

Assassins,
Eccentrics,
Politicians,
AND OTHER Persons of
Interest

A close-up portrait of an older man with a full, grey beard and hair. He is looking slightly upwards and to the left with a thoughtful expression. His right hand is raised, with his index finger resting against his chin. He is wearing a dark, textured jacket over a striped shirt and a patterned tie. The background is dark and out of focus.

Curtis Wilkie

FIFTY PIECES FROM THE ROAD

Foreword by Hank Klibanoff

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"Your Day Of Judgment Soon Will Be Nigh"

(*Boston Globe*, July 10, 1998)

More than five years after Beckwith's conviction, the man who had orchestrated many of the Ku Klux Klan murders in Mississippi was still free. Although an investigation had resulted in the indictment of Sam Bowers, the imperial wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, for the fatal firebombing of Vernon Dahmer in 1966, a new and potentially critical witness feared that prosecutors were discounting the value of his testimony. Bob Stringer, who overheard the order to kill Dahmer when he was a young man working for Bowers, wanted desperately to make his story public as part of his twelve-step recovery program for gambling addiction, a step that required him to make amends to those who had suffered because of his inaction. Stringer asked Jerry Himelstein, the director of the New Orleans office of the Anti-Defamation League, for help, and Jerry, a friend of mine, called me.

We drove to the Mississippi Gulf Coast to meet with Stringer, and the anguished man laid out his remarkable tale. After several days of follow-up interviews and research, the *Globe* broke the story. Weeks later, Stringer became a key witness against Bowers.

HATTIESBURG, Miss.—For three decades, Bob Stringer has lived with the memory of a conversation he overheard in the back booth

of John's Cafe, a Hopperesque hangout of the Ku Klux Klan in Laurel, Miss.

It was the winter of 1966, and Sam Bowers, a jukebox operator who moonlighted as the imperial wizard of the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, was voicing his frustration that Klan elements in neighboring Forrest County had been unable to suppress the voting registration efforts of the local NAACP leader, Vernon Dahmer Sr.

Stringer, in an interview, recalled the exchange the other day, "Sam said: 'Something's got to be done about that Dahmer nigger down south,' and he slapped the counter. Then Henry deBoxtel said: 'We need to put a Code Four on him.'"

In the parlance of the Klan, Code Four called for death.

Within hours, Dahmer was dead.

Bowers and his band were quickly rounded up and charged with the killing, but the prosecution of the case was inconclusive and resulted in few convictions. Bowers himself went free after two mis-trials.

Authorities, at the Dahmer family's request, reopened an investigation several years ago into what remains one of Mississippi's most infamous civil rights murders. But the case lay stalled until Stringer felt his conscience jarred after seeing the Dahmer family appeal for fresh information on local television in 1994.

At the time, Stringer was enrolled in a twelve-step program of recovery for gambling addicts, and step nine called for him to make "direct amends" to those whom he had caused suffering if it was possible to do so without causing injury to others.

"It was a tough decision," Stringer said. "I wanted to make amends to the Dahmer family, but on the other hand, I didn't want to injure my old friends" from the days of the Klan's campaign of terror.

After agonizing over his knowledge, Stringer drove to Hattiesburg, the county seat of Forrest County, looked up the name of Vernon Dahmer Jr. in a telephone directory, and used a pay phone to call the son of the man killed when his house was firebombed in 1966. Stringer shared little that he knew in that first, veiled conversation, but he

told Dahmer he had once been affiliated with the Klan and wanted to help.

The call led to a series of telephone talks and clandestine meetings over a four-year period that culminated May 28 with the arrest of the 73-year-old Bowers and two of his associates, Charles R. Noble and Devours Nix. Bowers and Noble are charged with murder and arson; Nix is charged with arson.

With Bowers's trial approaching next month, Stringer, the Klan leader's onetime protege, agreed to talk publicly for the first time about his role in the case. In several conversations over the past ten days, he laid out an extraordinary tale, the expressions of a 52-year-old Mississippian wrestling with guilt, redemption, and racial reconciliation.

