I Was a "Student at Moscow State"

A young African's inside story of the way the Soviets treat visiting students. Invited to Moscow State University for an "education," he soon realized he was being used as a communist stooge. Now in the United States, he says, "Thank God I am no longer a pawn of an international conspiracy!"

A Reader's Digest "First Person" Award

By Everest Mulekezi

Through a cloud of cigarette smoke the young cultural attaché from the Soviet embassy in Cairo ticked off the breath-taking benefits that went with a scholarship to Moscow State University. We would be flown to the U.S.S.R. for six years of study. We would receive 900 rubles ($225 at the official exchange rate) every month for living expenses, 3000 rubles for clothing and 1500 for an annual eight-week vacation, plus a free trip home every other year.

"The Soviet Union gives you this only because we love all you people who are fighting out from under colonial rule," said the communist functionary. "In return, we only want you to obtain the knowledge to carve out your own free destiny."

The date was October 6, 1959. After years of frustration and a grueling 2900-mile trek from our British East Africa homeland of Uganda to Cairo, my cousin Anthony Ngororano and I were to have free schooling behind the Iron Curtain.

We could hardly believe this was happening to us. Education is like a miracle of God to Africans. It is the way we can achieve dignity for ourselves and our countries. I had once been offered a one-year scholarship at Washington State University, but our British officials refused me a passport on the ground that I..."
hadn't enough money for the trip. Now the Soviet Union was paying not only for my education, but all my expenses as well!

Russian Hospitality. On our arrival in Moscow we were puzzled to find that we were segregated from the main student body. A thousand of us foreigners—Africans, Asians and Latin Americans—were housed a mile from the university in two five-story buildings. There were guards at the doors. Our rooms were only 14-by-16 feet, yet four students lived in each of them—two foreigners and two hand-picked Russians.

The first morning we arose early for a bath, and found that there was hot water only on Wednesday nights between five and eleven o'clock. But we put up with inconveniences cheerfully. We were dazzled by the chance to learn.

Throughout the first weeks, government propagandists haunted the dormitories, soliciting our photographs for export, asking for tape-recorded statements which they broadcast back to our countries.

"Why don't you tell how all this is so different from the colonialism of the Western countries?" one interviewer suggested.

There were "friendship" meetings at which we were introduced to cheering audiences as heroes who had risked our lives to reach the Soviet Union and salvation. The people we encountered on the streets were the friendliest I've known anywhere. They stopped to shake hands. Those who spoke English invited us into their homes. All were eager to hear of our world.

"Show Your Pass." Suddenly there was a shift in our treatment. We were photographed and told to fill out information blanks for identification cards and passes. One card got us inside the gates of the campus; another let us into the 32-story university building, still another into our dormitory. When we innocently invited back the friends we had met, they were turned away at the gate. One, an engineer to whom I had given newspapers sent from abroad, told me I had better keep my reading material to myself and not call on him even in his own home.

"The attention given these passes must mean the authorities want you to associate only with persons of their own choosing," he warned.

COURSES IN COMMUNISM. In this atmosphere we studied the Russian language five hours a day for three months—reading excerpts from Lenin, the history of communism and biographical essays portraying Khrushchev as a disciple of peace. When my cousin and I passed the language examinations, we began going to regular classes six days a week from nine to five. Every course was laced with indoctrination.

Professors invariably phrased their questions to ascertain whether our reactions to communism were indifferent or sympathetic; the answers depended our grades and treatment. Lectures suggested subtly that we should eliminate African leaders who opposed communist ideas. When I refused to return to one class because I wanted facts, not dogma, I was threatened with expulsion from the university.

AFRICAN STOOGES. One day there was a Uganda Day celebration. Four other Ugandan students and I were swept along with the crowd and pushed onto the stage of a hall where people we had never seen before began making speeches damming the British. In our name a stranger called for a vote on a resolution demanding immediate independence for Uganda, severance of all ties with Great Britain, and alliances of friendship with the Soviets. Before we could open our mouths, a roar of approval went up. Cameras snapped as the Russian actors gathered around to congratulate us on our "action." Tape recordings were made for broadcasts to be beamed back home. Suddenly it was over, and the Ugandans were left dumbfounded and angry.

This was just a sample. There was a similar Nigeria Day, a Guinea Day, a separate day for every African country plus an All-Africa Day. The plan was unmistakably clear. We Africans at the university were simply stooges.

