness. I found it interesting that I no longer even felt much fear and, certainly, no panic. I did not want to die; none of us wanted to die. The Movement was a celebration of Life. But, because life was good, we were ready to die, in the confidence that the work of the Movement was good. We knew death might be demanded to continue the Movement, but death could not destroy the Movement. But even as I felt an almost

beautiful sense of peace I also felt a sense of wisdom. I had great confidence in myself, in Jeannette, and in everyone with me. I knew that we would each do whatever was necessary, whatever was right -- even our deaths. I also felt great power -- that I personally could do anything, could and would do whatever was necessary. I knew I was in charge of our group. The others seemed to understand this.

The mob surrounded us. There was still just enough light for them to see us and for us to see them. They were not masked; they did not need to be. They struck with clubs on the roof and windows of the car and tried to open the doors. We sat quietly. No one screamed. I am sure that if either of the women, especially, had screamed this would have completed the madness of the men and we would have been killed within minutes. But our calmness seemed to surprise them. We had not terror. They hesitated. They could not open the locked doors.

But Hamid Kiselbash had not locked his door or rolled up his window in time. Several white men began to pull Hamid out of the car as others cursed and beat on the roof of the car. Clubs cracked against Hamid's head, but he did not scream. He held on to the steering wheel and pulled himself back into the car. Eli locked the door and got the window rolled partially up when the white men blocked it. Hamid was bleeding from his head wounds and his white shirt was badly torn and now spotted with blood. And I saw one man who seemed less mad, less animal, than the others. I knew he was the one I was to speak to so I stared at him. He did not turn away. I told them that they should leave Hamid alone, that he was a foreigner and they should not beat him or harm him in anyway. I commented that the rest of us were active in the Movement but Hamid was not even an American and he was just driving the car for us and just observing things, not participating. Most of the white men (some in sports shirts, some in white shirts) just kept up the steady growling of the mob, but I could tell the one man I had singled out could still listen. He knew what I was saying. We were still conversing as men, as human

beings. My nonviolent faith that there was some spark of goodness and humanity in all men gave me the ability to find this one man and to speak to his humanness. He was listening! I kept talking about why they should not kill a foreigner. (There was no question about their killing the rest of us -- the Americans.) I suggested that they would be in great trouble with the FBI and every force of the federal government if they killed a foreign citizen. The man I spoke to stepped nearer to the car. Now he stood by the door. Would he shoot me? But, no, he was still listening. He just wanted to look at Hamid. "He does look like a foreigner of some sort," he said to several men around him -- and he was not standing between us and the mob on that side of the car, the most vulnerable side because of the half open window. "What kind of foreigner are you?" he asked Hamid.

And I knew exactly what to say. I had to speak for Hamid. "He's an Indian," I offered from the back seat. But Hamid said something about being from Paskistan.

"What's that?" said a second white man, standing just behind the first. And I realized the mob was losing a second member.

"Oh, that's a city in India, that's his home town. He's an Indian and just visiting America. You shouldn't hurt him."

"I think I know who he is," said the second man. "He must be that crazy Indian that was on TV tonight, you know the one on the national news, the one that was arrested at the cafeteria in Jackson."

And I muttered, "yes, yes, yes". I knew they were think of Lohia.

"The news said the government in Washington was very upset about his being arrested. We better let him go. If the Jackson police let him go we probably ought to."

But most of the other men disagreed. "Let's get them all. We can't let him go, he's seen us. Let's do it now. Let's finish them and they won't ever come back here again. We have to do it; we said it was the only way to stop the damned summer business. Let's have a party! Let's have a party! Let's have a

party!" The two men who had spoken to about Hamid were pushed aside and some white arm reached through the window and again struck Hamid in the head with a club -- a police stick.

But then the man I had stared at, the man who had listened when I started talking, stepped back next to the car. I have no idea whether he was the regular leader of if there was a leader to this mob. But, for the moment, he was the leader -- and I knew that now he, at least, did not want to commit murder. He turned his back towards the car and began arguing with the other men; I could not hear most of what was said -- except the cursing and death threats from some of the men at the edge of the semicircle. But the man was saying something about having to let the Indian go so they might as well let all of us go and just get us if we ever came back to Canton. Finally he spoke clearly, almost authoritatively, "We can let them go back to Jackson if they swear they will never come back here." And none of us hesitated to swear what they wanted. Having lied about Hamid being from India, knowing this made them confuse him with Dr. Ram Lohia; having lied that the American government would seriously do something if they murdered a foreigner, which I did not believe since Hamid was associated with the Movement, I had no problem with additional lies. No one else did and we all said we would go straight to Jackson and never come back to Canton. (It is even possible that some of these white men knew we were lying, but, now that the peak intensity of their madness had passed, they, too, may have been pleased that a face saving way had been found not to have to kill us. While I lied that I would never return to Canton, I had total confidence in the absolute integrity of my opponents that they would try to kill us if we did dare return.) So we were not killed. We were released under orders to drive straight to Jackson.

