

Through Some
MIRACLE
NOT YET CLEAR TO ME



THE NIGHTMARE of
LIVING UNDER the
DICTATORSHIP of
IDI AMIN
...and SURVIVING

Vincent Musaalo

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*For my mother, Felicitas Musaalo
And in memory of my father, the late Francis Musaalo*

*For my loving wife, Freda, and my dear children,
Keegan, Megan, Dylan, and Sebastian*

My intention in writing this story is not to provide a complete political history of the country of Uganda. Rather it is my personal story, one that I share with you through first-hand experience. It is a story about a family trying to survive under extremely horrible conditions.

It is surreal to think that many Ugandans indeed survived Idi Amin's regime of blood and terror. Those like me, who survived this debacle, will forever have indelible memories of whizzing bullets that were ubiquitous at the time on Kampala streets, as confused masses jockeyed to find refuge in inconceivable places, hoping to cheat death.

Chapter 1

I WILL NEVER FORGET that fateful evening of January 25th, 1971. I was in the kitchen scrunched over my math homework mother had given me when I heard the huge explosion that shattered our world. The impact was so powerful that it knocked me to the ground where I lay stunned for several minutes. I was terrified, my heart thumping as loudly in my ears as the screams and gunfire outside. I had just managed to stand up when a second wave of mortar blasts knocked me down face-first on the kitchen floor amongst the clattering pots and pans which had been hanging on the ceiling.

Mother burst through the kitchen door, panicked for me and my siblings. She was apprehensive. I could see her face tighten up. As the oldest, by training and instinct, I knew it was my responsibility to do what I could to care and protect them.

“Where are your siblings?” she cried, pulling me from the floor. “We are under attack—find them!!!”

I opened the front door, and immediately caught sight of Martin, just two years old. He was terrified, sobbing, and his hand shook as he reached for mine.

“Where’s Patrick?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he choked. I heard Patrick’s little one-year-old voice crying uncontrollably. He was bleeding profusely from a

chair which had fallen and trapped him underneath. I ran to him and pulled him out. Together with Martin, we hurried back to the house where mother began attending to the wound on Patrick's head.

"Close all the windows and curtains," Mother ordered as she bandaged Patrick's head. The windows in the living room were already closed, so I dashed to the bedroom, where I again heard gunshots being fired, as if without any order.

My extreme boyish curiosity got the better of me, and I peeked out of the window. Groups of people who had fled their jobs in Kampala were running as randomly as the bullets fired from the machine guns. Old and young were ducking as they heard the whizzing bullets, while others desperately sought refuge on neighbors' porches or pounded on doors, begging to be let in. I ran frantically into the living room to tell mother what I had seen. But before I could, the door flew open—sending us into greater panic. It was father, a police inspector. He was very nervous and very concerned.

"We were worried," Mother's voice quivered. She rushed to him, clasping his arm. "Francis, what is happening in Kampala? What do you know?"

Father directed his attention towards mother. "The people at work say the Ugandan army has sealed off the Entebbe airport," father answered between gasps for air. "Reports say there are tanks on every street in Kampala." Father asked me to bring the portable radio. "I need to see if Radio Uganda has released any official statement about what's happening. This has to be an attempt by some political faction to overthrow the government."

At 3:45 p.m. a voice boomed from the radio. "Fellow countrymen and well-wishers of Uganda, I address you today at a very important hour in the history of our nation. A short time ago, men of our Armed Forces placed control of Uganda in my hands. I am no politician, but a professional soldier, and therefore a man of few words, and shall be brief. Throughout my professional life, I have emphasized that the military must support a

civilian government which has the support of its people, and I have not changed that position.”

Such seemingly harmless words, “The military must support a civilian government”—spoken by a general who had just used bullets, mortars and tanks to attack the civilians he now presided over! Thus began the “presidency” of General Idi Amin. With brutal military action, he had wrestled power from unpopular Milton Obote while he was returning from Singapore where he had just attended a Summit of Commonwealth Heads of government. Obote fled to Tanzania and a reward was offered for him—dead or alive.

Amin soon attracted attention on the international scene with his numerous telegrams to the other heads of state. He called Nixon, the U.S. President at the time, “my dear brother,” and wished him a quick recovery from the Watergate scandal. He congratulated the Chilean Junta when it assumed power, and even ordered Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth of England, to send a Scottish guard to accompany him to the commonwealth conference.

Chapter 2

THAT YOUNG BOY running from mortars and bullets, seeing the fear and horror in the face of a mother and children, and seeing his world change with an explosion and radio announcement, but without complete understanding, was me.

My name is Vincent Musaalo, although most of my friends here in the U.S. call me Moose. Because of the problems emanating from the pronunciation of my name, my friends changed my surname Musaalo to Mus; and later to Moose, the American version. I was born in Uganda, a beautiful landlocked country off the East coast of Africa, a country that Winston Churchill once described as the “Pearl of Africa.” I was born during the time when most African nations were demanding their independence from the colonial masters who had ruled most of Africa since 1885, the year the African continent was partitioned by the European powers at the Berlin Conference. I have vivid recollections of my family and extended family talking passionately about the aftermath of the Mau-Mau rebellion in my early years. Mau-Mau, *Mzungu Aende Ulaya—Mwafrika Apate Uhuru* was a Swahili slogan that translates in English to “Let the white man go back to Europe; let the African attain freedom.”