REBELLION. Now the authorities tried to bind us all into an Afro-Arab League dominated by communist-leaning Arabs and Sudanese. But we Africans refused and formed our own All African Students Union. Besides Ugandan students, there were Ethiopians, and there was a young Kenyan who had gone to school in Addis Ababa. Despite communist influences in their own country, students from Guinea were strongly anti-Soviet, not to mention young men from Somalia, the Cameroons, the Congo, Mali, Nigeria, Togo—virtually all of them black Africans at the university. And we were joined in sympathy by many of the Sudanese, Moroccans, Tunisians and Egyptians.

"You can't do this!" stormed Dr. K. I. Ivanov, assistant rector of the university, who summoned some of us to his office. "We won't recognize your union."

But we went ahead, taking over our lounge for meetings. The authorities pressured us with academic bribery. Africans who were "cooperative" were promoted and moved to better quarters in the university proper. The rest of us were punished.

The 1500-rouble vacation payment promised as part of our scholarship was denied us unless we joined a "Friendship Train." The train was to tour the provinces to impress the citizenry with a claque of cheering foreigners. We didn't go.

Our Russian roommates, meanwhile, were under instructions to guide us into communism. Many were assigned to learn our tribal languages. The objective: in later years they might become technicians or diplomatic agents in our countries, and we were to be waiting there as their local allies.

Fed up with listening to communist dogma, we began playing jazz
records that we had brought to Moscow. The sound brought other Russian boys flocking to the room. They clapped and beat out the time with their feet. "Who instructs your composers to write such music?" asked one of the Russians, whom I shall call Boris. "It would not be tolerated here."

"Nobody instructs them," I replied. "Our musicians are free to write what they want. And we're free to listen or not."

"We aren't supposed to listen to such decadence," Boris said. "We cannot be loyal to communism and listen."

"We're Not Free." But he stayed, and on succeeding nights we were invited to his room, for discussion—and more music. The talk turned to what Boris called "American imperialism," which he defined as "American aggressive acts such as supporting noncommunists in Africa." When I pressed him to explain how Russian dominance over its satellites was different from colonialism, he was at a loss. To reinforce my arguments, I cited news dispatches in English and American publications which we received from friends abroad. Then I tossed the magazine or newspaper itself to Boris to ponder over at his leisure.

The debates went on for weeks. One evening Boris fell silent and buried his face in his hands. When he looked up, he was tense.

"It's true, we're not free," he said. "I'm not free to read what Westerners read. I'm not free to visit the West or even travel in my own country without a permit."

"You're a fool, Boris," his white-faced Russian roommate burst out. "You must not have such opinions."

Every African who attended Moscow State University can recite similar incidents. Formal debate is not part of the Soviet curriculum. But nightly, Russians and Africans gathered all over the university dormitories, six to a dozen in a room. Like members of secret societies, we locked the doors against intrusion while we eagerly debated world problems and philosophies. Some of the Russians parroted Pravda editorials. But many others came, like Boris, to admit uncertainties about themselves and communism.

Crackdown. Finally the deans discovered what was happening. Orders went out banning jazz records and after-hours debates. The magazines and newspapers which we were receiving through the mail were shut off. Prof. Dekan Kuzin of the Russian-language department publicly issued a warning to foreign students: We could not behave in the same fashion as we might in capitalist countries where students were paying their own expenses. With the Soviet Union financing our education, we would be expected to do and think what we were told.

On each floor of every dormitory, a committee of the Komsomol, the Russian Young Communists League, policed the thinking of all Soviet students. The Komsomol now prohibited them from associating with us under pain of expulsion and blacklisting, which would relegate them to laborers' jobs for the rest of their lives.

There were unpleasant incidents. Michel Ayih of Togo was prevented from leaving the elevator at his floor in the university building. When he protested, a Russian shouted at him: "What right do you have to speak? You're a black monkey, not a human being." Once when I was walking in downtown Moscow a gang followed, taunting, pushing, trying to provoke a fight in which I would have been mobbed. One night Benjamin Omburo from Kenya was mauled by Soviet police when they found him talking with a Russian girl at a bus stop. At a party, Omar Khalif of Somalia, provoked into an argument with a communist student, was beaten unconscious and spent two weeks in the hospital.

The Last Straw. Finally, in the spring of 1960, word leaked out that in the fall Africans at Moscow State University were to be transferred to a "Friendship University"—for foreigners only. With members from 14 African countries present, our Black Africa union voted to have Stanley Omor Okullo, a second-year medical student from Uganda, write to the Ministry of Higher Education demanding that discrimination be halted, that we be accorded protection and dignity and that Friendship University be nonsegregated.

