

Transcripts – Day 4

Day 4 – Thursday, 19 November 1964

CHAIRMAN: We will now continue the inquiry. Mrs. Kowsillia Gopie will continue her evidence.

MRS. KOWSILLIA GOPIE continues her evidence:

SUGRIM SINGH: Members of the Commission, may I ask you to allow me to sit this morning?

CHAIRMAN: Yes, you may.

SUGRIM SINGH: Thank you. Mrs. Gopie, yesterday you ended where the policeman opened the door and you were able to pass through. Is that right?

GOPIE: Yes sir. That is at the Mackenzie police station.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, did you complain about this story first to anyone of the 32 men who were there.

GOPIE: Yes sir. To Mr. Deonarine Singh's father.

SUGRIM SINGH: You complained about this incident involving Policeman Brown to Mr. Deonarine Singh's father?

GOPIE: Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: What he advised you to do?

GOPIE: He told me to go and speak to Mr. Hobbs.

SUGRIM SINGH: Do you see him here in court?

GOPIE: Yes sir. [*Superintendent Hobbs is identified by Mrs. Gopie.*]

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you tell Mr. Hobbs what Constable Brown had done to you when you went to his room?

GOPIE: Yes sir, but I didn't quite finish telling him when he said, "Get out of here. You hadn't any right to get soldiers to get your things"; because he asked if I had already given a statement concerning the worries with my husband, and I told him yes.

SUGRIM SINGH: Do I understand you to say or suggest Mr. Hobbs was annoyed because of the statement?

GOPIE: Yes sir. The soldiers accompanied me to the various places and people's homes in finding my things.

SUGRIM SINGH: Well then, after this incident you came back to Georgetown?

GOPIE: Yes sir. The next morning.

SUGRIM SINGH: Now, you realise that when you were sworn in yesterday and took the oath in that box, all that you have said is the truth and you have not exaggerated or over-stated anything?

GOPIE: No sir. It is nothing but the truth.

SHEPHERD: Before I explain my position with regards to your witness and other witnesses, may I say that a map was mentioned yesterday which has now been handed to me. It has no caption and it is a tracing prepared, I think, by the Army. The map has markings which I think would be helpful to the Commission. As regards this witness and two others, I must admit that I was taken aback by the statement concerning the manhandling of the baby child and other incidents regarding the police. It is equally difficult for me to examine this witness as it was in respect of the one yesterday. I would now

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strongly urge that when the statements are made involving policemen that I be given copies in advance so that I may receive instructions.

CARTER: Mr. Chairman, what I am entirely concerned with most of these witnesses – I see now there still be a lot of time lag if this continues and Mr. Shepherd does not know what is coming. You know, sir, usually in criminal matters so much of this evidence is almost like evidence in criminal cases – that you might have some idea of what is coming so that you can cross examine from instructions before hand. The main feature is to see if you can expedite these proceedings.

CHAIRMAN: Mr. Singh can possibly show you his copy of the statement to Mr. Shepherd.

CARTER: Mr. Singh can show his copy of the statement to Mr. Shepherd not necessarily to me, because I would not examine witnesses for a day or two to come, so that he can get proper instructions. Otherwise, it would mean hearing of a witness when there is no possibility of examining until instructions are given to Mr. Shepherd resulting in a waste of a lot of time. If Mr. Shepherd is going to be shown Mr. Sugrim Singh's statement, I see no objection for Mr. Sugrim Singh to see Mr. Shepherd's statement. A number of these things seem surprising to me and he has got no instructions on it; and then he would not be able to properly examine the witnesses. I want to remind Mr. Sugrim Singh that this is not a prosecution. This is an examination in which everyone is trying to arrive at the truth. If Mr. Sugrim Singh has statements in his possession, possibly a day or two before he can give Mr. Shepherd and we would all get through faster.