Although the uprising failed militarily, it may have hastened Kenyan independence. It undoubtedly created a rift between

the British colonial community in Kenya and the Home office in London that set the stage for Kenyan independence in 1963.¹

For several decades prior to the eruption of this conflict, the occupation of land by European settlers was an increasingly bitter point of contention. Most of the land appropriated by the British settlers was in the central highlands of Kenya, which had a cool climate compared to the rest of the country and was inhabited primarily by the Kikuyu tribe. By 1948, 1.25 million Kikuyu were restricted to 2,000 square miles (5,200 km²), while 30,000 British settlers occupied 12,000 square miles (31,000 km²).² The most desirable agricultural land was arguably in the hands of the colonialists.

A colonialist might possess six thousand acres of land of which one thousand acres were squatters' land, what the Kikuyus called their *shambas*, the Swahili word for "gardens." The squatters held a few acres on a white man's farm and in return had to work for him or her for a certain number of days in the year. When the coffee plantations were harvested, the Kikuyu would load the coffee sacks, twelve to a ton, with sixteen oxen to each wagon, and would start on their way in to Nairobi railway station. The coffee would then be on the ocean in a day or two and sold at the big auction sales in London.

The leader of this revolt against British rule was the famous Jomo Kenyatta ... the light of Kenya and of Africa, our motherland. He and the rest of the freedom fighters dealt a staggering blow to British colonial governance in Kenya. Although father was not a Kenyan, and had not participated in the rebellion against British rule there, he was profoundly passionate about its significance to colonial Africa. He was a visionary of Africa's self-determination and a staunch advocate for Pan-Africa, a popular movement then that advocated, among many other

1 "Mau Mau Uprising." *New World Encyclopedia*. Web. <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Mau_Mau_Uprising>.

2 Mwakikagile, Godfrey. *Kenya: Identity of a Nation*. 1st ed. Pretoria, South Africa: New Africa, 2007. 26. Print.

things, Africa's liberation from foreign subjugation. It would be years later that I learned of the immensity of the struggle and the thousands of lives that perished in that protracted resistance. In those days independence was not just granted to you. African nations had to fight relentlessly for it. It was tantamount to sacrificing thousands of lives. Even the United States, the mightiest of all nations, was not immune to this type of struggle. The Americans had to fight painstakingly against the British for their freedoms. Through that heavily contested emancipation struggle, the world was again reminded that freedom is a value which must be fought for in every generation.

Father was an Inspector in the Uganda Police and mother taught at Police Children School, a local primary school that catered to the educational needs of the community in which we lived. Mother is a magnificent human being. She remains an attractive, zealous, 5-foot-five woman, although when we were kids, she was plump. She would often say, "Be nice to your friends. It is good to have friends in the neighborhood. If you are nice to your friends, they'll like you." She was also the driving force in our home. If any of us were hit with a bout of malaria, which happened innumerable times, she would run down to the drug store and purchase some quinine tablets. She would grind the tablets, mix them with some herbs, and send us to bed with these orders: "Sleep for ten hours, and sweat it out." I cannot forget the bitter-tasting, colorless drug derived from the bark of certain cinchona trees and used medicinally to treat malaria. Quinine also played a significant role in the colonization of Africa by Europeans. As the precursor of modern pharmacology, quinine was the prime reason Africa ceased to be known as the white man's grave. Some historians have argued that it was quinine's

efficacy that gave colonialists fresh opportunities to swarm into East and West Africa.^{3,4}

Because my parents were employed, we enjoyed a relatively modest life. In the late 60's when life's modern amenities and conveniences, such as television and radiograms, were in vogue and infiltrating the African continent, father was able to save up some money and purchase a Sanyo television. I remember with poignant memories watching America's then popular shows which, among others, included *Bonanza*, *I Love Lucy*, *Mannix*, *Batman*, and *Mission Impossible*. In my six-year-old mind I thought all Americans were cowboys, superheroes or world-savers. I didn't understand a word of what the actors said because they did not translate the shows into our native languages. However, it was not the words that captured my innermost interest, but rather the action scenes which caused me to block out everything else common to seven-year-olds around the world, even to this day. I knew if I mastered the art of the cowboys, with their gun swings and prancing horses, I would be the most famous kid on the block. My neighborhood friends would think I was immortal just by mimicking these fancy moves.

We lived in Nsambya barracks, in the quarters reserved for inspectors in the Police Force. The barracks was 3 miles away from Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. Ours was a warm and tightly knit neighborhood where most people were Christians and everybody seemed to know one another, including their respective relatives.

As a young boy, one of the greatest enjoyments was when father arrived home with his colleagues in a Police Peugeot, model 404. I remember running to help him carry his briefcase. Before entering the house, I would ask him to turn on the siren so that I could watch the miraculous light. That always

3 Conner, Clifford D. *A People's History of Science: Miners, Midwives, and "low Mechanics"* New York: Nation, 2005. 95-96. Print.

