

The great escape that changed Africa's future

In 1961, with Portugal in the grip of a ruthless dictator, 60 brilliant students were smuggled out of the country to safety. Ruaridh Nicoll tells their dramatic story – and reveals how many went on to become Africa's most respected and influential leaders. On the road to freedom: five of the students pose en route to France from Spain. Iko Carreira is second from right. Photograph: Kimball Jones



On the road to freedom: five of the students pose en route to France from Spain. Iko Carreira is second from right. Photograph: Kimball Jones

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When Lilica Boal was a little girl in Tarrafal, a dusty colonial town at the northern reaches of the Cape Verdean island of Santiago, she could see a concentration camp from her home.

“The prisoners would arrive in trucks covered in black cloth so no one could see who was inside,” she says. “Once they were in the colony there was almost total silence about their lives.”

The inmates were Europeans, opponents of the dictatorship in [Portugal](#), the colonial power. They couldn't see Lilica either – from within there was only a line of barbed wire, a deep ditch, the patrolled, crenellated walls and beyond the black and bare volcanic hills that must have seemed a long way from home.

Yet Lilica knew more than most and that knowledge would mark her life. Inside was a 16-year-old Portuguese communist, Guilherme da Costa Carvalho, whose family would visit regularly. As there were no hotels in Tarrafal, they would stay with Lilica's family. “We had a very close relationship,” she recalls, now an elegant, watchful lady in her 70s. “His mother suffered greatly.”



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Making plans: five students enjoy a smoke after fleeing from Portugal.

Lilica was clever. She grew up to earn a place in a medical school in Portugal itself. There, in 1958, she would join 300 other students from the Lusophone colonies in Africa – Cape Verde, [Mozambique](#), Angola, São Tomé, Guinea-Bissau – at the three universities of Lisbon, Coimbra and Porto.

But, in 1961, she would flee Portugal with a new husband and 58 others, many of whom would become the most admired leaders and fighters of our time, including two of Africa’s most celebrated presidents. It would be an epic escape, a great adventure story and one entirely untold in the English- speaking world.

Back in the late 1950s these students were just discovering their fire. “When I came to study in Portugal, Guilherme’s family welcomed me, and took me to visit the families of the other political prisoners in Tarrafal,” says Lilica. “All this leaves its mark on a 20-year-old woman. When people started talking about *our* liberation, I saw reasons to join the fight.”

As the 50s gave way to the 60s, Portugal was in the grip of the scholarly but ruthless dictator António de Oliveira Salazar. A “corporatist”, he saw the colonies as extensions of Portugal. His was, according to Joaquim Chissano, former president of Mozambique and one of the students involved in this story, a “fascist regime”.

The winds of change were sweeping Africa. Countries such as Ghana, Senegal and Congo had already achieved independence and a war of liberation had begun in the Portuguese colony of [Angola](#). Salazar was isolated in world opinion as he had lost his greatest supporters: Eisenhower had been replaced by Kennedy in the US; Pope Pius XII had died, and there had been a change of regime in Brazil.

In such a climate, the dictatorship grew increasingly – and rightly – concerned about the Africans studying in Portugal. “We saw the war had begun,” says Osvaldo Lopes da Silva, another of the students who fled Portugal and who would go on to become Cape Verde’s minister of finance. “We

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were increasingly being watched by the secret police [the [PIDE](#)], and we were running the risk of being drafted into the Portuguese army.”

Despite the increasing restrictions, life for the young Africans was romantic and entertaining, if frugal. “There wasn’t racism in Portugal, but mothers with ill children would hand us the children because people believed if a black person touched a child, it would cure them,” says Lilica (which was probably true given she was a medical student).

Their days revolved around the Casa dos Estudantes do Império, the house of the students of the empire. “It had been created by the Salazar regime to Portugalify the students,” says Lilica’s husband Manuel. “The result was quite different from what they intended. It was a laboratory of political discussion under the auspices of cultural meetings, dances and so on. Also, there was good, free soup.”

Like his wife, Manuel Boal, who would go on to become a regional director of the World Health Organisation, strikes an elegant and thoughtful figure. I am told the story of how they met by the daughter of another of the students. “They were both medical students,” says Ikena Carreira. “He is Angolan and asked about her and when he found out she was Cape Verdean, he learnt how to say ‘I’m crazy about you’ in Creole. One day he stopped her in the street and said: ‘I want to write something on your hand,’ and when she let him, that’s what he wrote.”



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Portuguese dictator Antonio de Oliveira Salazar.

The Boals married in 1958 and their daughter Sara was born a year later. Realising they would soon have a difficult trip ahead of them, they made a tough choice. “My mother visited,” says Lilica. “She asked if she could take her granddaughter back to Cape Verde. Seeing what was going to happen, we accepted.”