SUGRIM SINGH: Members of the Commission, I appreciate the difficulties and the disadvantages of my learned friend, Mr. Shepherd, in these matters. He has made two suggestions to overcome this difficulty and I would cooperate with him in facilitating the work of this Commission. My difficulty is that we have some statements but have not made copies of them. And I would ask for some time to have those copies ready. We have had ourselves to advertise, as he must observed in the newspapers, for statements and they are still coming in.

As a matter of fact, Mrs. Gopie is one of the new-comers. In future, before I put in a witness in the box, I shall see to it that I pass a copy of the statement to my learned friend, Mr. Shepherd. I cannot do so immediately but I will do so as soon as the copy is ready so as to give you time to study that statement. But at the moment I do not know what to do with three previous witnesses who have made statements, that is, Mrs. Mohamed, Alima Khan and this witness who have so far, as I can recollect, given some evidence against the police and security forces. They could be asked to come back another day to be examined

SHEPHERD: I am taking instructions and I may ask – I certainly shall try to examine her again. Mrs. Gopie equally has made some alarming accusations and I have no instructions this morning that are worthwhile. I should leave it for the time and cross-examine her again on proper instructions. As for Mrs. Alima Khan she tried to make a report but nobody took it down. I would recall here that Mrs. Shirley Mohamed was the most startling witness for yesterday when she gave evidence concerning the death of her child.

SUGRIM SINGH: That is all Mrs. Gopie. I call Theophilus Lam.

MR. THEOPHILUS LAM is sworn in and he states as follows:

SUGRIM SINGH: What is your full name?

LAM: Theophilus Lam.

SUGRIM SINGH: Mr. Lam, you are residing at Wismar at the moment?

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LAM: Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: What lot?

LAM: 16 Christianburg, Demerara River.

SUGRIM SINGH: You are a businessman up there?

LAM: Yes sir.

SUGRIM SINGH: During the disturbances your property was destroyed and the looters broke the windows.

LAM: On 23rd May about nine o'clock one Mr. Toolsie Persaud's foreman of the grant came into my hotel. He asked me to prepare two rooms for four men and Mr. Toolsie himself. They asked for supper which I did not have at the time. They went to a restaurant and they stayed there a very long time and then returned around 10.30 p.m. When they came into my hotel bar there were two Indians, one with a burn on his shoulder and the other one was also burnt with acid. Well, I became suspicious and I wanted to know what really was the set up at that moment.

At about 10.55 p.m. I went on to the main road. From my hotel bar I saw a group of men. They had small iron bars, rods, and knives, and so on. I asked one of them what was it all about. He said "Nothing skipper, nothing." I did not attach any importance however. I took it simple. At that time Mr. Toolsie Persaud and his men were in my shop. I usually close around 11.00 to 11.30 p.m. Then I went to the door and tried to pull it in. Just then there was a bomb but it did not hit me. It exploded on the door. Bottles were then pelted.

SUGRIM SINGH: Were they empty bottles.

LAM: Yes, they were empty.

SUGRIM SINGH: You closed this bar while the crowd started pelting bricks, stones and bottles?

LAM: Yes. Then I heard them saying, "You have that man Toolsie in there. Put him out." And when he heard the remarks he ran to the backyard of my building. At that time I peeped through my window in a small space and I shouted saying that he had gone, but they would not believe me, and they started pelting stones in the upstairs section and they broke the store and started to loot. I sent my son-in-law to the police station.

SUGRIM SINGH: What is his name?

LAM: His name is Richard Croft. In a few minutes the police were there. A corporal and a few policemen came on the spot and they helped me to prevent the looting. One of the East Indian men at the backyard came out. On Sunday morning, Mr. Hobbs and a few other policemen came to my premises and asked me to give a statement. He asked me if I know the persons' names. I said I do not want him to make any charges; in other words, I would not call any names because I do not know them. I had to put that in writing.

SUGRIM SINGH: Was your place damaged subsequently on Monday morning?

LAM: No sir. I closed my window and looting took place downstairs.

SUGRIM SINGH: On Monday you suffered any loss. About how much?

LAM: About eight thousand dollars. I had my cash sales – about three hundred dollars.

SUGRIM SINGH: What about the loss of your stocks?

