FRANK CHITEJI needed to out-think the KGB agent guarding his hotel room door.

CHITEJI WAS A STRANGER in Cairo, but escaping into the Egyptian capital’s chaotic streets was his only option — his only hope.

He had no future if he let the agent drag him back to Tanzania. Chiteji had been branded a Western spy, expelled from his university in Moscow, deported from Russia. He was innocent, but that would make no difference to the pro-Soviet rulers of his African homeland. Execution and prison were unlikely, but there would be no further education, no opportunities for fulfilling work, nothing but blighted prospects for a young man with a shadow on his name.

The trip from Moscow to Cairo was the first leg of a journey to oblivion. The next day’s connecting flight to Dar es Salaam, capital of Tanzania and Chiteji’s hometown, would truly be one-way.

His mind raced. A plan crystallized. He never dreamed how far it would take him.

By Jim Hale
From Tanzania to Russia to America, Frank Chiteji has lived the harsh realities of post-colonial and Cold War history. Few faculty members have traveled as far to arrive at Gettysburg.

From "Safari" to Frank
Chiteji had already traveled far in life. In fact, the Swahili word for “traveling” was his original name. “Safari” was the name my parents gave me,” Chiteji said. “Because I was born during World War II when they were traveling from southern Tanzania to Dar es Salaam.” Where they would eventually settle, and where Chiteji’s parents enrolled him in an Anglican mission school. “The rector of the church and school insisted that I should have a Christian name and not Safari,” he said. “My parents didn’t have a name picked, so the rector — his name was Frank — decided to baptize me ‘Frank,’ and gave me the middle name Matthew because I was born on St. Matthew’s Day. As a young man, I was proud to be given a European name. Now that I look back, I see the function of cultural imperialism, where everything African had to be Europeanized.”

European domination extended far beyond names. It reached into every aspect of life, even what language one might speak. Swahili was spoken across the region, but colonial realities forced Chiteji’s father — baptized Richard, but known as Tambala — to learn Portuguese and English as well. Portugal controlled Tambala’s homeland of Mozambique. And in neighboring Tanzania, English permitted him to become a low-level civil servant in the British colonial system. Similarly, Frank learned English in addition to Swahili and Chinyanja, the ancestral tongue of his mother, Evelyn, whom he never knew.

One might think Frank Chiteji’s obvious facility with languages would have opened the door to a bright future, but persons of African descent faced very limited opportunities under colonialism. Though Chiteji was better educated than many — he had completed the equivalent of high school — he was able to find only menial work in a garage, scrubbing greasy engine parts with gasoline. But soon, he displayed the daring that would propel him far beyond what the British oppressors believed him to be capable of. While his boss was away at lunch each day, Chiteji commandeered the keys of vehicles being repaired and slowly, secretly, taught himself to drive. It was a skill that, along with his boldness and language abilities, helped him make his own luck.

Translating the revolution
In the early 1960s Chiteji attended a rally at Dar es Salaam’s airport. The speaker was Eduardo Mondlane, a tribal chief’s son who was educated in Portuguese and the United States. Mondlane had returned to Africa to lead the revolutionary Mozambican Liberation Front, which finally won the nation’s independence from Portugal in 1975.

That day at the airport, there was a problem. Mondlane spoke in English, so Chiteji heard his words of freedom loud and clear, but they were lost on the Swahili-speaking audience. Mondlane recognized the difficulty and called out for someone who spoke both languages. “He looked around, and I popped up,” Chiteji said. The young garage assistant suddenly found himself before a large crowd, microphone in hand, translating for a leader who was then one of the most prominent Africans in the world.

It was the beginning of a crucial bond in Chiteji’s life. For two years, he was Mondlane’s trusted translator, driver, and personal aide. In addition, Chiteji took on the responsibility of helping Mozambican refugees find lodging and other services in Tanzania.

July 4 means Russia
Mondlane recognized that Chiteji deserved the same kind of educational opportunities that he himself had benefited from. He advised his protégé to visit the United States embassy, located in Dar es Salaam, where Chiteji could gain access to a variety of scholarship programs.

“But I didn’t realize that the Americans closed their embassy on the Fourth of July,” Chiteji said. “As I was walking away, I noticed there was a long line of people in front of the Russian embassy across the street. So I went there and applied for a scholarship. That’s how I ended up in Russia.”

In Moscow, Chiteji joined students from around the world at Patrice Lumumba People’s Friendship University, named after the Congolese leader who won independence from Belgium in 1960. The university was where I became more interested in politics,” Chiteji said. “The idea was to study military affairs, but the first class I attended required me to learn how to drive a military tank. I said no, no, no!” Instead, Chiteji sampled a number of other subjects, including the Russian language, until he encountered a professor who helped him find his true calling. “My teacher was an ex-soldier who was injured in the Second World War, and he said to me that African history has always been distorted.” He urged Chiteji to “think about writing good African history.”

