

DEC 4, 1995

THE END OF THE WORLD WHEN THE AUTHOR, AN OLYMPIC MARATHONER, LEARNED THE 1968 GOLD MEDALIST IN THAT EVENT HAD BEEN IMPRISONED IN ETHIOPIA FOR THREE YEARS WITHOUT HAVING BEEN CHARGED WITH A CRIME, HE BEGAN THE RACE OF HIS LIFE: TO JUSTICE

KENNY MOORE

We began by casing the Ethiopian central prison. We drove a dented 1967 VW Beetle slowly down a muddy, unmarked Addis Ababa street, passed the Libyan Embassy, turned right and tried not to stare at a haphazard compound of cement and corrugated sheet-metal buildings. Across the road, in the rain, goats and trucks bleated and brayed at each other. Men urinated against a wall. An arch marked the main gate. In the lee of a crumbling yellow plaster watchtower, a half-dozen guards wearing thin blue overcoats watched us go by, eyes instantly locked on the faranjoch, the foreigners. A thought came: the things you do for Olympic brotherhood.

Or maybe simply the idea of Olympic brotherhood. Captive inside the prison was a man I had not seen in 23 years. I had never had more than fragmentary conversations with him. We had simply raced each other in two Olympic marathons. Was it a conceit to think, because of that, I knew him? Knew him well enough to believe he couldn't possibly deserve to be in there? Knew him well enough to try to outwit the Ethiopian prison system to get that simple message to him?

The man was Mamo Wolde, the 1968 Olympic marathon gold medal winner. Last May, Amnesty International revealed that in '92 Mamo had been rounded up with thousands of other Ethiopians suspected of involvement in the horrid human-rights abuses of the Communist regime that had been deposed the year before. He had been imprisoned, without having been formally charged with a crime, for the past three years.

Learning that, from a tiny item in the Los Angeles Times, had jerked me to my feet. Mamo Wolde? He and countryman Abebe Bikila were the greatest one-two punch in Olympic marathon history. Abebe won in Rome in 1960 (barefoot, finished in torchlight under the Arch of Constantine), and in Tokyo in '64 (shod, did calisthenics on the stadium infield after destroying the world best time), thereby beginning the great African distance running avalanche.

In Mexico City in 1968 a leg injury forced Abebe to drop out after 10 miles. Mamo, who had already taken the silver in the 10,000 meters, won that marathon, making it three in a row for Ethiopia. I placed 14th in Mexico City, but I remember Mamo only as a black-and-green wraith, vanishing ahead after 15 miles, his pace remorseless. He won by three minutes.

So the whole of our relationship was based on something that happened in the last 11 miles of the 1972 Olympic marathon in Munich. Mamo was so soundless of foot and breath that often I only knew he was running beside me by the sight of his distinguished widow's peak. With six miles to go, Frank Shorter was a minute ahead of us and increasing his lead. But when Mamo and I looked back, we seemed to have left the rest of the field behind.

We both run with our toes pointing out slightly, so at times our shoes brushed. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Mamo would say.

On a rough path in Munich's English Garden, with five miles to go, a dehydration cramp shot up my right hamstring. Mamo watched me slow and hop, grabbing my leg, and then he turned and ran on. He looked back one last time. This is what I cannot forget. His face was filled with regret. He seemed to be saying it wasn't supposed to happen this way. We were supposed to race on together, and the stronger would take the silver and the other the bronze. In fact, Belgium's Karel Lismont caught us both and finished second. Mamo got the bronze. I followed in fourth, on my twinging thigh, some 30 seconds behind, a gap that gave me a clear view of Mamo over the last couple of miles but no hope of catching him.

The postrace scene has long since taken on a strobe-light selectivity. I can clearly see how stunned Shorter was at winning. But I don't see Mamo. We must have shaken hands, congratulating, consoling, but if we did, the memory is gone.

I never saw Mamo again. He went home to Addis Ababa, where he had been promoted to captain in the Palace Guard of the aging Emperor Haile Selassie and was promised a nice house, like the one that had reportedly been given to Abebe before he died in 1973. Mamo never got it. In '74 Haile Selassie was overthrown by Ethiopian military leaders who, under Mengistu Haile Mariam, created a ruthless, hugely paranoid Communist government known as the Dergue, the Amharic word for committee.

Mengistu outlawed private land ownership and put collective urban planning under the authority of local councils called kebeles. This fueled resistance in northern Ethiopia's rural areas, and Mengistu met the opposition with terror. For 17 years all human assembly was assumed to be subversive. Ethiopians needed written permission for a wedding party. Chatting on a street corner could lead to interrogation by council tribunals or Revolutionary Guards--armed citizen enforcers.