"I just want to do right," said Stringer, who operates a landscaping business in a south Mississippi community. When he was a teenager, he worked for Bowers, typing Klan manifestos and distributing leaflets. "I never took the oath, but I considered myself part of the Klan," he said. "I never went out on missions with them, but they never asked me. If they had asked me, I probably would have gone."

Although unwilling to identify the secret witness in the case, Forrest County District Attorney Lindsey Carter confirmed yesterday that a new informant was "important because he's new evidence. He's instrumental in this case."

In a separate interview, Vernon Dahmer Jr. said Stringer provided the breakthrough in his family's long ordeal. "Bob's coming forward was the catalyst in giving us hope," he said. "He was valuable in the sense that he was the first informant who had been affiliated with the Klan who agreed to come forward and tell what he knew."

The attack on the Dahmers' farm home, on a night when the pastures were covered in frost, is a legendary chapter in the ugliest part of the state's history, and the recollections of Dahmer's widow, Elsie Dahmer, are as vivid as Stringer's own memories after thirty-two years.

"We had been gettin' threats over the phone," she said this week as she retold the story in her comfortable brick ranchhouse, built on

the site of the home that was burned. "We knew the Klan was active. They would put up signs on the trees, and when Vernon would drive by, he'd stop and tear them down. They would call and ask for Vernon." The anonymous callers accused him of "wanting to be white," she said. "Then they would use the N-word and tell him he was going to get killed."

Nightriders burned down a shed full of hay on the Dahmer place, but it did not deter him from advising blacks on how to register to vote at his grocery store next door to his home. Windows were knocked out of the store several times, Ellie Dahmer said.

For several years, the couple slept in shifts to protect their home. Dahmer kept a shotgun and a pistol by his bed. But with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, their fears ebbed.

"We had started going to bed like ordinary people," she said, when their sleep was interrupted on the night of Jan. 10, 1966, by the sound of gunfire and crashing glass. "I told Vernon, 'I believe they got us this time.' There were two carloads of them. One stopped by the grocery, the other by the house. They shot out the plate glass window of our house and the display window of the grocery." The raiders flung gallon jugs filled with gasoline to drench the roofs and interiors of the two buildings, then they used burning rags as torches.

While Dahmer fired several loads of buckshot at the nightriders, his wife escaped from the burning house by bundling their 10-year-old daughter, Bettie, in a coat, breaking through a back window, and falling safely to the ground. Two other children and an elderly relative who had been living in the rear of the grocery also retreated to sanctuary in a barn. After the raiders fled, Dahmer stumbled outside, but his lungs had been seared by the flames. He died twelve hours later.

Dahmer's death, which followed the assassination of Medgar Evers and the murder of three civil rights workers in Neshoba County, triggered outrage in Mississippi. Dozens of FBI officers and state investigators swarmed into the area and traced a dropped pistol to a Klansman named Billy Roy Pitts. One of the cars used in the raid was abandoned with a flat tire, and it produced more clues.

Bowers, the founder of the most dreaded unit of the Ku Klux Klan, was quickly rounded up along with more than a dozen confederates. Although thirteen men were indicted on murder and arson charges in state court, and federal charges of conspiracy and intimidation resulted in fifteen indictments, there were few convictions.

Three men were sentenced to life but none served more than ten years. Another defendant served less than two years of a ten-year term for arson after then Governor John Bell Williams, a darling of the radical right, commuted his sentence in 1970.

In exchange for his testimony against his fellow Klansmen, Pitts was given a brief federal sentence and was allowed to disappear without serving a day on his life term on state charges. But as the Dahmer case intensified recently, Pitts was found in Louisiana and is now being held in the Forrest County jail here. He is expected to again testify against the Klansmen, and law enforcement sources say Mississippi Governor Kirk Fordice has privately agreed to Pitts's release if he cooperates with the prosecution.

