

By ROGER WILKINS

Jackson Refused to Cede His Spirit to Prison— He Saved His Soul and Lost His Life

EAST HAMPTON, L. I.—August in East Hampton is a lovely time. Gusts from the ocean hint fall, and the late summer sun casts a soft, light over brown meadows, green potato fields and deep blue ponds. People fret over communal picnics, speculate over names included or left off weekend guest lists, and compare notes on the household help available in the local talent pool. In serious moments, a disgruntled intellectual may talk of emigrating to Ireland, or the alienation of modern man and his ceaseless search for identity.

Then comes the news from California. George Jackson couldn't get to Ireland. He couldn't even reach the San Quentin wall. The paper said that in the yard at his prison Jackson received a rifle bullet "on top of the head . . . that went through the base of his skull, down his back alongside the spine, fracturing a rib and leaving from his lower back."

Talk on the beaches and at backyard cocktail parties turned to the inconsistencies in the official reports and to speculation about prison authorities having set him up to die. Jackson, the general judgment goes, though for perhaps good reason—imprisoned for up to life for a \$70 robbery—was a desperate man and alienated from our society.

Jackson was certainly alienated from East Hampton's late summer ennuï and that strain of American life that encourages people to fritter their

lives away heedless of casual and calculated cruelties inflicted on people who do not belong, but he was not alienated from himself. He was the ultimate nigger and he knew it. A man of intelligence and dignity, George Jackson was one of those against whom American law contorts, degrades and mocks itself. For a crime for which a white youth might have received probation for two years, Jackson served 11 years—most of them in stench-filled solitary cells—at the mercy of officials who had some need to break his will. He told Angela Davis in a letter: "They created the situation. All that flows from it is their responsibility. They've created in me one irate, resentful nigger—and it's building—to what climax?"

George Jackson never really had a chance to live the life of the empty spirit, worrying about status, his next promotion or the right place to live. He suffered the final American degradation—he was poor and black and smart and a prisoner.

Jackson knew the value of \$70 and a black life in the California prisons. He wrote often that he never expected to be given back his freedom—to leave prison alive. But he also made clear that his soul was his own. He refused to cede his spirit to coarse prison authority in return for the

mean favors of a system that could pen men for years in cramped "adjustment-center" cells smaller than a family bathroom, behind solid metal doors with two-inch by five-inch slits to see the "free" corridor area outside. To preserve his mind, Jackson read everything from Stendahl to Engels. To preserve his body, he did exercises in his cell for six hours a day. To preserve his soul he resisted prison brutality and evolved a philosophy of rebellion which he preached to all who would listen. He saved his soul and lost his life following the precepts of the prisoner Sologdin in Solzhenitsyn's "The First Circle": "The most rewarding past . . . is the greatest external resistance in the presence of the least internal resistance. Failures must be considered the cue for further applications of efforts and concentration of willpower. And if substantial efforts have already been made, the failures are all the more joyous. It means our crowbar has struck the iron box containing the treasure. Overcoming the increased difficulties is all the more valuable because in failure, the growth of the person performing the task takes place in proportion to the difficulty encountered!"

No matter how hard they pressed George Jackson's face in the slime, he always thrust his hand toward the sun.

The state says George Jackson was a murderer and perhaps he killed a man or more but if he did, he did it inside an iron circle of hell where the agents of a careless people have almost unlimited sovereignty over the bones and spirits of the men they keep. Death of prisoner and keeper alike are the natural consequences of state-sponsored savagery. If some men kill to prevent the theft of the goods of their store or their family jewels might others not also kill to prevent the theft of their lives and their spirits?

In Easthampton and other places—where iron boxes are rarely struck—people will speculate briefly on the nature of Jackson's life and the reasons for his death and go on to the next headline. Whatever the details of his last day—whether or not he had a gun in his hair—the brothers, not Soledad, but mainly black—George Jackson helped define for all time our iron boxes and some of the ways to approach them.

In his time and in his place, he built a powerful life and suffused our spirits with the nigger suffering and the steel force of the Black Everyman he had come to be. In California they could snatch his life for \$70, but the bullet that split his skull and cressed his spine could not kill what he had become.

And now, as August wanes, waves lap quietly on the sandy Hampton shores.

Roger Wilkins, a former Assistant Attorney General, has visited Soledad and other California prisons.