It was an event in Angola on 4 February 1961 that galvanised the students. Fifty pro-independence militants attacked a police station and a prison, killing seven policemen. Forty of the militants were killed, but the recriminations didn’t stop there. Portuguese vigilantes raided Angola’s slums, dragging people from their houses and shooting them in the street. One Methodist missionary told of seeing 300 bodies.

In Portugal, the police harassment stepped up. President Chissano, now celebrated for guiding Mozambique, the other big Portuguese colony, from a civil-war-wracked one-party state to a

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multipart democracy, tells me from his home in Maputo of being taken in to be interrogated, but not for the reasons he expected.

“I was not under suspicion because I was studying on a loan given by the Portuguese Youth Organisation, a movement led by the fascist government and based, I came to understand, on the Hitler Youth. What the police wanted to do was warn me not to mix with those ‘communists’ at the house of the students of the empire.”

Some of the students were already in the clutches of the Portuguese military. Henrique “Iko” Carreira, who would become the most celebrated general in the Angolan civil war, and Pedro Pires, who would become president of Cape Verde, were already in the forces. They were concerned that they would be forced to go into battle against the freedom fighters with whom they sympathised, and even numbered themselves among. “We were asking ourselves what we should do,” President Pires recalls as he sits in the office of his foundation in Praia, the Cape Verdean capital. “We decided to leave Portugal.”

Yet it was the more religious students who called for help first. They turned to a visiting missionary of the Methodist church, an organisation already deeply concerned by the reports it was receiving from Africa. The missionary carried the message to the [World Council of Churches](#) (WCC) in Geneva. It was: “Help us, we want to get out, we are being persecuted and fear for our future.”



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Power play: Henrique ‘Iko’ Carreira as a general in Angola.

The WCC offered its support, and responsibility for the escape was handed over to Cimade, a French ecumenical organisation which almost two decades earlier had smuggled Jewish children out of occupied [Europe](#).

With a blank cheque from Methodists in the US, Cimade pulled a team together, part French, part American. The leader, Jacques Beaumont, flew to Lisbon to meet the students and told them to recruit

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others who wished to flee. Then he returned to France and, conspiring with Charles “Chuck” Harper, a 28-year-old American, put together a plan. It was very risky, involved disguises, smugglers, huge distances, false documents and political help at the highest levels. “Jacques had been a courier for the French resistance,” Harper tells me. But such experience wasn’t going to keep them out of jail.

In Portugal, news of the plan was whispered among the students. “The Protestants had their hostel nearby,” Chissano says. “My friend went to their church so they had confidence in him and told him the plan.” In Coimbra with the military, Pires heard about the plan through Carreira. In their case leaving meant deserting the army. The Boals were also facing hard choices. “We were told that in two days we would be leaving and that we could only take 5kg,” says Lilica. “We had just set up home. We ended up closing the door, taking only the clothes that were necessary.”



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‘We were taken to a kraal for goats’: former Mozambican president Joaquim Chissano. Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

Lopes da Silva was called in to see the secret police on the day he was due to leave, after four couples had already been arrested on their way for a seaside holiday. “The police were convinced we were going to flee by sea, that an Egyptian submarine was to pick us up. By arresting those couples they thought everything was OK. I was welcomed into the office of the inspector, who said: ‘You guys wanted to escape but we fooled you.’ I said: ‘No, we like it here. Why would we want to escape?’”

By now, the churchmen were in town, Harper striding around in a white linen suit, playing the rich American tourist, hiring big, dark-windowed cars because such vehicles were associated with the dictatorship. “We did a test trip with 19 students and that worked, but they were not the heavy ones.” The heavy ones would come in the next group.

Those heavy ones would include Carreira, the Boals, Lopes da Silva, the two future presidents Chissano and Pires, and many others who would hold senior government positions including two future

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prime ministers. “Of course, at the time, we didn’t know anyone would become a president,” says Harper.

Some of these 41 students in the second group took the train to the northern town of Porto, others were driven. None were told who to look for when they arrived, and were instead approached when they got there.

“It was very tense,” says Harper. “We believed PIDE to be one of the most efficient secret police services in the world. We didn’t know whether we had been infiltrated, whether someone was taking bribes, whether someone had been picked up. But that never happened. One of the minor miracles of this group was that no one whispered anything.”

From Porto the students were ferried north, a few at a time, to the border and the banks of the Minho river. “We had some hot moments,” Harper continues. “We arrived in one town after midnight and the square was packed with people celebrating a festival. They immediately spotted the black guys in the back seats. The kids were running up, chanting: ‘Pelé, Pelé, Pelé,’ and we were scared as any policeman could have come along.” But there were no policemen and they pushed their way through the crowd.