Meanwhile, deBoxtel, whom Stringer heard suggest a "Code Four," died after a mistrial was declared in his case. Bowers survived two mistrials in the Dahmer case, but spent six years in prison following his conviction on federal charges growing out of the Neshoba County murders. He has long been considered the kingpin of the Klan and is believed to have directed much of the violent opposition to integration that once terrorized the state.

Although he has been a free man for more than twenty years, Bowers was never forgotten by Dahmer's family.

"All we wanted out of this was justice," said Vernon Dahmer Jr.

The Dahmer case gained renewed interest following the 1994 conviction in Mississippi of Byron de la Beckwith for the murder of Evers, the state's leading NAACP official, thirty years earlier.

Encouraged, the Dahmers pressed the county district attorney's office and the state for action, and the Legislature responded by appropriating funds for a new investigation. During the 1995 election, the Dahmers asked each district attorney candidate for a commitment to pursue the case. They wound up supporting a Democrat who prom-

ised a vigorous reexamination. Carter, a Republican, was elected. But he, too, had pledged, "If it can be done, it will be done."

Unknown to the newly elected district attorney, talks between Stringer and Vernon Dahmer Jr. were already underway.

In their telephone chats, Stringer was unwilling to give his name, but a relationship of trust was growing. "We talked about his affiliation with the Klan, what he knew, and how he felt about trying to help us," Dahmer said. "These conversations continued for two years, but we never met face to face."

Then in late 1996, an intermediary for Stringer contacted Dahmer and said Stringer was willing to meet privately if his safety could be ensured.

In April 1997, six men gathered in a motel room in Diamondhead, a Gulf Coast resort: Stringer and a friend known only as "Frank," Vernon Dahmer Jr. and his brother, Dennis Dahmer, Jerry Himmelstein, the director of the New Orleans office of the Anti-Defamation League, and Jerry Mitchell, a reporter for the *Clarion-Ledger* newspaper in Jackson, Miss., whose stories had helped revive the case against Beckwith.

Stringer, a towering man with graying hair and a moustache, was identified only as "Bob." He spent most of the day talking about his experiences as an "errand boy" for Sam Bowers.

Despite his reputation as a racial terrorist, Bowers was an erudite man, the grandson of a congressman. Bowers's favorite book was George Orwell's anticommunist allegory *Animal Farm*. He ran his affairs from Sambo Amusement Co., a business that distributed juke boxes and pinball machines throughout tough, gritty Jones County.

When Stringer was 14, living with his grandparents and holding down two jobs, he met Bowers. "Sam took me in like a son," he said. He handled small tasks, helped install amusement machines, and when it was discovered Stringer could type, he was enlisted to put Klan messages on paper. One of the "Klan Ledgers" carried the lines:

"Now listen, you COMMUNIST and NIGGERS and JEWS.

Tell all your buddies to spread the news.

Your day of judgment will soon be nigh,

As the Lord in his wisdom looks down from on high.

Will this battle be lost? NEVER! I say,

For the KU KLUX KLAN is here to stay!!!"

Young Stringer distributed the leaflets around Jones County. He also ferried packages. "I didn't know what I was hauling. It could have been dynamite or guns," he said. He attended Klan rallies, where Bowers always appeared in a seersucker suit. As Bowers's acolyte, Stringer was able to move with confidence among the Klansmen at John's Cafe, where he heard the discussion of the strike against Vernon Dahmer Sr.

While he discussed his past at the Diamondhead meeting, Stringer told the group about his fears for his future. After losing his job and \$30,000 gambling at Mississippi's new casinos, he was trying to come back from the bottom. He and his son had taken lawn mowers and rakes and begun knocking on doors to build up a business. He had controlled his gambling addiction through group therapy. But Stringer felt he might jeopardize his family if he agreed to become a witness against the Klan.

Himelstein assured Stringer that the ADL could help him relocate, to start over with a new job in a new state.

Stringer agreed to come to a second meeting, a month later, which included an investigator from the district attorney's office, Ray Howell.

"At that meeting," Dahmer said, "Bob said he was willing to cooperate by wearing a wire and talking with the Klansmen."