LAM: It is about two thousand dollars. That included washing machines, other big items such as fridges, oil stoves, and so on.

SUGRIM SINGH: May I ask you one question more, Mr. Lam? Was Banga Mary involved in the looting? Was he around that place? Did you see him?

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LAM: Yes. He was there earlier. He was speaking with me before any incident occurred. He told me to close my shop. Then I did not close it, but instead he closed it himself.

SUGRIM SINGH: Did you see any man there?

LAM: No, I did not see any man there.

SHEPHERD: I understand you said that you did not want to make any charges.

LAM: No, I did not make any charges because I was afraid and I refused to call the names, and generally, I lived just there, and imagine what would have taken place. I had to give it in writing.

SHEPHERD: Thank you.

SUGRIM SINGH: That is all, Mr. Lam. I call Surujpaul Singh.

MR. SURUJPAUL SINGH is sworn in and he states as follows:

CHAIRMAN: What is your name?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Surujpaul Singh.

CHAIRMAN: You now live where?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: In Alexander Village, Lot 2, First Street.

CHAIRMAN: Formerly you lived where?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: At Mackenzie. Christianburg, 170 Silvertown.

CHAIRMAN: What work you used to do?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: I was employed by Sprostons.

CHAIRMAN: What do you know of this incident?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: The incident took place on Sunday.

CHAIRMAN: That was Sunday 24th?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: It was around 8.30 in the night.

CHAIRMAN: Yes? What happened?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: They started to spray gasoline unknown to me.

CHAIRMAN: Where?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: On the house.

CHAIRMAN: How did you get to know that they were spraying gasoline?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: It was around 8.30 when I assumed that they were spraying gasoline.

CHAIRMAN: Why did you assume?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: It was nine o'clock. I had a friend who was stopping at me and the tenant upstairs opened his backdoor, and when he opened his back door the gasoline hit him and he shouted there was fire at the back. I jumped up from my bed and went upstairs where I saw two pans with gasoline, and the steps from the top to the bottom were soaked. The pans had unlighted wicks. I went upstairs, took my foot and kicked the pans down the steps, took some water and washed the platform from the top right down; and then we decided to keep wake the whole night. A few yards away, a fellow by the name of Harry, who was a butcher, stood by his back door for the whole night looking to see if we would go in back to sleep.

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While he was looking, he felt to himself that we were not sleeping, so three times he extinguished his light and signalled to the people who were still awake. We stood there and watched him for the whole night, but he was watching at us, so he did not do anything.

CHAIRMAN: Did anything happen that night?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Nothing.

CHAIRMAN: The next day?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: I left about 7.30 a.m. to go to work and I ordered my wife to go to the station to make a report. Then from there we went to the wharf at Mackenzie. I was doing some repairs there for the boat house. I lighted the fire to heat some glue, and then I saw the fire at Wismar Hill.

CHAIRMAN: Around what time would you say that was?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Around 8 o'clock this fire started to blaze up the hill.

CHAIRMAN: Yes?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Shortly after that I could not work anymore. I stood there and was looking to see what else was happening. Shortly after then, they started to brick down Bissoon's store from the opposite boat landing.

CHAIRMAN: Yes?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Shortly after then, we saw some fellows go upstairs and then they came down and disappeared. I stood there looking at the fire on the hill, but all I could see was flames all around the hill. About eleven o'clock I took a small boat and came back over.

CHAIRMAN: Which boat?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Sprostons' small boat. I remained there for the balance of the day.

CHAIRMAN: Remained where?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: At Sprostons wharf, Wismar. I was there hiding and looking. At 2.00 p.m. they started to loot Bissoon's store.

CHAIRMAN: Yes?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: After they finished looting Mr. Bissoon's store, members of the Volunteer Force could be seen standing around.

CHAIRMAN: Standing where?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Members of the Volunteer Force were standing on the premises looting and sharing to the crowd, but the crowd was so large that I did not know anyone. They were crossing over to Mackenzie with the Quamina boat. He has a boat service there.

