



# Letters From Africa

A Johns Hopkins professor returns to Africa, where he served 15 years, until recently, as a medical missionary.

by Gilbert Burnham

## Fort Portal, Western Uganda

Uganda is but a shadow of its former self. True, Field Marshal Amin and Milton Obote are gone, but they left behind an unsettled and suffering land with perhaps 1.3 million of its people killed. As the country struggled to its feet it was savaged again, this time by the AIDS virus. Two decades of devastation seem to have etched into the Ugandans with whom I work a certain indefinable sadness. Outside my bedroom window the guard with his Kalashnikov is a reminder that in some places, order has not been completely restored.

In the evening the sun sets behind the 17,000-foot Ruwenzori mountains, their glaciers and snow fields virtually astride the equator. The peaks are named for the Victorian greats who came this way on their explorations: Sir Samuel Baker, traveling with his slave-wife; Henry Morton Stanley, prince of hype; and the unfortunate John Speke. Captain Sir Richard Burton is not remembered here.

I am staying with Walter, a German doctor with

interests in Hans Küng and double reeds. He is doubtless the finest (and only) *cor anglais* player in Fort Portal, if not all Uganda. From his house the road goes *poco a poco* among the potholes and past the colonial-era municipal buildings, now balancing between decay and dereliction. On the green in front of the Labor Office the colonials once played cricket every Saturday in their starched whites. The bark of a nearby Jacaranda tree enfolds a corroded metal plate, which reminds the passer-by that this peace tree was planted in 1918 to celebrate the armistice. As years have passed, the carnage has come home from Ypres and Compiègne. Beyond the cricket pitch the road goes *allegro vivace* downhill, sun-dappled through the trees, to the river where bare-foot pedestrians cross on a foot bridge made of tropical hardwoods laid in a herringbone pattern. Above the river stands the old Hindu school, and not far away is the Asian cemetery where still rest the only Indians whom Idi Amin did not expel in 1973.

At the top of the hill, where the shops begin, the roundabout has only shards of asphalt—left from the days when Uganda's GNP was greater than that of Korea. Before its *glissando* into anguish. To the left, in a refurbished garage-cum-servant's quarters, is the office of the Northwestern Uganda Field of Seventh-day Adventists. Entering the door, I walk in on the monthly meeting of the field's pastoral staff. These district pastors have lean, hungry looks avouching salaries that fall short of the Minimum Daily Require-

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*Gilbert Burnham, who teaches international health and tropical medicine at the Johns Hopkins University, travels extensively, especially in Africa. With an M.D. from Loma Linda University and a Ph.D. from London University, Burnham served 15 years in East Africa, 14 of them, until 1991, as head of the denomination's Malamulo Hospital in Malawi.*

ment of a wife and children. The 14 pastors look after 49 churches and 98 companies. During the last quarter, Cranmer Nkiriyehe, the field president, says there were 408 baptisms and U.S.\$2,587 in tithe was collected. Remarkable for a country where many households earn less than \$25 a year. I try to exit tactfully and allow the meeting to go on, but a bond of brotherhood has been established, and I cannot leave until we pray together. My request to the Lord that he remember the wives and children of these gaunt men evokes a resounding amen.

The world church's shrinking resources threaten to leave unions like Uganda, established as they were during the spring tides of missionary zeal, heaped on the beach. Orphans like those up in the Toro Babies Home. But orphans from apathy, not AIDS.

On Sabbath, church is held in an uncompleted building on a hill overlooking town. If you come early you can squeeze together with other worshippers on the few benches. Late comers bring mats to sit on the unfinished floor. Until prosperity returns, the church is likely to remain unfinished. To begin the divine service we sing one of the grand old Adventist hymns from the Toro hymnbook, translated in some distant year from *Christ in Song*, and still printed, no doubt, from time to time by aging type at the *Africa Herald*. F. E. Belden and P. P. Bliss sing on in these remote reaches of the church.

Six secondary school students in their school uniforms sing the special music. Born into a world of

motion and rhythm, they sway gently and unself-consciously in time to "The Old Rugged Cross."

The sermon comes from Revelation 2:17; "... and in the stone a new name written. ..." It is preached in English for my benefit. To many Africans one's name has significance, perhaps remembering a past great deed done by the family, some injustice done to a parent, or great expectations for the child. John promises that we, as did the Apostle Paul, will receive a new name, signifying our new relationship with Christ.

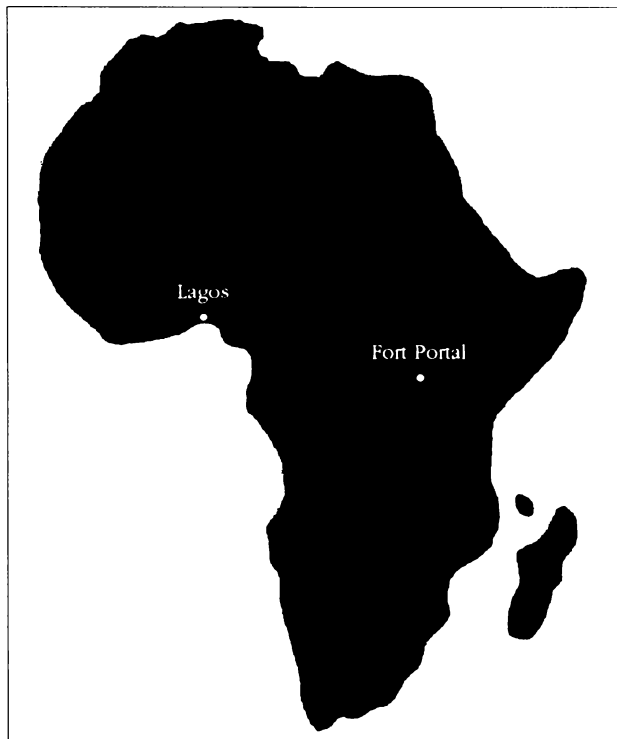
We close with another song from the past, sung in the rich harmony so characteristic of African congregational singing. Between the third and fourth verses I wonder what the music of heaven is like. My friend Walter already knows: oboe *con basso continuo*.

