# Heart of Darkness

## Alfred Erdos' son breaks the family silence to shed light on the tragic events of Aug. 31, 1971, in Equatorial Guinea.

*By Chris Erdos*

*Editor's Note: A feature article in our October 2007 issue, "A Foreign Service Murder," by Len Shurtleff, reviewed the tragic events of Aug. 31, 1971, the day administrative officer Donald Leahy was killed in Santa Isabel, Equatorial Guinea. Chargé d'affaires Alfred Erdos was subsequently found guilty of voluntary manslaughter in a jury trial in Virginia and sentenced to the maximum 10-year term. His appeal was denied by the Fourth Circuit in Richmond. Erdos was released on parole in late 1976, after about three years in prison, and died of a heart attack in California in 1983.*

The subject of Len Shurtleff's article, "A Foreign Service Murder," is my late father, Alfred Erdos, and the circumstances of his terrible story. Mr. Shurtleff makes many valuable observations. However, his article contains certain errors and omissions regarding the facts of the case. Moreover, there are some particulars of the story that Mr. Shurtleff does not, indeed could not, know. Finally, there are rumors and speculation surrounding the episode, which, sadly, have not dissipated. For these reasons, I feel obliged to break the family's silence on this matter and offer what information I have.

My father was born in 1924 to Hungarian immigrants in New York City. It was a Catholic household, and Father felt his religion very deeply. After World War II broke out, he volunteered for the army as soon as he turned 18. The Army sent him to Europe. However, due to a bureaucratic error, his war papers were lost in Washington; army command did not "know" that he was there. He followed the army throughout the Ardennes campaign, wondering why his orders to go to the front never came.

*Chris Erdos is the son of the late Alfred Erdos.*

Father received an honorable discharge in 1946. He had acquired a taste for travel, and returned to Europe briefly before enrolling in college on the G.I. Bill. After graduating from Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, he decided to serve his country once more, and applied to the Department of State. After passing the lengthy exams, he became a Foreign Service officer in 1952. He pursued graduate studies in diplomacy at The Johns Hopkins University before being assigned abroad.

During this period, Father met a woman with whom he began a relationship. However, she was not an American. The State Department did not allow FSOs to marry non-citizens at that time. In addition, she was not Catholic. They stayed together for many years; but ultimately, their relationship ended when he met my mother. My parents married in 1968; it was his first marriage, her second. I was born shortly after, the first child for both.

Father was anxious about his career. In the diplomatic corps, he was not always the most popular person at post. His military years had given him an appreciation for order, discipline and, above all, adherence to the rules. He gained a reputation as a tough, sometimes intimidating supervisor, a by-the-book perfectionist who also demanded perfection from others. He was frankly resented by some FSOs who were more accustomed to the hail-fellow-well-met Foreign

Service culture of that era. But he always did his job, and his superiors loved him. His fitness reports were uniformly outstanding; he had ascended as high as he could without becoming an ambassador.

However, in the up-or-out Foreign Service, unless he was promoted — soon — he would be forced out. He had been told that the only problem was finding an open ambassadorship. Unfortunately, political considerations and cronyism often influenced those appointments. He was facing the prospect of having to start over again professionally — an older man, and now with a young family.

In early 1971, he was summoned by higher-ups at the Department of State. They wanted to talk to him about a possible assignment. Father had served at the embassy in Niger. Was he familiar with Equatorial Guinea? What did he know about its government? In particular, the questioners kept coming back to a word that appeared repeatedly on Father's fitness reports: "solid."

The men finally came to the point. A position had opened up in Equatorial Guinea. The title was chargé d'affaires. The position reported to the American ambassador in Yaoundé, who was also accredited to Equatorial Guinea. It was a small post; in fact, there would only be one other American, an administrative officer. There would be no Marines, just the two FSOs and three Foreign Service Nationals.

It would be a short tour, but the place was "challenging." American tourists were advised not to go there. The dictator, President Francisco Macias Nguema, had led the country to its recent independence from Spain. The USSR, China and North Korea were active there. Macias resented Spain and the Western powers. In particular, he was hostile toward the United States.

Three years before, a delegation of U.S. congressmen and their aides had visited the country under the auspices of the Red Cross. Macias had thrown them in prison without explanation; there was no U.S. diplomatic presence at that time. (The president eventually released the delegation.) In 1969, the U.S. had evacuated its nationals from the country, under threat of a coup. But shortly afterward, the Department of State established an embassy, albeit over the objections of State's country director. Pres. Macias refused to meet with the U.S. ambassador from Yaoundé, calling him an assassin.