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A map showing the route taken by the students to escape Portugal and the colonies in Africa they would eventually return to. Photograph: PR

Eventually, around 3am, they reached a thick forest where a young Portuguese man was supposed to be waiting. “The first attempt to cross the river failed,” says Pires. “The person supposed to take us across wasn’t there and we had to go back to Porto.”

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The churchmen had done a deal with a professional smuggler. “A very respected man, with family on both sides of the border,” says Harper. He smuggled dry goods – coffee, cigarettes, that sort of thing. His nephew would meet us in the forest as we delivered, not dry goods, but people – and the Methodist church paid for all this.”

The students were led down a steep bank to the strongly flowing river, maybe 80m wide. “There were guards on either side,” says Harper. “They were out of sight at this particular curve, but only 400m away. There could be no noise.” The smuggler’s rowboat leaked so the Africans had to bail water as they went, the nephew rowing hard to cross the river before they were swept downstream and into sight.

Chissano remembers tying all his letters – including love letters from his girlfriend back in Mozambique – into a handkerchief, adding a stone and throwing it over the side in case he was caught. Lilica says of her crossing: “It was only a small canoe. We could only go two by two, but in our group there were babies who were with their parents.”

The other bank didn’t bring relief from fear, for here lay another, yet more notorious dictatorship. Spain was under the boot of Franco. As each group emerged from the boats, they were taken up the hills to the smuggler’s shed. “We were taken to a kraal for goats,” laughs Chissano. “The animals were put out and we stayed there. I lay on a branch, my friends saying: ‘How can you sleep there?’ and in the morning people passed and saw us and we were frightened. There were people with us who had never been in the countryside.”



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New beginnings: some of the students getting off the bus in San Sebastián.

Cimade had provided another group of idealistic young Americans to drive them across Spain, among them Kimball Jones. “We were in our 20s, it felt like an adventure,” Jones tells me on the phone from New York. “But for the students it was very serious. Especially for the likes of Pires and Carreira who would be tried as deserters if they were caught.”

The 700km trips back and forth across Spain were gruelling – at one point Jones grew so tired he started hallucinating, seeing giant pink rabbits hopping across the road. The reality also brought terrifying moments: “We were on this isolated road and we came up on two guys in a small car who thought I had cut them up – I didn’t think I had – but they got very angry,” he says. “And they started

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honking at us, then overtook and forced us to stop. Then the guy come out and he started screaming in Spanish: ‘You damn Algerians!’ At times it was very intense, at others relaxed. Often the students would sing freedom songs.”

The churchmen hid the students in the attic of a sympathetic Spanish pastor near San Sebastián while they ferried to and fro collecting the rest. In the end, they hired a bus to shift the final 20.

“The Spaniard who hid us was a communist,” remembers Chissano. “He would joke with us and say: ‘Do you know who the first communist was?’ When we said no he would say: ‘Jesus! Jesus Christ and his central committee of 12.’”



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Pedro Pires, former president of Cape Verde with his portrait from the struggle.

Having negotiated the French border successfully with the original 19 students using false Senegalese passports, the churchmen loaded up the bigger group and drove towards France. There they found the man running the border post had been replaced. The young American leading the churchmen in Spain, Bill Nottingham, went to see this official. Jones recalls that “the guard said: ‘You are probably

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surprised to see me' and when Bill asked why, he said: 'Well, my predecessor is no longer with us because he let you guys through. You need to come with us.'

They were taken to a house near San Sebastián where they were interrogated. Pires remembers it well: "When we were searched, the Spanish police looked at the brand of our shirts. One of them said: 'So, you are Senegalese from Coimbra!'" Finally a paper proving they were from Portugal was found. There was pandemonium and they were taken to prison.

At this point, Carreira had to admit something to the churchmen – he had a gun. "Iko had one of these small pistols," says Pires. According to his daughter Ikena, he tried to drop it down the toilet, but the hole was too small. When asked why he had the weapon, he replied, "Well, it's *my* gun." As casually as he could, Bill Nottingham handed it to the guards.

The students and their rescuers settled down on filthy mattresses as other inmates began constructing bunks, saying it looked like they would be there "for some time". But then, without warning, the door opened and they were told they were free. At the time they didn't know the reason, and even now there are several theories, but the group was driven over the border. In France, they were met by a woman from Cimade who had come down from Paris to greet them. "She said as we arrived: '*Mes amis, vous êtes libres,*'" says Jones. "At that moment a lot of the students broke down in tears."

Not all the friendships formed in Portugal would survive the struggles for independence and the civil wars in Angola and Mozambique that followed. Manuel Boal had been told of the plan to flee by a fellow student, but their close friendship wouldn't survive.