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The solution required another costume change. The embassy knew of a regular American military flight from Cairo to Khartoum, Sudan. When departure time came, Chiteji said, “I was at the airport looking like a Yankee. I was dressed up in an American Marine uniform.” The police at the airport didn’t have an eye, and soon Chiteji was airborne.

After landing in Khartoum, he reported to American officials who already knew his story. Within a few days, they issued him a one-way travel document to John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York and on to Philadelphia. His scholar- ship, through the federal Fulbright Hays program, was to Lincoln University, a historically African-American liberal arts institution 45 miles southwest of Philly.

Full circle
Lincoln University was the first stop on a transcontinental educational journey. Chiteji stayed there for a year before transferring to the University of San Francisco. After completing a bachelor’s degree in his two years there, he loaded his 1967 Volkswagen Beetle and trekked to Michigan State University, where he taught Swahili for five years — one of his students was basketball great Magic Johnson — while completing a master’s and Ph.D. in history and anthropology. At Michigan State, his professors were in the forefront of progressive thought about Africa, including budding international opposition to apartheid in South Africa. “They gave me a lot of nourishment,” he said.

The state of Michigan came to feel a bit like home, and Chiteji stayed nearly after completing his degree. He took a job teaching history and Swahili at the University of Michigan’s Flint campus. But after a time his real home beckoned, and he soon moved into the streets of Cairo. With him were his American wife — in San Francisco, he had met and married Sheila Marama, an anthropology student at Berkeley — and their daughter Nginja, now a student at the University of Missouri.

Between Chiteji’s roots and his education, however, a big problem remained, however. He plans to return to Africa, and is already building a house in Malawi. There, he will live out his days, and the work he began as the young protégé of Eduardo Mondlane nearly a half-century ago — educating refugees, either through a non-governmental organization or the Anglican Church. Departure from Gettysburg will be bittersweet, he said, but in Africa “I have a lot of relatives I’d like to be close to.” My story would be different, he said, if I had a cultural tradition. I always like to visit my father’s burial ground. “Home is always home; you have to go home someday.”

Chiteji has also reached out to colleagues by inviting professors from numerous departments to teach in the Africana Studies program and by organizing Central Pennsylvania Consortium conferences that have brought nationally known speakers to Gettysburg. He has contributed more broadly to the field with wide-ranging scholarship including several books, most recently *Imperialism in the Modern World: Sources and Interpretations*, co-edited with Gettysburg history Prof. William Bowman.

All in all, Chiteji is pleased with the progress he has witnessed at Gettysburg. “I think we’ve become more open. The degree of tolerance is quite impressive, not only in terms of tolerating people of different cultural backgrounds, but generally speaking, you can come from anywhere — in religion, culture, sexual orientation — and all this is now accepted,” he said. “I’m impressed especially by the fact that the number of black students now is growing.”

“Grandfather teacher”
After contributing so much to the life of Gettysburg College, Chiteji said, “It’s time for me to rest. My colleagues are getting younger and younger, and I’m getting older. You can come from anywhere — in South Africa, I can’t wait to come back.”

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Chiteji was placed on a flight to Tanzania with a stopover in Cairo. A female KCJ agent escorted him and checked them into hotel near the air- port. Her room was across the hall.

“The door was open all the time to make sure I wasn’t moving around,” Chiteji said. “Fortunately, I came up with a quick idea of how to escape.”

“I’m hungry,” Chiteji told the agent, and she permitted him to order from room service. “Egyptian hotels were open for business. We all looked alike in her eyes. I took him down to my room. I gave him a couple of dollars to give me his uniform. I went downstairs. My Russian escort didn’t even notice. We all looked alike in her eyes. I hitchhiked from the airport town and disappeared into the streets of Cairo.”

Another borrowed uniform
Chiteji had escaped the KGB, but he knew he couldn’t stay in pro-Soviet Egypt. And so he found himself once more a refugee. "Imagine my surprise when the big black man came to order from room service. "Egyptian hotels were open for business. Her room was across the hall. Her room was across the hall. She permitted him to order from room service. "Egyptian hotels were open for business. We all looked alike in her eyes. I took him down to my room. I gave him a couple of dollars to give me his uniform. I went downstairs. My Russian escort didn’t even notice. We all looked alike in her eyes. I hitchhiked from the airport town and disappeared into the streets of Cairo."