4 Porter, Roy. *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: a Medical History of Humanity*. 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998. 465-66. Print.

intrigued my boyhood fantasies of following in his footsteps as a policeman. Father was a very kind man. He always played with me. When he was home in the evenings, he would hold me on his lap, and would tell me a story or two. Father would sit quietly, letting me play with him as long as I wanted. I enjoyed our wrestling matches, and he always let me win.

Father was handsome. He was five foot ten, slender, but muscular, and often said, "Eat all the food on your plate; you are a blessed child to have it; many children in the country are starving to death." Sometimes he would ask me if I had taken my cod liver oil, a very disgusting nutritional supplement very popular in the early 70's, that I was supposed to take daily and which left an intense and obnoxious odor of fish in my mouth. He would emphasize "Cod liver oil is one of your best sources of Vitamin A." This led me to believe that the word "vitamin" was synonymous with cod liver oil.

Father's humble and adventurous life had begun 32 years prior on a small farm in the small remote village of Bugube, in Mbale district, in the county of Budadiri, located in the eastern region of Uganda, and bordering with the Republic of Kenya in the east. Mbale district covers a total land area of 2,504 square kilometers, and lies approximately between latitudes 0° 45' N; and 0°35' N and longitudes 34° and 34°, 35' E.

The terrain on which father was raised is home to interesting and unique flora and fauna, magnificent waterfalls, enormous caves, scenic peaks, gorges, and hot springs which bubble up at 480 degrees centigrade. A diverse number of animals inhabit the mountains, including bushbuck, antelope, civet, wildcat, and the elusive leopards which roam below. Bush duikers, hyenas, jackals, rock hyrax, buffaloes, and elephants rove between the forest and the moorland, making the most of the rich ecosystem.

Father grew up on a small farm, in these rugged slopes in a small remote village of 500 farmers, raising coffee, beans, maize, onions, banana plantains, sweet potatoes, cassava, and herding

cows and goats on land that is occasionally interrupted by a few upland and mountain ridge extensions.

Like many of the villagers, he had been raised in abject poverty. Thirty years earlier, Great Britain had attempted to relieve the strain of poverty in Uganda by initiating an economic program of raising and selling coffee beans to the rest of the world. His father immersed himself wholeheartedly into this economic enterprise and was determined to plant more coffee trees to pay for his son's education. Accordingly, he enrolled him at a Catholic primary school that catered to the educational needs of its congregation. The learning environment of the missionary Catholic schools, while often morally and physically rigid, was far more advanced than the government schools and played a pivotal role in shaping and streamlining its pupils. Father responded with gratitude and hope to his father's sacrifice.

"I will one day make it," he had reiterated on many occasions while talking to his father, with whom he had established a strong bond and who wholeheartedly believed in his son's abilities.

One does not plow a field by turning it in one's mind, and like a pragmatic man or woman who sets his or her goals and resiliently puts forth the requisite effort to achieve them, father was determined to succeed. He was true to his word, and to his father, graduating near the top of his class at the Police Academy. He was now prosperous, but best of all, he was content because he had married well and had beautiful children: Vincent, Annette, Martin and Patrick. Promotions had come his way, but father still maintained a low profile, never allowing his professional success get into his head.

He was fond of testing my courage often, but little did I know my father wasn't just testing me for fun, but maybe a father's God given instinct was behind it for a future time when that courage would really be tested. One day Father came back from work, and as we were visiting my little five-year-old sister, Annet, came screaming into the living room, saying Mukyakaze, a local derelict we were both scared of, was in the neighborhood. Mukyakaze

was probably in his mid forties. He had a shabby beard that hung to the middle of his stomach, and wore several shredded shirts over his big belly. He walked with a distinctive swagger, and his grey hair was in dire need of grooming. Over his shoulder he carried a bag that contained various items he had obtained while rummaging through the trashcans. All my little buddies in the neighborhood had each had their own scary encounter with him, probably exaggerated by boyhood imagination more than reality. Mothers knew of the fear that the children had built around this man and used it to scare them into doing their chores, emphasizing that if they didn't, they would bring the bum to the house.

Upon hearing what Annet had said, Father quickly walked out of the living room and passed our neighbors house to where Mukyakaze was standing and started talking to him. The mere fact that father was talking with him sent cold chills through my entire body, but what froze me in my tracks was when I saw him follow my father back to our house. Before they reached the door, I was under my bed. Then I heard father's footsteps enter the bedroom. He must have known where I was hidden. He reached down and grabbed me. I remember beseeching father not to take me, but my pleading was in vain. He had me stand right before this man, but I'd promised myself that I would not make any eye contact. In the interim, I struggled to keep my knees from shaking. I do not remember much of what transpired that night, for my little mind was in such a state of shock. I was told that father gave him some food, and sent him on his way. If father's goal had been to eradicate the fear I had towards this bum, he fell short of this goal. It wasn't until I was older that my fear of Mukyakaze completely subsided.