After crossing the border, the students all settled at Cimade's headquarters in Sèvres just outside Paris. There they made plans to continue their studies or head back to [Africa](#) to join the struggle. Rumours circulated on why they had been released by Franco. One suggested French and American pressure; a better one yet came from the CIA, who had been watching the operation, and called in its Methodist funders for a debriefing.

Jones tells the story: "Apparently Salazar had called Franco and said: 'I hear you have prisoners of mine. I would like them returned immediately.' Franco said: 'They're my prisoners, not yours.' Salazar got heated, an argument broke out, and finally Franco said: 'Fuck you, I'm letting them go,' Whether there is any truth to that I don't know."



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Lilica and Manuel Boal today.

What certainly helped the Africans is that Charles de Gaulle, then president of France, was furious with Salazar. Involved in the bloody battle for Algeria, de Gaulle had faced an attempted putsch that April from several of his generals. Having failed, the mutineers took refuge in Portugal. “De Gaulle took it very badly that these generals were supported by Salazar,” says Lopes da Silva. Such were the details on which the future of entire nations hung.

In time, the Africans began to leave Sèvres, going their separate ways. This was the moment when Manuel Boal split from his friend, who had chosen to follow a different liberation movement. “I couldn’t say anything to him about leaving. It’s painful to think of even now. And things never got better. In Leopoldville [now Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo] I saw my friend again, but our intimacy had been lost. His UPA [Union of Peoples of Angola] and my [MPLA](#) [Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola] had become deadly enemies. After independence he committed suicide. I think it was impossible for him to feel good inside UPA for it would kill its adversaries, and that must have affected his head.”

The vast majority of the students would remain close, though, as their travels took them all over the world, from Germany and Switzerland, to Russia, Vietnam and Cuba, and any number of African nations. Iko Carreira would lead the struggle against apartheid South Africa’s “kommandos” in the battle for Angola. “He was an exceptional man,” says Manuel Boal, a sentiment Chissano and Pires agree with. When he succumbed to a stroke, Cape Verde helped pay for his medical fees despite his being Angolan. He died in 2000.



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Taste of freedom: the party outside the restaurant in Hendaie where they celebrated their liberty, including (far left) the Boals.

“Growing up, he always made it clear we were representing an ideology, which was the equality of all men with each other,” says Carreira’s daughter Ikena. “My parents made it very clear we weren’t fighting Europeans, we were fighting against the oppression of man against man.” Besides Carreira, of those who made the journey, there are now the two presidents – Chissano and Pires – two prime ministers, a bishop, several ambassadors and countless government ministers. There is not a dictator among them. Both Pires and Chissano, having served their countries, have stepped down. Both have won the [Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership](#). This is the most valuable prize in the world, with the winner receiving \$5m over 10 years, and \$200,000 a year thereafter. That two of only four recipients in history – the last given to [Namibian president Hifikepunye Pohamba last Monday](#) – were on this trip is astonishing. Ibrahim, the magnate behind the prize, says: “The common

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thread of these people is humility. That and to know what it is to serve. As prime minister of Cape Verde, Pedro Pires introduced democracy and immediately lost power. [Pires would be elected president several years later.] Afterwards he took a taxi to his mother's house with his family. It's incredible."

Chissano is reflective: "The suffering in the Portuguese colonies was untold. We had to learn many things from nothing. We were not allowed to conduct politics because there was a fascist regime that other countries' colonies did not have. They had colonialism but not fascism. Even the apartheid regime was less cruel in my view. It obliged us to be ourselves and to behave in the way we behaved. So when we became leaders we had to liberate the people with the dignity we used to speak about."

The concentration camp at Tarrafal is long closed, its baked dirt a place of pilgrimage by relatives, first of the Portuguese dissidents that Lilica remembers, then of the African freedom fighters that were housed there before the Portuguese dictatorship fell in 1975, and the colonies found their freedom. This is what her political awakening led to. "There were very hard moments though," she says. "I worried the secret police would use our daughter to pressure us and said this to my husband. He said when a person joins this sort of thing, they have to be prepared for anything. It wasn't easy." Their daughter Sara is now in her 50s and lives in Cape Verde.



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The four cars used to drive the students into France.

From Mozambique, Chissano tells me he forgot one item when he threw his personal effects into the Minho river. "I had a picture of my girlfriend, which crossed with me and was not found in the search by the police in Spain, it was with me for the two years I was in France, then in Dar es Salaam, then I got married where it was discovered by my wife..." he laughs. "She said: 'I bet I know who this is,' because I had told her the story."

If you want to read more about this adventure, Charles R Harper and William J Nottingham are writing an eBook called The Escape – the Church in Action: the secret Flight of 60 African students to France. It will be published in April by Lucas Press Books, St Louis, Missouri, USA. President Chissano is also hoping his memoirs which cover this period will soon be published in English.

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