Ethiopians deemed disloyal were killed by the thousands. The Dergue reportedly made its morgues run at a profit. A family claiming the body of a loved one was charged 10 Ethiopian birr (\$1.60) for each bullet used in the execution. Since more holes meant more revenue, death squads reportedly were asked to observe a two-bullet minimum.

All this seemed to mean that Mamo, who had been identified with the deposed emperor, could be in great danger. Being an Olympic champion and a national hero does not ensure safety in a nation that is ruled by fear of counterrevolutions and whose leaders are always on the lookout for a rallying point for insurgency.

Yet Mamo was hardly that. He had never seemed a martial sort of man or even ambitious beyond his sport. He seemed to owe his captain's rank more to his Olympic success than to personal or political connections to Haile Selassie. He was not of a rebellious tribe. The only Ethiopians he seemed to want to inspire to action were his country's young runners, several of whom he coached. But so effectively did the Dergue embargo information that for years if I thought of Mamo at all, it was only to wonder what had become of him amid benighted Ethiopia's incessant war, famine and purge.

In May 1991 the Dergue, having lost military aid from the collapsing Soviet Union and East Germany, was overthrown by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front. Mengistu, who was responsible--through his Red Terror and by blocking aid to famine victims--for hundreds of thousands of deaths, escaped to Zimbabwe.

In late 1991 the new Ethiopian government rounded up more than 2,000 alleged officials of and collaborators with the Dergue, many of whom surely do deserve punishment for the regime's homicides. In this sweep, Mamo Wolde was caught up and imprisoned. In '92 Ethiopia created a Special Prosecutor's Office to investigate, charge and bring to court the suspects. But in May of this year Amnesty International said that no charges had ever been filed against Mamo and that it had seen no evidence to suggest that he was implicated in human-rights abuses. Amnesty appealed to Ethiopia to either charge or release those in his situation. Ethiopia did neither. In August, Mamo was still confined in the Ethiopian central prison, in a section known as the End of the World. There he would sit, prosecutors had told Amnesty, until more important cases were dealt with. But Amnesty did not learn what crime, if any, Mamo was suspected of. Ethiopia was still being gallingly tightfisted with information. I started calling African contacts, trying to learn more.

I wasn't alone. After word of Mamo's plight got out, the International Olympic Committee and the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF), the world governing body of track and field, demanded explanations from Ethiopian sports officials. But since those officials were also members of the Ethiopian government, they got back only hand-wringing. "We have been advised to await the verdict of the court," said Sibehat Belya, vice president of Ethiopia's National Olympic Committee. At the World Track and Field Championships in Goteborg, Sweden, in August, IAAF officials admitted that all they could do was inquire and exhort.

Whether they knew him or not, all the Olympians I spoke to were astounded to learn of an Olympic champion's imprisonment. Not that they felt a gold medal guaranteed moral perfection, but what is more at the heart of the Games than the forsaking of violence? So sacred did they hold the Olympic truce that the ancient Greeks put down their arms on the battlefield in the days of the Games. Who can look on an Olympic 100-meter final or heavyweight wrestling final and not see combatants subsuming the most powerful human ambitions into peaceful competition?

Such was the feeling of another 1972 Olympian, 800-meter bronze medalist Mike Boit of Kenya, who is now his country's commissioner for sports and represents Africa on the IAAF Athletes' Commission. I was in Goteborg covering the championships when I ran into Boit, who urged me to go to Ethiopia, try to see Mamo or at least discover all I could about his case and condition, then lay the information before the Athletes' Commission. "The combined voices of Olympians," he said, "must be heard."

So I flew to Addis Ababa, which is set 7,500 feet above sea level, on dark, hilly earth that was then being turned to black mud by cold rain. The essential fact of Ethiopia is that it is high, up to 10,000 feet above sea level. Its central mountains claw from the sky virtually every drop of moisture blown northwest from the Indian Ocean and so become the source of the Blue Nile. Their long rain shadow is the Sahara Desert.

Ethiopia is a country most known for its suffering and poverty, yet few people have a richer history than the Ethiopians do. They, perhaps fancifully, claim that the highlands were first settled by a great-grandson of Noah named Ethiopic. Some 97 generations later, his descendants were ruled by the queen of Sheba, who traveled to Jerusalem, bedded King Solomon, converted to Judaism and bore him a son, Menelik. Menelik brought back to Ethiopia not only a thousand people from each of the 12 tribes of Israel, but also the Ark of the Covenant (What is said to be the Ark can be found this day in the St. Mary of Zion Church in Axum). Menelik was first in the Solomonic dynasty of emperors that ended some 237 monarchs later, with Haile Selassie.