CHAIRMAN: Is the boat named Quamina or the person who operates it?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: The person's name is Quamina. About half an hour later we decided to borrow a boat, and shortly after then we saw Bissoon's house on fire. Shortly afterwards then they were going around in circles – there were many of them, hundreds of them – until afterwards they decided to go at one D. Persaud's rum shop; and I stood up and watched as they were looting Mr. Persaud's rum shop, and I could have seen the Volunteer Force boys with bottles leaning to their mouths drinking, and that distance was about quarter mile from where I was standing. I could see the wharf from there.

Shortly after, I saw girls being shaken in the water and then taken on the beach. I also saw men going over them. I could have seen the men between their feet. After that, I do not know what happened to them but the volunteers were standing around there. After that, I saw two Indian boys pushed out in a boat and two others jumped into the river. Some of the men of the crowd went behind them with a boat but could not catch them because the tide was against them. The Indian boys were going towards the hospital.

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The crowd of men that were going behind the Indian boys, seeing they couldn't make it, turned back and went to Wismar and started to put fire on Mr. Persaud's building, and a little afterwards, they walked around and went to Mr. Hackim's building and set fire there too. Now, I was trying to get conveyance to go for my wife and could not. I then approached the Volunteer Force because there were crowds around. I told them that my wife was hiding in the yard, and they said they would go. I met them again about two hours after and asked them if they found my wife and they said, "Man, your wife isn't there but your house was burnt since eight this morning."

I stood there still waiting for my manager. He got through to Wismar police station through the phone in order to get conveyance to go for my wife. When my manager got through he said no police were at the station. About two o'clock Tuesday morning, I met the soldiers and I lay my story to them again. At that time I was at the Sprostons wharf on the Wismar side, and they said they would see what they could do for me. They didn't do anything, and when I saw them again they said they could take me to the police station, and they took me there to the police station and there I met Major Langham. I told him that my wife is in the yard hiding. He said, "Look, I feel that your wife has gone over to Mackenzie, and I am sending you with a guard. Go over check at the Sports Club and if you do not find her there, ask the officer to bring you back."

CHAIRMAN: You checked? Did you find your wife?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: No sir. I returned and met Mr. Langham. He told me that a woman with quite a few little children had just come in, so I must go and check. As I was going I saw my little girl running down the steps.

CHAIRMAN: Did you see your wife?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes sir.

CHAIRMAN: Where was your wife during the day and what did she tell you?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: She is in the Pomeroun River. Mr. Green took her and the children and hid her in the house. He begged her not to allow the children to keep any noise and don't come out and let anybody see you. About 7 o'clock the crowd came in Mr. Green's house. They told Mr. Green that he was hiding some people in his house. Mr. Green told them no. They told Mr. Green if they find out they were going to burn his house. They went away. My wife had hidden some of the things in the yard and Mr. Green told her to show him the things and he was going to keep them for her.

CHAIRMAN: Did you get those things back?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: No. Not unto now.

CHAIRMAN: You and your wife had gone to Mackenzie over the other side?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

CHAIRMAN: What is your loss? The house is your house?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: I am a tenant of Mr. Bacchus. My loss is about \$700 because the furniture I made myself.

SHEPHERD: Your wife and children were saved?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: You said you saw some men soaking some under pants?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: Did you try to call the police?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: My wife went to make a report that day. That was Monday morning.

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SHEPHERD: The fire sprang up all around?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: You saw the fire?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: Up the hill and on the other side?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: You saw a crowd going around?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: A crowd of whom?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: A crowd of men, women and children.

SHEPHERD: I thought I heard you said they were Africans.
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes, they were Africans.

SHEPHERD: They were the same crowd?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: No. Different crowds about 100 each. They were making noise and the place was in confusion.

SHEPHERD: The police and Volunteer Force had a lot to do at the time?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: I did not see any Volunteer Force.

SHEPHERD: Did you say you saw them drinking from bottles?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: How far was it to where the volunteers were?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: About a quarter mile away. I could have seen rather clearly.

