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My Friend in Lubumbashi

I saw the other day that the Republican budget-cutters have forced the State Department to close or schedule for closing 13 U.S. diplomatic and consular posts around the globe while deferring a decision on another six. It sent my thoughts back to Zaire, which I had visited in August 1990 to do research for a book I am writing on U.S. foreign policy and human rights.

I had gone to Zaire's second city, Lubumbashi, the capital of the important copper region, to look into reports of an army massacre of several hundred students a few months before. Late one afternoon, a day or two after my arrival, an official of the ANI (the Zairean immigration service) came to my hotel and ordered the desk clerk to call me down from my room and to tell me to bring my passport. The clerk phoned and added a surreptitious warning: "Do not give it to him, madame."

I had heard that such officials routinely take passports, then refuse to

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return them without bribes. In a celebrated case, a journalist had been forced to remain "for investigation" for several days until authorities finally returned her documents. Also, the hotel staff had warned me the day before that security agents had been asking about me. An interview I was having in a hotel restaurant had ended abruptly when the man I was interviewing was informed by a note handed to him by a waiter that security agents were watching us.

I quickly took the creaky elevator downstairs and saw a burly Zairean official waiting at the reception counter. When I asked to see his identification, he showed me a card—with a thick finger hiding his name.

"I can't see your name. I'd like to see your name," I said. He pulled his hand away and turned menacing: "I can bring you to headquarters!" he threatened.

I backed off, turned and hurried to a phone booth. Quickly, I leafed through

my notebook for the home phone number of U.S. Consul James Yellin. I had interviewed him the day before, and he had invited me to join him and other consular officials at his residence that evening. I gave thanks I had thought to ask for his home number and was glad our appointment meant that he would probably be there.

"Don't give him the passport. I'll be right there," Yellin said when I got him on the line. It seemed only minutes later when he arrived at the hotel in his sports clothes and identified himself to the official: "*Je suis le consul Americain. Est-ce que je peut vous aider?*" The hotel clerk caught my eye and nodded almost imperceptibly: "It's okay now, madame."

The ANI agent examined my passport in exaggerated detail. "Everything is in order," he mumbled, and he left.

The next day was going to be my last in Lubumbashi. I was expecting a package of papers from someone I had interviewed, but when it didn't come at the appointed time, I checked out of the hotel, loaded my suitcases into a taxi and set off for a scheduled interview. I left my destination address with the desk clerk so the messenger could bring the papers there.

I was sitting in the house of the local traditional chief when our talk was interrupted by a phone call from the hotel. The hotel clerk told the chief that I had been followed by security agents; the clerk already had informed the American consulate. A few minutes later, Yellin telephoned the chief, and after some brief pleasantries—"Yes, yes," said the chief, "we really must get together."—the two men decided that the consul would send an official car for me.

The car took me to two subsequent appointments, with a stop for a light lunch at the consul's residence. Then, the number two official in the consulate together with the "expediter" (necessary in countries where bureaucrats and officials pillage instead of serve) took me to the airport, drove the consulate car to the edge of the airfield, retrieved my boarding pass so I would not have to face more security agents in the waiting room and stayed on the spot until I boarded the plane.

The American consulate in Lubumbashi was shut this past year. Would budget-cutters in Congress be gratified to learn that security officials in Lubumbashi were pleased?

The writer is a New York journalist.