## Lagos, Nigeria

The early morning flight from Maiduguri has set down at Lagos in light showers, and without the benefit of air controllers, who are on strike. I am relieved to be off the worn and weary Boeing. After two weeks in the arid Lake Chad Basin in the northeast corner of the country, the humid air of the coast is welcome. In Lagos I look forward to seeing old friends at the embassy and new friends at the ministry of health.

Getting to Victoria Island from Ikeja airport is a slow trip through the high-viscosity road traffic of this 4-million strong pullulating metropolis. Small muddy roads lead off at irregular angles between countless one- and two-story buildings stuck up against one another. Some buildings affect an air of self-importance, peering over their lessers with an uppity smugness. But most look as if they had set themselves down for a moment of rest en route somewhere else, then decided to stay on. Intermittent electricity and a more intermittent water supply suggests an aggressive neoplasm, rapidly outgrowing its vascular supply. Floating in serenity above this amalgam of vitality and squalor is the new Sheraton Hotel. Visiting businessmen in their pressed tropical worsteds will still be breakfasting in the Garden Room on croissant and fresh melon as we pass.

This morning the traffic resembles the frenzied instinctual migration of some feral rodent species. Seemingly without beginning; certainly without end. The horde of Peugeots that have been flowing along in a noisy turbulence suddenly congeal into an agitated, snarling mass, stopped up by a stalled bus and a truck undergoing repairs. On the right side of Ikorodu Road, protected by high walls topped with



broken glass, rises the office of the Nigerian Union Mission of Seventh-day Adventists. The belief of its builders in the Imminent Return is proclaimed by stark steel window frames set in a commonplace concrete structure, unadorned by plating of hair or wearing of gold. More recently, a church building has been constructed adjacent. Its exuberant architecture with attractive angles to its roof and walls and imaginatively designed hardwood doors suggests that the eschatological certitude has, perhaps, softened.

On Sabbath, an urbane congregation will pack the benches to sing historic Christian hymns from the new *Seventh-day Adventist Hymnal* and to hear traditional Adventist sermons that could have pleased the early missionaries. Women will wear kilometers of colorful Nigerian print. The headdresses of matching fabric will be especially spectacular. The choir from the Adventist Seminary of West Africa may be there to sing, with graduation gowns, mortar boards, and tassels doubling as choir robes. The choir director is particularly resplendent, gowned in yellow and green of a tropical iridescence.

Several hours and a few miles later we reach the decaying grandeur of the Federal Palace Hotel with its spectacular prospects across Lagos harbor to the open sea. Peddlers of magazines, hawkers of curios, and the inevitable bevy of bar girls ebb and flow through the lobby while negotiations for a room continue.

Julius is director of research for the federal ministry of health. A few nights later we are at his house for a chat. He is dressed in an embroidered kaftan, which flows generously over his substantial frame and serious stomach. On the walls, Nigerian art is interspersed with Pissarro, Corot, and Turner prints. Tonight he is in fine form. We are quickly infected by his spontaneous laughter and clever wit. From his inexhaustible supply, the Great Stories roll, covering the circuit from improbable to absurd. They tumble out, words stepping on one another as enthusiasm compromises articulation. At the approaching punchline Julius collapses on the sofa in mirth, feet kicking wildly in the air, long robes flapping and abdomen convulsing.

Julius is a Falasha, one of several thousand Nigerian Jews whose families have lived here for centuries. They are an inseparable part of the intellectual and commercial life of this most populace of African nations. Amidst the long-running strife among Nigeria's many tribes and between its Christians and Muslims, they have preserved their Judaism. When did the Jews come to Nigeria? Julius is not sure. Perhaps it was in the 15th century. Perhaps before. When smoldering conflicts with the Christians in Ethiopia flared up into another pogrom, his forebears were chosen by their co-religionists to search out a new land where their race and religion could be preserved. Even now there is a tradition among Nigerian Falashas that one child in each family must be brought up to sacrifice himself, if circumstances require, so others might escape.

When he was a child, Julius remembers Golda Meir, future prime minister of Israel, coming to his parents' house, asking help of his father to encourage the return of the Nigerian Falashas to Israel. In the end, the Falashas decided they preferred trade with Israel to immigration. At the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Julius left his academic position to join the Israeli army in the defense of a land his ancestors had left during the reign of Solomon. This was the high point in his life.

On our last day in Lagos, with my colleagues I pay a final visit to Julius in his office, high up in the 15-story ministry headquarters with its sweeping views across the hazy afternoon sea. In the hallway sit a gaggle of gossiping messengers, deep into the analysis of the day's rumors. The impending change of government, riots in the north, a possible move of headquarters to Abuja and the latest announcement by General Babangida gives them much to consider.

When we arrive at his office there are already two meetings going on, and Julius is conducting spirited negotiations on the telephone, punctuated by dramatic gestures. We just dropped in to say good-by, but no, he is thinking of a new research project, funded by Japanese money, and we have to talk about it now. But for us there is the airport ordeal ahead. We must go. We edge toward the door. Julius blocks our way. Have we heard the story about the rabbi at the funeral?