

Encounters with Amin
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Ron Stockton

I crossed paths with Idi Amin three times. He had started as an army cook with a fourth grade education, been promoted to commander of Uganda military forces, and ended up as President for Life of the country (until he was overthrown in 1979).

My first encounter was in 1966 when I was living in Machakos. Milton Obote, the Prime Minister in neighboring Uganda, had just crushed his rival, the Kabaka, with General Amin's help. The thought that the military could unleash such violence was frightening. Kenya was very peaceful, and we were forty miles from Nairobi, where any problems would occur, but still, the headlines were nervous-making. One Saturday afternoon I was in my front yard on the school compound. The road twisted through the school grounds with the school in the front and teacher's houses along the road farther in. My house was the very last one. I looked up and saw a large military lorry filled with standing soldiers coming down the one-track

road. Fear is irrational but as that lorry got closer and closer to my house, with nowhere to go after me, I wondered what was going to happen next. It pulled up in front of my house and a uniformed man jumped out. I was so relieved when he said, "Sir, where is the football match?"



Dictator and mass murderer

My second encounter was in 1970 when I was returning to Kenya to do doctoral research. I stopped in Kampala to see some friends at the university and to get whatever advice I could on doing field work. This was a time when armed gangs, known as kondos, were running wild. They would often close off a street in Kampala or surround a house, and do great damage. Many people were killed. I spoke to a Kenyan grounds keeper at Makerere University who told me that in Nairobi they would steal your bicycle, but in Kampala they would kill you for your sufuria (cooking pot). He was living in fear. That night I slept on the sofa in my friends' living room. The next morning Jack came in from a inspection walk and said there were fresh footprints outside the sofa window. "Apparently they saw you and decided to come back another time when the situation was

more predictable.” My friends were living in fear. A few days later, they moved into secure university housing. The grounds keeper did not have that option.

My third encounter was a year later when my research in Kenya was nearing its end. Jane and I (with our small boys) decided to take a trip to Kampala. We were driving in Jinja, an industrial city on the Nile. Idi Amin had just overthrown Milton Obote. He was rounding up the kondos and dropping their bodies into the river. The crocodiles were very happy. In fact, a lot of people were happy. This was a time when Amin was riding high, and the army was riding high. Civil liberties be damned, the kondos were getting theirs. But Amin was also rounding up politicians who criticized him and judges who released criminals for lack of evidence. They were also going to the crocodiles. And the army was doing what it wanted. We were driving through Jinja late in the afternoon looking for someplace to get a meal. I was paying no attention to the fact that there was a military jeep behind me. Even if I had been paying attention, I would not have known that in that environment anyone with any sense pulled over when a military jeep was behind you. The jeep accelerated around us, pulled sharply in front of me and forced my Beetle off the road. I was dragged out of the car and interrogated. “Who are you? What are you doing in Uganda? What are those things in your bags?”

Jane sat there mute, holding Ted (1) while Greg (4) stayed in the back seat. A minute ago the boys had been hungry and fussy, but now they were deathly silent. They knew there was danger. So did I. I thought to myself, I am going to be beaten unconscious right here in front of my family. I told the soldier I was looking for a place to eat. He was skeptical. He grabbed one of the bags and said, “What is in this?” When he opened it, he was greeted by a smelly diaper that had been left on top. He threw it down, got in the jeep, and drove away without a word.



Family Hero

Years later, a colleague offered a course on the Holocaust. One of the readings said people in the camps had to learn quickly how to behave around the guards. I told him this observation was wrong. When someone has complete power over you, the power

to destroy you, with no consequences, you do not have to *learn* how to behave. You know instinctively what to do. You become small, deferential, quiet. You lower your voice and your eyes. Your words slow down. You agree to everything. Groveling is an inadequate word. I knew that if I were beaten, there would be a written protest from the American embassy, and nothing more. If I disappeared, there would be a short news item in the *New York Times*, and nothing more. And I learned that in a situation such as this, salvation can come from unexpected quarters. I have always been grateful to my small son for his contribution to our family safety.

I got the following response from Patricia Podorsek, one of Ted's best friends in high school and someone who "grew up in his kitchen," as she once told a student who met her in India: "You know that East Africa, Nairobi in particular, continues to be riddled with violent crime. I don't have a clear sense of whether it has gotten any better in the last decade, but it the years that we were there, 1997 - 2002, we had colleagues shot at close range, friends' homes attacked by armed gangs, and knew several people who had been carjacked, which was the fashionable crime of the day. I myself was carjacked in 2001, taken at gunpoint while stopping to buy eggs from a little kiosk near my house, and held for four hours before they released me. You were right in your post, that when you find yourself in a position of paralyzing fear and an utter lack of power, you know instinctively what to do: You look down and give complete deference to the men with the guns. During the hours I spent with my assailants, I never saw their faces. I just did what I was told, without question, without resistance of any kind. In the weeks following the incident, I replayed the episode many times in my head, and considered every time I might have challenged them, or tried to make a break, or done something different than what I did do. Passivity is not an easy nut to swallow when you've been a victim. I was working with a counselor, and it is her wisdom that has stayed with me, "Patricia, what you did was exactly the right thing. You are here and you are alive to see your children through another day." Mostly, I think I was just very, very lucky. Many, many others would have done the same thing I did, and faced very different results.

It's a strange paradox, this whole situation. When people instinctively cower to the people with the armed strength, it makes it that much easier for the thugs to gain and maintain further power. History is rife with political examples--Stalinist Russia, Pol Pot, Nazi Germany, Idi Amin, many others. How do you break the momentum of their reign and its ascent? Can it ever happen from within the afflicted nation? Even the deposition of Amin engendered helped from Tanzania and the DRC. I guess this phenomenon underwrites the importance of the world community as "watchdog". People within a fear-based situation may not be able to help themselves or resist in some way on their own."