SHEPHERD: What sort of bottles were they drinking from?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Black bottles. These bottles were coming from the shop.

SHEPHERD: From bottles that were looted from the shop?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: How did you know these bottles were looted?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Because I saw them coming from the shop.

SHEPHERD: You said at the beach later during the day you saw some girls and men. They were raping the girls?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: What time it was?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Around 4.00 p.m.

SHEPHERD: You were at Sprostons wharf.
SURUJPAUL SINGH: Myself and five others were hiding there.

SHEPHERD: How far away were these girls being raped?
SURUJPAUL SINGH: About quarter mile away.

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SHEPHERD: What were those girls doing?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: They were calling for help.

SHEPHERD: There were five of you?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

SHEPHERD: Did you try to interfere?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: I could not.

SHEPHERD: You and four men could not help?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: We could not help.

SHEPHERD: You said there were volunteers. How many were there?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Roughly about twelve volunteers, sir.

SHEPHERD: Can you recognise them?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: No. They were from Georgetown.

SHEPHERD: You said they went to Mackenzie.

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes sir.

SHEPHERD: You realise that they were not from Mackenzie?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: No, they were from Georgetown.

MOOTOO: You said that when they were looting Bissoon's store, they were sharing clothes. Who were they?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: The looters.

MOOTOO: Then you said you were trying to get over to the river and you asked the volunteers to help you. What did they say?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: They will see, and they went away.

MOOTOO: You asked another set?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: They said they would see too.

DRAYTON: Mr. Singh, at what time of the day was Bissoon's store burnt?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Around 2.00 p.m.

DRAYTON: Were you at Sprostons at that period of time?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: I was there until dusk. I did not go anywhere else. I was just hiding and looking.

DRAYTON: How far away was Bissoon's house?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: About 50 yards away.

DRAYTON: I am not familiar with the distance. How far was this house?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: It was two times the distance from those people across the road. [*Witness indicates the house across the road.*]

DRAYTON: Mr. Singh, you said you saw people looting Mr. Bissoon's store at 2.00 p.m. in the day.

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes, I saw people looting the store at that time.

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MOOTOO: You said you saw the store and Police Carter standing with the crowd. You said in cross-examination you were not far from that place and that the volunteers were not from Mackenzie but from Georgetown. How do you know that the Volunteer Force were not from Mackenzie?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: I know most of them. I knew them before I got employment at Sprostons. They were living at Bacchus' home, and I know their names, and they know me as Carpenter Singh.

DRAYTON: You confirm then that you did see the volunteers taking part in the looting of Mr. Bissoon's store?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

DRAYTON: Where is this shop? How far away is it?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: This is about quarter or half mile away.

MACDONALD: Now firstly – one thing, Mr. Singh, you said you saw girls in water. Were they only shaken or were they raped?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes. Then they were shaken in the water and brought back to land and raped again.

DRAYTON: Was the stelling where you were right against the river bank?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

MACDONALD: How many people comprised the crowd that was around the girls that were being shaken and raped?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: There were about one hundred of them, but they could not get close to the river.

DRAYTON: You said you saw this between the legs of the people?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes. I was in the line of the riverside, so I could have seen the whole view.

DRAYTON: You said you worked at the Mackenzie side on that morning until 11 o'clock and then you crossed to Wismar. You came across with a small boat to Wismar to work? What about that boat?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: It was tied and remained there all the time.

DRAYTON: As regards the efforts that were made to use the telephone. You said that it was not possible for you to get through to the police station by telephone?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes.

DRAYTON: Can you give a reason why they could not answer the telephone?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: I did not worry to wait for any statement.

DRAYTON: Did the police simply refuse to answer the telephone?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: Yes, I suppose so.

DRAYTON: Why do you think the police were not answering the telephone with everything that was happening at Wismar that day?

SURUJPAUL SINGH: I believe the police were cooperating with the looters.

[At this stage an adjournment was taken for the day owing to the illness of Mr. Sugrim Singh, Counsel for the Commission.]