A few days later, Stringer met with Carter, the district attorney, and Howell at a cafe in the south Mississippi town of Wiggins, where Stringer offered the authorities more information.

At times, the attempt to ensnare Bowers veered into a Keystone Kops routine. The county investigator gave Stringer a bulky tape recorder to wear. If someone asked about the protrusion in his clothes, Stringer said, he was supposed to explain that it was the aftermath of surgery.

During one conversation with a member of the Klan's women's auxiliary, who was unwittingly implicating the Klansmen, the tape recorder clicked off loudly. Stringer was relieved when the state attor-

ney general's office joined the investigation and wired him with more sophisticated equipment.

He had lengthy talks with Roy Wilson, Bowers's friend who ran a truck stop in Laurel. According to Stringer, Wilson told him that Bowers had given him his memoirs, titled "Rifle in the Bush," to hold for safekeeping. "I was told it was all about Medgar Evers's killing, Martin Luther King's killing," Stringer said, and it was not to be revealed until after Bowers's death.

Stringer secretly taped two conversations with Bowers—one at the truck stop, another as they rode around Jones County in Stringer's pickup. Stringer said he asked Bowers why he had never given him a more important role in the Klan.

"Sam said: 'Because you were too young. You were needed to type up the propaganda while I was busy fighting the revolution. You were important because your propaganda caused more revolution for me to fight.'"

After their second meeting last summer, Bowers grew suspicious and broke off further contact. Stringer said he is convinced Bowers knows he has become an informant; as a result, Stringer said he was willing to be identified in this news story.

In their last meeting, Stringer said, Bowers gave him a final accolade. "He called me 'a great patriot and a good disciple.'"

Plains Knew When Carter Wept

(Boston Globe, November 5, 1980)

Written on Election Day 1980, this piece could serve as a bookend with the one I wrote from the same spot four years earlier. Jimmy Carter cried both times. But this time, the story was far more painful.

I found myself in an interesting position that day. On the press plane during our pre-dawn flight from Seattle back to Georgia, I had been quietly informed by a ranking member of Carter's staff that their latest poll, completed a few hours earlier, showed that the president's support had collapsed almost overnight. I was told that Carter, who felt he was leading, would surely lose the race with Ronald Reagan. "We're going to have to tell Jimmy on the way home," the aide said. "I'm glad I'm not on Air Force One."

Later that morning, it was my turn to be the pool reporter, so I accompanied the president to the polling place. I knew that he knew he would lose, but I was sworn to secrecy until after the polls closed, so Carter had no idea that I knew of the poll. I asked him a couple of lame questions. He seemed downcast, his replies as weak as my questions. I awkwardly tried to prompt him, telling him I hadn't heard his usual, confident boast: "I don't intend to lose." So he delivered that line, for the last time, almost grudgingly. Then he walked over to the old depot to address his followers, and he broke down.

PLAINS, Ga.—After a final, punishing campaign journey of more than 6,000 miles, President Jimmy Carter made a melancholy return to his hometown yesterday. He struggled to keep from crying as he told his

followers of the “difficult” and “politically costly” decisions that he felt were costing him his presidency.

Even though the polls had just opened, he appeared exhausted and disheartened by the grim word from his staff—based on their own polling data—that the election appeared to be irretrievably lost.

Carter had learned the worst a few hours before on the long overnight flight from Seattle to Georgia, news his aides had kept from him until he could complete, in a confident and fighting manner, the last of seven stops on both sides of the continent that they had scheduled for him on the final day of his campaign.

He had not known of it in Seattle, where he rallied a late-night throng in a cavernous airport hangar and blew kisses at a young heckler who held a sign that said: “Carter Blew His Four Years of Time.” He had not even lost his composure as another man bearing a sign that read, “Carter’s Maternal Grandmother Is a Mulatto,” attempted to storm the stage and had to be dragged away. As the hour approached midnight on the Pacific Coast—it was nearly 3 a.m. back home and seventeen hours since he had first set out—Carter delivered one of his finest speeches of the campaign.