The car in front of us pulled away to let us out. Although Hamid's head wound was still bleeding we did not dare even change drivers. Even that little disturbance might have disturbed them. And I did not want to take that much time for them to change their minds. And I did not want them to see the blood. They might go mad again. Hamid whispered that he could still drive and, as Jeannette pressed handkerchiefs around his wounds, we drove off towards Jackson. Four of the white men got in a car and began following us. It was now totally dark -- and still twenty miles to home.

For the moment we were alive. We talked over what had just happened, agreed they had intended to kill us, and that our calmness was the crucial factor. We felt no great sense of relief. The men were still behind us and anything might yet happen. We did not dare stop even to check Hamid's wounds -- but Eli sat close to the wheel in case Hamid got dizzy. We all understood that there would be more such troubles. We would face death again.

We had all made the proper responses. We had all acted in unity, without ever making specific plans or role playing such a scene. We had accepted our deaths. I remarked that, even with the men still following behind us, I still had not felt normal anger, much less hate (and I could usually be quite angry about things in Mississippi and can probably hate as well as the next man). The others in the car agreed; their feelings were similar. I had done what was necessary; I had been sure that what I was doing was the right thing as I did it; but had we all been killed I would not have been surprised. We had all accepted our death. Throughout that entire school year we had talked of the meaning of faith, of the Christian Church, of nonviolence. None of this was in anything like traditional, orthodox terms - - although we sometimes had to use those words. There really were no words or terms for the kind of faith, the strength that could support a "beloved community," we spoke of and needed. But on that Canton road we were a "beloved community" and knew our fellowship - - and had the strength and the peace we needed. In traditional religious terms, speaking for myself, I would say that I felt (or "knew", or "experienced", or "was filled with") the presence of God, the spirit of assurance that everything was, then, at that moment, all right, and that there would be sufficient strength given each of us to do what we must, endure what we must, accept what we must - - even death.

We drove on towards Jackson, going fast enough to keep the men behind us from passing. We decided we did not dare take the Tougaloo exit; we would have to slow down, and make several turns in a very dark and isolated area where several times recently white men had tried to force Tougaloo cars off the road. We hoped we might mix with traffic in Jackson and lose the men following us. Then an odd thing happened. As we passed the highway entrance from Tougaloo

We were going very rapidly. The car behind us was also speeding to keep up with us. Bill Hutchinson and several Tougaloo students were waiting at the intersection and saw both cars speed past. They recognized my car -- and realized we were being followed or chased. So they joined the parade and followed the klan car, recording the license plate and some description of the four men. This little parade continued all the way into Jackson. Then we turned onto the Millsaps College campus, thinking that was one place we might stop and the klan might hesitate to attack us. The klan car followed -- but when they realized they were being followed they passed us and drove off on to North West Street headed towards town. We told Hutchinson (who himself had been forced off the road twice -- once that spring by hooded men with clubs who had mistaken him for me)--to come along and we headed towards town.

We lost the klan car in downtown Jackson -- but within two minutes had reported their presence to police. We were only a few blocks from the Governor's mansion. Hamid and Eli had been in to see Gov. Paul Johnson just a few days earlier -- to complain about a very severe beating received by Eli in the Hinds County jail along with death threats. The Governor had insisted that, if such a thing did happen, it was extremely unusual and he certainly hoped they would let him know if there ever again was a problem. They tried to this time. By now it must have been after ten p.m. and not exactly calling hours. But we parked and went up to the front door of the Governor's mansion and rang the bell. We stood there beneath the white columns, Hamid's torn and bloody shirt very visible in the bright light. An officer of the state highway patrol answered the door. He refused to admit us but we insisted that he hear our story and notify the city police and highway patrol units immediately to catch the car of klansmen which had to be only a few blocks away. The car, whose license