The communist reply was to expel Stanley from Russia. When he reached London, he told reporters of his experiences. The Russians then accused him falsely of immorality, drunkenness, "joining the imperialist camp." Government propagandists surged through the dormitories offering 1000 rubles to any of us who would sign a statement supporting the charges. After two weeks of intensive canvassing only three or four allowed themselves to be bought.

Now we Africans were furious. We met and drew up a full indictment of the communism we had once found so attractive. We addressed the document to each of our African governments, only to have the Russians prevent its dispatch. At a meeting each of us vowed to get out of the Soviet Union as soon as possible.

The Road West. We fanned out to the Western embassies to plead for scholarships elsewhere, anywhere. The Western representatives were anxious to avoid the appearance of interfering with the Soviet educational program for us. But after repeated requests, the West German embassy obtained scholarships for my cousin, for Theo Okonkwo of Nigeria, and for Michel Ayih of Togo. The British embassy then decided it could let Andrew Richard Amar, a countryman of mine with a British passport, resume the English education he had interrupted to come to Moscow.

As for myself, the U.S. embassy finally agreed to help me if the British embassy would provide me with a valid British passport. This
was done, and in October 1960 I prepared to quit Moscow and fly to Pullman, Wash., to enroll in the same Washington State University where I had earlier been offered a scholarship.

"You'll be sorry!" warned my dean at Moscow University when after five days of argument he finally granted me the right to get an exit permit.

But I'm not. I'm eternally grateful.

True, there is racial discrimination in the United States, but Americans are consciously striving to eliminate it; in the Soviet Union this is official policy. True, compared with the financial assistance given me in Moscow, my funds today are lean and precarious. But I thank God that I am here not as a pawn of an international conspiracy; I am here because of the generosity of American people. (I found out later that the U.S. State Department had phoned the university and said it could provide only plane fare to America for me. Could Washington State do the rest? Dorothy Campbell, foreign student adviser at the university, overnight collected pledges in my behalf from the students' fraternity council, the YMCA, the ROTC cadets, and individual fraternities.)

I am one of the lucky ones. Today, a hundred or more other young Africans are floating around Europe, impoverished and discouraged. They had the courage to get out of Moscow State University, but they have hunted in vain for free countries that would accord them another educational opportunity. In the meantime, the ranks of the students behind the Iron Curtain have been increased to a thousand or 1500 by expanded Soviet recruiting programs. I pray that a way may be found to let some of these young men have the opportunity I'm being given.

It is important for the world—and especially for the world's neutrals—to know how Moscow treats its visiting students. Our formal charges against the communists will, I hope, serve to put other students on their guard:

"In the name of all loyal Africans," we wrote, "the executive committee of the African Students Union in Moscow wishes respectfully to call the attention of all African governments to the deceptions, the threats, the pressures, the brutality and the discrimination with which the Soviet administrators and strategists have so often handled African and other foreign students. New and dangerous forms of colonialism and discrimination are being fostered by the communists and are a grave threat to the future of Africa.

"This new colonialism is being advanced by deceitful propaganda and subversion. Our accusations have not been directed against the Russian people we met and some of whom we came to love. We accuse the astrous ambition of communist dictatorship and its bureaucracy that have brought terror and fear much of the world."

Millions of persons in the United States today have high blood pressure and don't know it. This is a serious situation for, as recent reports indicate, even moderately high blood pressure—hypertension—can, if unattended, sharply shorten life.

Here is, however, a happy side to the picture: within the past decade treatment for high blood pressure has been revolutionized. And advances continue. Doctors now have at their disposal a host of increasingly effective drugs, and surgeons have been learning new techniques to achieve dramatic results. Right now most hypertensives can, with treatment, live virtually normal lives.

Systolic-Diastolic: Blood pressure is simply the push of blood against the walls of the arteries. Created by the pumping of the heart, the pressure is at its highest level—the systolic—each time the heart contracts or beats. It falls to its lowest level—the diastolic—between beats. Blood pressure readings usually include both measurements: the higher systolic over the lower diastolic. For example, 120/80.

It is normal for the blood pressure of any individual to vary, to rise temporarily during activity or excitement and to fall during sleep. Average blood pressure increases with age. For boys 15 to 19, the average is 117/71. It rises gradually.