But outside the hangar his longtime associate and press secretary, Jody Powell, stood despondent on the airport tarmac, washed by a gentle autumn rain. Powell had heard of Patrick Caddell’s latest poll findings over the sophisticated communication system aboard Air Force One on the leg between Portland, Ore., and Seattle. The information showed that Carter had slipped further behind in the target states, and as the president basked in the cheers of the crowd, Powell turned to another Carter aide and said simply, “It’s gone.”

And Carter, himself, was told before his plane descended at dawn yesterday to the funereal southwest Georgia landscape that was shrouded in a heavy ground fog, the leaves a dull and dying brown in the pecan groves and little calves awaiting slaughter for veal tethered in a field outside Plains.

The president went first to the old red brick schoolhouse he had attended as a boy. Joined by his wife, Rosalynn, he stood with a group of thirty other Plains residents in a foyer where the ceiling was exposed

by a gaping hole in the plaster and the paint on the walls was drab and peeling.

He showed little of the old Carter confidence. His complexion was ruddy, and the splotches were visible under the pancake makeup he wore to make himself look healthier on television.

He was asked if he felt he would win. "I hope so," he said. "We'll see." When it was suggested to him that he did not seem confident, he said, "I always think I'll win." He was told he was not using one of his favorite expressions: "I don't intend to lose." So he smiled wanly and spoke up: "All right, I don't intend to lose. Right on."

From the school he went to the old railroad depot that served as his local headquarters in 1976. A crowd was waiting, and he mounted the same platform where he stood triumphantly four years and one day ago, the morning after the 1976 election. He had broken down and wept that day before a cheering mass of his townspeople who were themselves weeping tears of joy over the success of their native son.

This time, Carter's appearance was just as dramatic, though the crowd was smaller and more subdued, as if they sensed that defeat was enveloping the man from Plains.

At first, as he began speaking to the crowd of familiar faces, Carter's voice seemed strong, but by the end, his chin was trembling and his eyes filled with tears.

He recalled how he had gone proudly out from the South four years ago to make profound judgments at the White House "in a time of crisis or a time of solitude." Always, he made these decisions "with the memory of my upbringing here in Plains, the fact that I'm a Southerner, the fact that I'm an American."

It seemed as though he were developing a rationale for his own defeat.

He told the gathering he had "made some difficult decisions. Some of them have not been politically popular." But he insisted that they had been right.

"We've tried to deal fairly with all people, with black people, with those who speak Spanish, with women, for those who've been deprived in life. We've done this in every instance. Sometimes it's

aroused the displeasure of others, and sometimes it's been politically costly," he said.

Carter cited the Panama Canal treaties—vilified by conservatives as a giveaway—as another “courageous judgment” by his administration that proved to be damaging politically.

Talking with reporters outside the school, he also said, “The concern about the hostages, the frustration that all Americans have felt, I think has obviously been a negative political factor.”

Now he was nearing the end of his last campaign speech. He recalled how many of his neighbors from Georgia, “people from Plains, from Americus, from Richland, from Preston, from Schley County, from around this area have gone all over the nation to speak for me and shake hands with people in other states, to tell them that you have confidence in me and that I would not disappoint them if I became president.”

Now it seemed that Carter feared that he had disappointed them, and his jaw quivered.

“I’ve tried to honor your commitment to those other people,” he said, and it became a struggle for him to get the words out. “In the process, I’ve tried to honor my commitment . . .”—and he had to stop altogether, biting his lips as tears welled in his eyes, before he could finish the sentence—“. . . to you.”

He collected himself and called out in a voice hoarse from the many speeches in the past twenty-four hours: “God bless you. Thank you. Don’t forget to vote, everybody.”

And he sprung down from the platform to await what he called “the judgment of the American people.”

A Withered Wasteland

(Boston Globe, March 20, 1985)

The Israeli occupation in Lebanon, begun with its invasion of the country in 1982, lasted eighteen years. The Israeli army achieved its original purpose—to drive the PLO leadership from Beirut—but the decision to keep a military presence in hostile territory proved catastrophic. The occupation turned picturesque farmland along the Mediterranean into a war zone, encouraged the rise of a radical Islamic group, Hezbollah, and cost the lives of hundreds of civilians and soldiers in the region.

