

Student forced to flee Lesotho finds his way to Halifax

by Gregory Hamara

Sitting in his office at the ministry of education in Maseru, capital of the African nation of Lesotho, Edwin Qobose, 26, was not prepared for the warning his cousin was about to deliver.

"All of a sudden, without warning, she came running, tears in her eyes, and told me I had to leave at once," said Qobose, recalling the events of a June day sixteen months ago that would abruptly, and perhaps irreversibly, change his life.

For Qobose, the decision "to leave" that day did not entail a leisurely choice over whether he wanted to pack-up his work early and head home. Qobose clearly understood the message his cousin brought: he had to flee Lesotho, very fast and without time for second thought.

Rushing home to collect a scattering of personal belongings, Qobose, without realizing it at the time, set off that day on an international odyssey that would see him clandestinely shuttle between South Africa and Botswana, followed by internment in a Botswanian refugee camp, and then across three continents to Halifax where he is now studying library sciences at Dalhousie University.

Most students would shake their heads in bewilderment and suggest that somehow there must be an easier way to gain admission to Dalhousie. Edwin Qobose, however, is hardly an ordinary student.

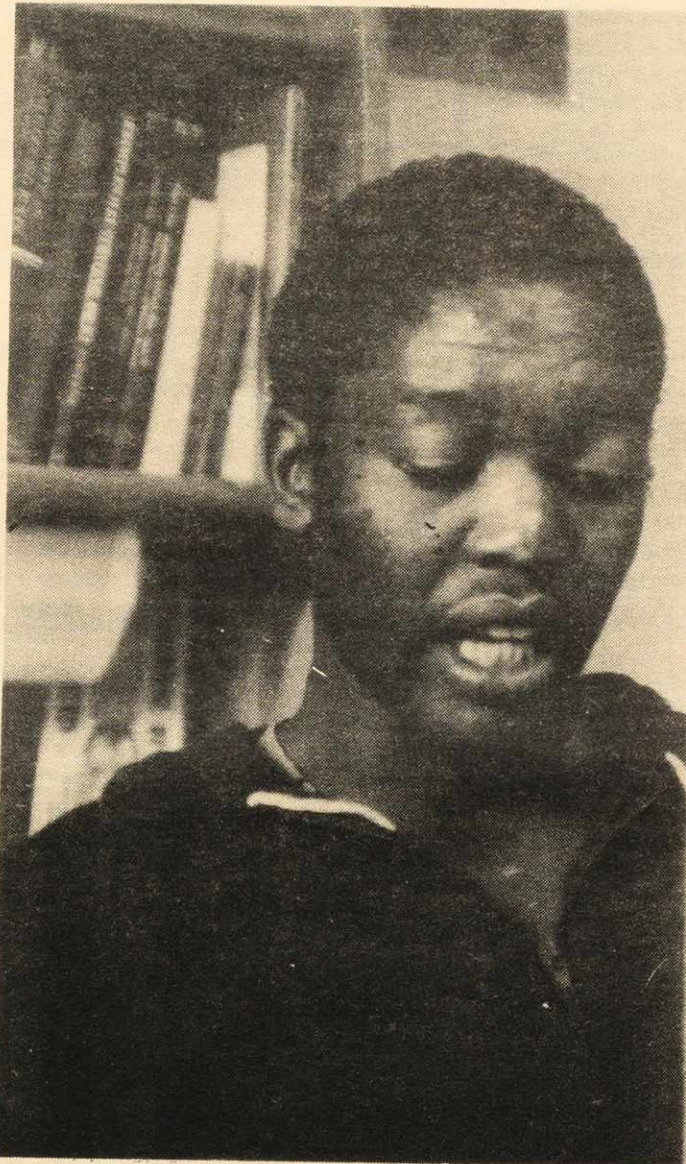
Enrolled at Dalhousie under the auspices of the World University of Canada's (WUSC) student refugee program, Qobose is one of a handful of political refugees who have successfully secured placement in a Canadian university after being forced to leave their homeland. And though he has survived Western cultural shock and has enjoyed his first two months on campus, his words are unmistakably genuine when he says: "I would very much like, someday, to return to my nation".

There is little doubt that should Qobose, a one-time student activist at the National University in Maseru, return home tomorrow, his future would almost certainly be determined by the government he vigorously opposed. He would be thoroughly interrogated. The possibility of lengthy incarceration would hang over him. Or, he could end up following the lost path of other opponents to the government of Prime Minister Leabua Jonathan, and simply disappear - forever.

Lesotho, a tiny former kingdom - about half the size of Nova Scotia - gained a peaceful independence from Britain in 1965. Despite constitutional guarantees that open elections would be held every five years, Basothans have not cast a ballot since 1970. That year, the nation of one million elected Jonathan's main opposition party, the Basutoland Congress Party (BCP), a party Qobose des-

cribes as "more inclined to socialism, but definitely not ultra-leftist".

Not pleased with the electoral results which gave the BCP a clear majority in Parliament, Jonathan declared the election null and void, suspended the constitution, exiled King Moshoeshoe to the Netherlands and replaced Parliament with an "Interim National Assembly" in 1973.



