

Jacob Kuhangua



APPEAL

The Story of the struggle of the people of South West Africa to win their freedom and independence is a familiar one to you.

In all of South West Africa there are only two Africans who have been able to complete their college education. The attainment of an adequate education is an important corollary of the struggle for freedom and independence in South West Africa.

We are now asking you to contribute to this cause, by giving money towards the cost of educating one of the refugees from South West Africa who escaped last year and now has appeared twice before the United Nations as a petitioner on behalf of his people.

Jacob Kuhangua was born in Ovamboland in 1933. He was educated by the Saint Mary's Mission in Ovamboland, then worked as a school teacher and a clerk in South West Africa. He was eventually deported to Angola and escaped through that country to Tanganyika and New York to the United Nations. He now wants to continue his education. Before Jacob Kuhangua can start school, he needs funds to cover his tuition and room and board.

Tax-deductible contributions can be made out to:
The African American Students Foundation, Inc.
375 Park Avenue, Suite 3308,
New York 22, New York.
Mark contributions for the account of J. Kuhangua.

Sheldon G. Weeks
20 Willow Street
Brooklyn 1, New York

ESCAPE

By SY and BARBARA RIBAKOVE



On December 22, 1959, armed guards brought a young South West African to a village in Ovamboland and turned him over to the local headmen. "This man is dangerous," they said. "Tie him up. He was responsible for last week's rioting in Windhoek." While the guards watched, the young man's hands and feet were bound tightly together. Then he was left in a hut, alone.

So it happened that at twenty-six years of age Jacob Kuhangua found himself a stranger and a prisoner in the village where he was born, the village in which his father's bones were buried. But to be a stranger and a prisoner in Africa is a common experience for South West Africans.

Jacob Kuhangua had lived in many places under harsh *apartheid* restrictions: as a child in Okatale; as a young man in Johannesburg, where he had quickly discovered that rumors of living wages for Africans were nothing more than rumors; in Cape Town, where he had joined a half-dozen friends to form the Ovamboland People's Organization which later evolved into the 50,000-member South West Africa People's Organization; and in Windhoek, where he had organized his people to boycott movies and government beerhalls because the authorities had razed their homes and forced them to move to a new high-rental location five impossible miles from the city where they worked.

For more than two months, except for the hours when, under close guard, he plowed the earth to pay for the food he ate, the hut in Okatale was home to Jacob Kuhangua. He was given no blankets, no change of clothing, no news about the fate of the friends who had shared his arrest.

In March he was officially charged and brought before the tribal chiefs and headmen of Ovamboland. They refused to convict him, referring his case to the local Native Commissioner. In the days that followed, as he was shuttled from one official to another, surveillance was temporarily relaxed. Kuhangua managed a surreptitious visit to his sister who lived near by, and one to an African political leader, Toivo Ja Toivo. The two men discussed Kuhangua's plight and came to a decision. Before the Wind-

hoek riot, Kuhangua had planned to try to make his way to New York to petition the United Nations in behalf of his countrymen. The journey, illegal then, would be a hundred times harder now, with the Organization in chaos and Kuhangua himself a hunted man. Nevertheless it was decided that he should make the attempt.

He had, of course, no papers; they had been confiscated long ago. He had no passport; the government had never issued one to an African. He had almost no money; it was impossibly difficult to reach the Organization. But one of the men of the village had a bicycle and would help him begin his journey. That was enough.

And so the trek to freedom began—a trek that was to touch a dozen countries on three continents, a trek that was to mean six months of hunger, exhaustion, and danger. The whole story of that journey cannot yet be told. But some things can be said.

Wherever he went, Jacob Kuhangua found friends. Only a few were old friends. Most were total strangers who knew neither his real name nor the true purpose of his journey. Yet they took great risks to help him.

First there was the man from his own village. The two men walked together through eighty-six miles of jungle, pushing the bicycle with their few possessions tied to it. Neither man had a weapon. At night they built a small fire, and while one slept, the other watched and listened. When they reached a dangerous border, his friend climbed the high barbed wire fence, and then helped Kuhangua and the bicycle over.

There were the people of the kraals. Often no one spoke his language or knew his tribe. But a gesture said he was hungry, thirsty, tired—food, water, and shelter were given until he was able to go on his way.

Sometimes there were white men and women. Twice missionaries fed and sheltered him and drove him across hundreds of miles of country, their mere presence protecting him from questioning.

And perhaps most important, there were the Africans in the big cities. They passed him on from one city to another with hastily scrawled introductions. They taught him enough of the native language to enable him to ask his way. They dispatched his occasional telegrams and brought him the money his friends sent. They told him which buses were safe to ride without identification papers, and which streets were to be avoided. They lied

for him. More than once, Kuhangua sat up in bed holding his breath, as some new friend answered a midnight knock at the door.

"We're looking for a stranger, a foreigner. Is there one here?"

"No, sir. No one here."

They lied, in spite of the danger. They never asked him to explain himself or his destination. It was enough that he needed help. They helped him all the way to freedom.

Today in New York, Jacob Kuhangua tells his story with mixed emotions. Sometimes he smiles, remembering incidents that were ludicrous despite their peril — as his trying four times to cross a guarded border at the same point, always without papers, always being turned back, always trying again with the same plaintive story: "But where I come from, we don't need any papers!" And there was his first airplane ride, from Dar es Salaam to Addis Ababa when, at take-off, Kuhangua found himself more terrified than he had been by guns and police and jungle.

Sometimes he shakes his head grimly, remembering the times he was ready to give up, the weeks he spent in a strange city wracked by fever and, penniless and without identification, unable to go to a clinic. He decided then that he would forget this impossible journey, take a false name, find a job, and settle where he was. But once again friends found him and brought him medicine and hope and the will to go on.

And when he ends his story, his eyes fill with warmth as he recalls his arrival in New York. There, waiting for him, was one of his lost SWAPO friends, and news of the imminent arrival of another.

Now Jacob Kuhangua shares a railroad flat on Second Avenue with half a dozen South West Africans. Only one, Mburumba Kerina, who reached the United States several years ago on a student visa, is permitted to work. The others exist on his earnings, spending most of their time preparing their petitions for the U.N. hearings on South West Africa and writing long letters to sisters, wives, and children whom they may never see again.

If the United Nations fails to act, they will be forever exiled, forever dependent on the hospitality of strangers. For, as long as South Africa holds its cruel mandate over their country, Jacob Kuhangua and his friends cannot go home.

SY and BARBARA RIBAKOVE are free-lance writers living in New York City.