Often, I was able to call on the assistance of UN peacekeepers in order to get an inside view of the conflict, and I spent a lot of time in southern Lebanon between 1982 and my last visit in 1991.

Around the time I was writing this account, I arranged a meeting with a handful of Hezbollah fighters in the village of Marrakeh. They vowed resistance and proudly showed me a cache of weapons they planned to use against the Israelis. A couple of days later they were dead, killed by a bomb believed to have been placed in the annex of a mosque by Israeli saboteurs.

MAAROUB, Israeli-occupied Lebanon—The lush citrus orchards have been converted into fields of fire as the Israeli army reaps the bitter harvest of southern Lebanon.

Trees are bowed under the weight of their own fruit which now goes unpicked, and the ground is covered with rotting oranges and lemons that have already fallen. Farmers do not dare go into the fields,

for any suspicious movement in the orchards—which serve as cover for snipers and roadside bombers—can draw fire from the Israelis.

The entire landscape of southern Lebanon is a picture of desolation today, a region in the thrall of a guerrilla war being fought by the local Shiite Moslem resistance and the counterterrorist tactics of the Israelis. Commerce in southern Lebanon, which is riddled with violence and isolated from the rest of the country by military roadblocks, has practically come to a halt. Villages have been abandoned, stores are shuttered, and there is little traffic on roads that once bustled with trucks loaded with produce and battered Mercedes.

Because of the threat of cars loaded with explosives and driven by suicidal Shiites, the Israeli army has imposed restrictions. Motorcycles are banned. Cars must carry at least two passengers or the driver risks being shot. The few cars on the road yield to Israeli troop convoys by pulling to the shoulder and stopping until the soldiers have passed. “That is one of the rules of survival in southern Lebanon,” said a U.N. official stationed in the area.

An Israeli army officer who gave a *Globe* reporter permission to travel in the area this week insisted that he confine himself to U.N. vehicles. If the reporter attempted to move about in a Lebanese taxi without authorization—as he had done in the past to cover the conflict—he might draw “inadvertent fire,” the officer warned.

But in the land where debris on the side of the road could be a bomb, where any moving vehicle could be on a suicide mission, even the marked U.N. truck belonging to the peacekeeping force was suspect. Nervous Israelis on foot patrols aimed their automatic rifles at the truck until it passed from sight.

There is fear in southern Lebanon, and it shows in the eyes of the soldiers of the army of the occupation.

Israeli forces struck Monday in Maaroub, a Shiite settlement in the hills seven miles east of the port city of Tyre.

Acting under a month-old policy known as Iron Fist to confiscate arms and round up suspected members of the Shiite resistance, the army surrounded the village just after dawn. It was a tame operation compared with some of the other Israeli raids. Thirty-four persons

died at Zrariyeh, four miles north of here. No one was killed in Maaroub, although two Lebanese—identified as “terrorists” by the Israelis—were shot to death nearby that day. One house was bulldozed to the ground.

According to accounts from villagers and U.N. observers, the town was awakened by an Israeli truck equipped with a loudspeaker broadcasting orders, in Arabic, for all men to report to the local school. The women and children were told to stay inside their homes.

The Israelis used a small explosive charge to blow apart the door to the school, and shot locks on doors to open unoccupied homes as they conducted a house-to-house search.

By the time four American reporters and a photographer reached the village it was eerily quiet. About 150 Israeli soldiers were deployed around the village, but the only sounds were roosters and radio transmissions. Most of the male population—about 100 men—was being interrogated behind the walls of the school. Women peered warily out of the windows of their homes.

U.N. personnel, who had hurried to the scene, were perched on the tops of houses and in a minaret overlooking the schoolyard in order to watch the operation. The mandate of the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon, or UNIFIL—which has served as a buffer between belligerents since 1978—calls for the protection of the civilian population in the embattled area.