Less than a year previously, the government had seized Spain's embassy and residence without warning; the Spanish diplomats managed to flee the country safely. The regime quickly reversed itself, however, and Madrid eventually returned its diplomats to Santa Isabel. Nevertheless, a precedent had been set: the regime did not respect, or perhaps simply did not understand, diplomatic sovereignty.

The internal dynamics of Equatorial Guinea were similar to of those North Korea. Citizens were forbidden to talk to foreigners, including diplomats. Even diplomats were forbidden to talk to any citizen or government official, with the sole exception of the chief of protocol at the Foreign Ministry, who was 20 years old. The secret police regularly entered diplomatic residences during receptions to make lists of the guests.

The State Department men had a proposition. If Father was prepared to serve as chargé, it would be with a de facto understanding that he would receive an ambassadorial post before his up-or-out time ended. Was he interested?

Father answered in the affirmative. He then received briefings.

Equatorial Guinea was a small country on the western coast of Africa with a large volcanic outpost in its territorial waters called Fernando Po, a beautiful, primordial jungle island about the size of Maryland. The dictator had established the nation's capital, Santa Isabel, there.

The country's main source of revenue was cocoa. But the U.S. government was not interested in the cocoa but rather in Fernando Po's deepwater ports, which had military potential. The Soviets were aggressively expanding their influence in Africa at the time. They had evidently approached Macias about a naval base. Father was instructed to find out more about that, and to try to improve relations between Equatorial Guinea and the United States.

My parents arrived in Santa Isabel on April 15, 1971. They moved into the residence, which was across the street from the main jail. The atmosphere in the city was tense.

Pres. Macias regularly issued diatribes on the radio and in newspapers against Spain, blasting the Spanish government as criminals and worse. Government thugs routinely harassed the Spanish expatriates in the country; they beat one so badly in 1971 that the man suffered permanent brain damage.

It was commonly known that Macias had personally murdered his foreign minister and beaten a political opponent to death in the palace. Many other unfortunates had met a similar fate. Usually the wives and children of his victims were also killed, sometimes in gruesome public spectacles; more often than not, their tribal villages were wiped out, also.

On one occasion, Macias announced that foreign assassins were hiding in trees in the capital, waiting to kill him. They would not succeed, he added, because he was immortal. Nonetheless, the residents of Santa Isabel awoke one morning to find the trees along a main boulevard cut down. In his addresses to the nation,

Macias gave himself various names, including "God," and commanded his citizens to worship him.

Shortly after my parents arrived, a *New York Times* correspondent somehow managed to enter the country. Upon leaving, he published a feature article attacking the regime. The story quoted "a member of the small diplomatic corps that maintains a nervous vigil here," who spoke of the frightening disappearances that were all too common.

The president was apoplectic. American diplomats and their families were suddenly forbidden to travel outside of the capital. When my mother or father left the residence or the embassy, men in suits followed them.

Macias and the state media started to excoriate the United States daily. It was not so much communist or ideological rants as hysteria. America was assigned responsibility for every ill imaginable, and many that were not. The government began sending pages of anti-American gobbledygook over the official wire to Washington, pages without grammar, punctuation or paragraph breaks.

I was 2 years old at the time and fell victim to the tumbo fly, a parasite that lays its eggs on wet laundry put out to dry. When the eggs come into contact with skin, they work their way in and the larvae begin to grow. I cried nonstop, and Mother dug the worms out of my flesh. Santa Isabel had a hospital in name only. There was only one doctor on the entire island, if he could be found. Weeks earlier, the Nigerian chargé's son had become sick, and died within hours. The boy had been my age.

My father soon had yet another reason to worry. A French diplomat's son, not much older than me, had pointed a toy bow and arrow at a policeman. The policeman seized the child on the spot, and took him away. The French government intervened, and the police finally returned the little boy to his hysterical parents. Father commanded Mother to never, ever let me out of sight, even around the house.

At the beginning of August, little more than three months after our arrival, the regime began a massive wave of arrests throughout the island. Observers believed that Macias was wiping out the last vestiges of opposition to his rule. The police brought the prisoners to the main jail, across the street from the residence. Trucks and buses deposited the prisoners after dark, and the screams of the victims being tortured kept my parents awake. In the mornings, Father and Mother saw dead bodies being carried out. It


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continued day and night, without letup. My parents could not sleep, and Father, in particular, began suffering from sleep deprivation.

One morning, African men in suits entered the embassy. They stood silently in the chancery, looking around. Father arrived, and asked if he could help them. The men ignored him, looked around some more, and left without a word. The next day, one of the embassy's three African employees failed to show up for work. The other two disappeared during the following two days. Their relatives called my father, begging him to do something. The FSNs had been arrested.