Hayden

ducted a sporadic campaign of guerrilla warfare against Jonathan's government.

Qobose, who gained a Bachelor of Education degree from the National University in 1980, said that he had not become involved in any student politics until his third year at university. Elected in 1977 as Vice-Secretary of the Lesotho Union Student Association (LUSA), he began to observe the increasing

Jonathan's national assembly, void of any opposition parties, was filled by nominees chosen largely from the prime minister's Basotho National Party (BNP). A state of emergency, was declared. But what Qobose recalls most vividly during the seventies was the "systematic terrorizing of opposition".

"Bloodshed was the order of the day," Qobose said. "Our country was being ruled in a para-military manner. Many people were detained and questioned, some subjected to torture."

According to Qobose, the Jonathan government also established "black lists" from which hundreds of suspected opponents of the regime were release from jobs in schools, churches and the civil service.

Those leaders of the BCP who were not apprehended, slipped into nearby Botswana - along with Swaziland, a former tripartite partner of Lesotho. From this group, along with other Basotho exiles, sprung the Lesotho Liberation Army (LLA), under the leadership of the BCP leader **Ntsu Mokhehle**. Since its inception the LLA has con-

tendency of the government to replace students believed to be oppositionists, with people he described as "government-type students" - older, conservative and drawn mainly from the civil service.

"For some reason more and more police officers began to take courses," he ruefully added.

The event which in all probability served as the catalyst for his forced decision to flee Lesotho occurred in January 1980. Following the resignation of the LUSA's president and secretary, Qobose organized a meeting with the government-sanctioned Student Representative Council (SRC) to draft a "letter of invitation" to the prime minister, asking him to join them in a discussion over the "current political situation" - a situation made even more tense by increased guerrilla bombings.

"We delivered the letter to the prime minister's executive secretary who promised that Jonathan would take it into serious consideration," Qobose said.

When, through his senior executive secretary, Jonathan responded, he directed his remarks to a second letter that had surfaced, not the letter put forth by LUSA and SRC. The letter purported to say that Qobose "had fallen into bad elements at the university." It was signed by two members of the young wing of Jonathan's National Party.

for the next six months.

Because the camp suffered from a severe shortage of qualified teachers, Qobose soon began conducting instruction among his fellow refugees. By January of this year he had received an offer of temporary employment with the ministry of education at Palapye Botswana, and left the Dukwe refugee camp.

"All of a sudden, without warning, she came running, tears in her eyes, and told me I had to leave at once."

"Jonathan's executive secretary said he was 'glad to hear this information'" Qobose said.

An atmosphere of increased tension began to permeate the university throughout the spring of 1980, marked by a growing number of police on campus and the disappearance of a university lecturer, Qobose said. In addition, students began to prepare a boycott for year-end exams to back up their demands for university reforms.

In the meantime, Qobose began exploring the possibilities of leaving southern Africa altogether. His first contact was with the WUSC refugee field-worker in Botswana, followed by a lengthy meeting with the Canadian High Commissioner to South Africa, E.A. Bergbusch in March. After a series of academic and medical examinations, Qobose set out in September on the long road to Halifax.

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Despite landing a job with the ministry of education in May 1980, Qobose noted that a number of student leaders were being earmarked "criminals" by the Lesotho secret police, the Criminal Investigation Division.

Only days before he began to make his way to Botswana, at least four student leaders had fled to Swaziland.

"Even though my cousin urged me to leave the country I have to say that I was confident that nothing would happen to me, for I believe I had done nothing wrong," he said.

Having made the snap decision to leave Lesotho, Qobose headed for the Botswana capital of Gaborone, a journey which required travelling across South African territory - a risky proposition even during periods of relative political stability.

Arriving in Gaborone, he applied for, and was granted refugee status with that country's Special Branch.

"I really did not wish to become a refugee," he said. "I had hoped that things would cool down in Lesotho which would have allowed me to return."

In August 1980, he was, in his words, "dumped into" the Dukwe refugee camp, 500 kilometers north of the capital. Once a settlement for 10,000 Zimbabwean refugees, and later a large number of Namibians, Dukwe's impoverished surroundings of tents and sodden huts were to be Qobose's home

Though Qobose will be studying at Dalhousie for two years, he fully expects to return to Lesotho someday.

"At the moment the situation remains bleak," he said. "Until the present regime is replaced by a democratic one, I don't see much hope for an improvement."

A climate of political and social instability continues to hang over Lesotho. In recent months the editor of the country's only independent newspaper, the "Leselinyana la Lesotho", was abducted, his decomposed body found a few days later. The chairman of the Christian Council of Lesotho has vanished without a trace of his whereabouts, his five-year-old grandson shot dead during the abduction.

Though he admits that the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) has done a "marvellous job" in providing technical aid to his country, Qobose said that Canadians must become more sensitive to the myriad of problems confronting the Third World.

"Canada should take a second look at the money it is putting into our country. Instead of investing it in jobs for the people, Jonathan seeks only to maximize his military position. What he doesn't spend on arms goes into the tourist industry. Who's he helping by building more hotels? Qobose asked.

"Canada should spend its money to aid democracy first."