The Israelis seized two new AK-47 assault rifles in one house, but centered their attention on a manhunt for Mohammed Shehadi, the director of the local school. A resident of Maaroub later said Shehadi is a leader of Amal, the chief arm of the Shiite resistance in southern Lebanon. “Of course, he is not here,” he said.

Israeli soldiers, accompanied by Arabic-speaking agents of Shin Bet—an Israeli intelligence unit—questioned each of the village men individually, asking about weapons and the whereabouts of Mohammed Shehadi. The villagers were also led by a car where an informer, prepared to identify the suspect, was believed to be sitting.

Shehadi, who is in his 20s, could not be found, but the Israelis knew the house where his father lived. “We made as strong a protest as we

can,” said a U.N. observer, “but they are definitely going to blow up the house.”

By late morning, the Israelis told the U.N. that the stone house where the Shehadi family lived was “the home of a terrorist” and had to be destroyed.

“All our protests are to no avail,” the U.N. observer reported over radio to the UNIFIL headquarters.

A bulldozer was moved into town. As the family raced to rescue belongings from the house, the operator of the bulldozer mistakenly began attempts to push down a building next door. Told of his error, he moved on the Shehadi house. Within fifteen minutes it was reduced to a pile of rubble while the family watched from a house across the road.

Surrealism reached new heights when the Israelis pulled out of town. After a photographer indicated interest in a picture of the scene, about a dozen family members—including Shehadi’s 57-year-old father and several women carrying children—gladly scrambled onto the ruins and assumed grief-stricken poses.

Fayad Dimashk, a 32-year-old schoolteacher, said that he and the rest of the men of the town were held more than six hours before being released. He said the Israelis told them they would be leaving southern Lebanon in ten weeks and hoped there would be no more fighting. He said they complained that the Lebanese “did not welcome them in a good manner.”

During their search of his home, Dimashk said the Israelis stole two bottles of perfume. He said they broke into cupboards and looted other houses. In a further assertion—confirmed by the U.N. observers—Dimashk said an Israeli officer returned to the Mukhtar, the leader of the village, some money that soldiers had taken from the houses.

As the Israelis departed, Dimashk related, one officer gave the men of Maaroub a curious message. “He told us they hoped someday to come back and visit us with their families, and he said he hoped we would visit Israel.” Did Dimashk have any interest in visiting Israel,

whose border is less than twenty miles away? "I don't think so," he said.

In a two-sentence public report on the operation at Maaroub, the Israeli army concluded that "two terrorists who tried to flee the area were killed."

U.N. officials who found the bodies some distance from the village said they had apparently been shot by an Israeli patrol as they attempted to cross the Litani River. Two others who were thought to have been traveling in the same group were captured. One prisoner, blindfolded and his hands bound behind his back, was brought to Maaroub for interrogation.

Sources said that papers found on the bodies indicated they were connected with Hezbollah, the radical Shiite "Party of God," but there were no signs that they had been carrying weapons.

Maj. Lauri Ovaska, chief operations officer of a Finnish UNIFIL contingent, said that three bodies were found in the same area last week. The men had been shot repeatedly, and the face of one victim was mutilated by shots fired at close range. Because of Israeli road-blocks, many Lebanese try to return to their homes in the south by stealth. Instead of weapons, the three men killed last week were carrying plastic bags filled with tape cassettes and items for children, Ovaska said.

The Finns said there had been many incidents in the area lately. Homes have been hit with rifle fire and rocket-propelled grenades, though some of the strife is attributed to family feuds that have wracked Lebanon for decades.

On Saturday night, the wife of the sheik of the village of Khirbet Silm was wounded when their house was fired upon. The next night a rocket-propelled grenade hit the sheik's house again.

Israeli officials reiterated this week that their operations in southern Lebanon are designed to protect their own soldiers. They denied reports that they want to push hostile Shiites out of the area.

"Somebody," a U.N. official said of the attacks in Khirbet Silm, "intends to drive the sheik out."