Two more nationals worked at the chargé's residence, a cook and a chauffeur. They were also arrested. The police took the cook, a woman whom my parents considered a friend as well as an employee, across the street to the courtyard in front of the prison. They removed her clothes and staked her to the ground, in full view of the residence. They then proceeded to strip the skin from her body. The woman screamed for two days before she finally died.

Father repeatedly sent cables to Washington, asking for help. The responses from State were equivocal. He lodged protests with the 20-year-old chief of protocol, who did not respond at all. The U.S. ambassador in Yaoundé was on home leave; Father was on his own.

His hands began to shake so badly that he, a smoker, could not light his own cigarettes. Macias announced that the nation was facing imminent invasion by an "imperialist power" and its "white mercenaries." They were trying to kill him, he said, but he would kill them.

Father started behaving oddly. He began sending cables to Washington, at the highest encryption level, warning of communist conspiracies and the danger to the United States.

One morning shortly after the arrests of the staff, a policeman was posted at the door of the embassy. He refused to speak to my father, or to anyone else. The next day, he arrested a messenger from the Ghanaian Embassy who was attempting to deliver a personal note to Father from their chargé. The policeman guarded the embassy door every day after that. The number of visitors dropped.

It was all too much. Father became progressively more paranoid, and suffered a mental breakdown. He took the life of Don Leahy, the administrative officer. Following this tragic act, he decided that the American diplomats who were trying to evacuate him from the country were communist agents. He refused to leave.

During the impasse, the Nigerian ambassador, with whom he was acquainted, invited Father, Mother and me to the Nigerian residence. The three of us remained in the ambassador's living room for three days, without a change of clothes. The ambassador patiently stayed up with my father day and night, trying to calm him down, as Father spoke unendingly of plots. I will always be grateful to this man, whom I never saw again.

Immediately after the incident, the government of Equatorial Guinea accused Father of "gun-running." The regime seized the U.S. embassy.

Father was finally persuaded that he needed to return to America. But at the airport, he balked; the plane was really a Soviet plane, he said, with the hammer and sickle painted over. After many reassurances, he boarded. Macias allowed the American diplomats to evacuate him. The president also relinquished to them the body of Don Leahy, which the regime had kept for three days.

Upon landing in Washington D.C., Father was immediately admitted to the psychiatric ward at George Washington University Hospital. All the doctors who examined him agreed: he had experienced a "psychotic episode" as a direct result of the conditions on Fernando Po.

The trial took place in March 1972 at the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. It was known then, and is still known, as the "rocket docket." Judge Oren R. Lewis was of the old school. He declared before the jury that psychology was "nonsense," and expedited matters by curtailing the testimony of defense psychiatrists. The doctors produced by the district attorney to rebut Father's insanity defense admitted that they had never examined the defendant. Depositions from foreign witnesses, such as the Nigerian ambassador, were


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not admitted into evidence.

"Equatorial Guinea is not on trial," Judge Lewis said, "and will not be." He accordingly refused to permit any information about the country or its madness to be introduced. Temporary insanity usually implies certain inciting conditions; however, my father's jury heard about none.

Ultimately, the jury rendered a verdict of manslaughter. My father's lawyer was Aubrey M. Daniel III, who had previously found fame as the My Lai Massacre prosecutor and later became a partner at an elite Washington law firm. Daniel told me many years later that he considered my father's conviction and subsequent denial of appeal to be the "single worst" miscarriage of justice he had ever witnessed.

The horrors of Equatorial Guinea during the 1970s have often been compared to those committed by the regime of Pol Pot. At some point, Pres. Macias began setting up crosses and crucifying people. He did it along the airport road, so that diplomats and foreigners would see. Firing squads executed masses of victims at the newly constructed "Freedom Stadium," while playing American music over the loudspeakers. When the natives on Fernando Po began fleeing, Macias ordered every boat on the island burned. Many who depended on fishing for their sustenance starved to death.

Between one-third and one-half of the country's population either fled or were killed during Macias' tenure. He was finally overthrown by a relative in 1979. Oil was discovered offshore, and contracts with American petroleum companies followed. The country that was once called the "Auschwitz of Africa" soon became known as the "Kuwait of Africa."

After Father's evacuation, the embassy was closed. It was reopened briefly in 1981, only to close again in 1995 when a host government official insulted an American diplomat. In 2003 it was opened once more. Today, the country is very friendly toward the United States.

My parents separated soon after the trial. In prison, Father went through extensive psychological therapy and counseling. After several years, he applied for parole and the board, considering his record of service and positive psychological evaluations, granted it. He retired quietly to San Diego, where he attended church regularly and spent time with a small circle of friends. He met a lady, and they were planning to marry, but he died of a heart attack before it happened. I remember her. She was very nice. ■

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