number and description we gave to the officers, could easily have been caught in the Jackson city limits; certainly on the way back to Canton. But the officer was not cooperative. He said he did not believe our story because it made it sound like white men in Mississippi were some kind of savages. Jeannette told the officer that she was a native Mississippian and she certainly thought the men who might have killed us were savages. The officer refused to do anything and told us we would have to make a complaint, in person, to the Madison County sheriff back in Canton. We said we were afraid to go back to Canton and that something should be done immediately to catch at least this one group of men who were still on the road. We urged him to phone for help. He again told us to report things in person back in Canton that no one would believe such a story over the phone. I pointed to Hamid's bloody condition, but it was useless. The man knew who I was and may have know some of the others. I suggested we would return to Canton right then - - if the highway patrol would protect us or ride behind us on the trip. He said there would be no such help and that if we had not been doing something wrong we would have no need to fear returning to Canton (which almost meant, "you got what you deserved".) Finally he ended this little conversation with, the forces of law and order in Mississippi by saying that since we were involved in civil rights trouble that the State of Mississippi would not protect us and that it was up to the United States Department of Justice to protect us. (It was nice to end the conversation on a matter of mutual agreement, that Mississippi police forces of any sort would never protect civil rights workers and that it was, indeed, the responsibility of the U.S. Justice Department. This man probably had less experience and more respect for the U.S. Department of Justice and the whole government in Washington than we did. The Mississippi officer probably assumed that the despised liberals in Washington would do their duty; we in the Movement had long ago lost such trust or respect for our government.

But to have such a man remind us of the help we should have received from the government only made the pain we felt at that government's failure as strong as the anger.)

We left the Governor's mansion and took Hamid to the emergency room at Baptist Hospital. The good folks there were quite upset when they asked what had happened and we told them. The general attitude was the same as that of the policeman -- you got what you deserved. After Hamid had his wounds (which were not too serious) stitched and bandaged we let Hutchinson (who had joined us) take Hamid home while the rest of us made another effort to get police help. We went to the nearby state headquarters of the Highway Patrol, the one place we knew would be open and could easily still notify Canton authorities. Joan and Eli told officers our story and were treated quite rudely. Again the officers refused to help. When Joan overheard a man in the next room saying, "Get out the agitator file. We've got some right here," she whispered to Eli that it was time to leave. They came back to the car where Jeannete and I were waiting (in far more fear than we had experienced that entire evening) and we returned to Tougaloo with no more trouble.

All the information, including the auto license number and rough descriptions of the men, was, of course, given to the FBI. Agents came out to Tougaloo the next day and spent their usual hours and hours of interviewing. I hated to waste the time with this, but, I still hoped - this time there had actually been an attack. Hamid had been beaten. And we were all close to death. I seemed to have been the major target. I was the only person referred to by name by any of the klansmen. Also their threats of future trouble (to us if we returned) and the comment I had heard that some of them thought it necessary to kill some of us as a

way to stop the Freedom Summer project might well mean someone else would be killed in the next few weeks. So I also talked to the FBI. Of course, nothing significant was done. (A year or so later a friend in the Justice Department checked the records and found out that, according to the FBI investigation, the owner of the car whose license we had claimed he did not use his car that night. It seems that some unknown person had taken his car without his knowledge that night and returned it later the same evening. I wondered if the FBI even bothered to check the identity of this honest citizen and those fingerprints left on the oil can when the cross was burned on campus. Probably not. It hardly mattered.

Hamid Kiselbash sent a long written report of the incident to the Madison County Sheriff. We were honestly afraid to drive up to Canton or be seen in the county the next few weeks. (The Sheriff told a Civil Right Commission hearing a year and many deaths later that he had never investigated the matter or even asked Hamid to come in person to give him more details.)

Most likely all the forces of law and order involved, the local police, the Sheriff, the highway patrol, and the FBI, all knew all the details by the next evening -- if not beforehand .

We were alive because the klansmen refused to treat a foreigner as they would an American citizen -- and because a gentle little man from India, who could be quite obstinant when necessary, had come to Mississippi -- and because this man from India had followed another little gentle and obstinant man from India, Mahatma Gandhi, a confrontation with the powers of Mississippi had been inevitable. The Government of the United States of America was embarrassed because of the actions of this Indian. A Pakastani and four American citizens were still alive because of the action of this man from India.