Christianity, which arrived in Ethiopia in the fourth century, came under assault in the seventh century when the great plateau region was encircled but never conquered by Islam. For nearly a thousand years even the trade routes to the highlands were cut off by the stalemate between the forces representing the two religions. This long isolation produced, to many Western minds, one of the world's most feudal, xenophobic, argumentative cultures. British novelist Evelyn Waugh, who covered Haile Selassie's coronation in 1930, wrote of "the prevarications, the evasions ... the lethargy and cunning.... Tricking the Europeans was a national craft."

These were the people I would persuade to let me visit their rejected national hero? These were the people who would tell me why he was locked up? Fortunately I was not alone. Antonin Kratochvil had flown in from Prague. A former Czech freedom fighter whose natural photographer's combativeness had been sharpened by life and work in repressive regimes, he was very clearly the right man for the job. Yet photographing the slaughter in Rwanda had made him sensitive to the ever-present possibility of violence. I said I trusted him to not take too many chances.

"Give me your little plastic camera," he said. "I can hide it in my scarf when we go to the prison."

Maybe trust is too strong a word.

Even before we left for Ethiopia, we were faced with a choice. Ethiopian Olympic officials wouldn't talk to us unless the Ministry of Information certified us as journalists. But once the government knew we were journalists, we assumed, there would be no way we were going to be allowed near a prison, let alone Mamo.

So we bagged the officials and came in on tourist visas. Kratochvil planned to say he was a designer and trainer. My pitch would be personal: As an old friend and competitor of Mamo's, I would say I was stopping over in Addis simply to see him and cheer him up.

I tried this out first in a phone call to the Special Prosecutor's Office. I was transferred to a prosecutor named Abraham Tsegaye. His English was precise, his tone unnervingly bland. He said that some trials of the architects of the Red Terror had begun but that the courts were in a "period of hiatus" to allow defense attorneys more time to prepare. At present, he said, there were 1,300 detainees. "No charges have been filed against Mamo Wolde," he said, "but we are preparing to make charges when the courts resume, perhaps in two or three months."

I took a breath and asked the crucial question: "What are you charging him with?"

"With taking part in a criminal act."

"What criminal act?"

"A killing...."

I went queasy. I had come all this way on the strength of a backward glance. Suddenly it didn't seem such an ironclad guarantee of innocence. "What killing?"

"Mamo Wolde is suspected of being involved in killing one person while he served as a Dergue Revolutionary Guard."

"Revolutionary Guard? How could he have been a Dergue Revolutionary Guard? He was in Haile Selassie's Imperial Guard."

"The Imperial Guard was disbanded by the Dergue," said Abraham. "The Revolutionary Guard was then organized in 1975 along Communist lines to incite the public to 'defend' the revolution against its enemies. Mamo could have joined."

I grabbed at a straw. "What do you mean, 'could have'?" I said. "Did he or didn't he?"

"I don't know," said Abraham. "I'm basically a spokesman."

"Who accused Mamo of this crime?"

"The victim's family. Of the possibility of his collaboration with others."

"Was there a hearing before a judge?"

"Yes.... Well, perhaps not a hearing in the way you mean, with testimony. Our investigator gathered statements. Then the court sat with the investigator and Mamo Wolde and looked at the file and decided there were sufficient signs of his implication. So the court ordered him taken into custody."

"Did Mamo Wolde have access to a lawyer?"

"Not now. Not until he is charged."

"If I was detained for three years without charge, I'd sure have a lawyer."

"Well, in your country every time you shake hands with someone, you need a lawyer. In Ethiopia it is not such a way."

"Can you give me permission to visit Mamo?"

"I'm sorry. I don't have that authority."

He hung up. I must have looked ashen. Kratochvil brought me a glass of water and said prosecutors always put the worst face on things. Then he brightened. "Does Mamo have a wife?" he asked.

Mamo did indeed, and when we called her, she invited us to visit. So, on the last day of August, on a rocky lane not far off a main road, some children directed us to a door in a long, corrugated metal wall. As we pounded on it, the reverberations seemed to carry around the block.

A young man admitted us to a yard where corn and squash grew. He led us around a small house made of mud over a framework of sticks and held together with a coat of paint. In the back doorway, dressed in their Sunday best, were Mamo's wife, Aberash Wolde-Semhate, 24, and their five-year-old daughter, Addiss Alem Mamo, and three-year-old son, Tabor Mamo. Tabor's brave little handshake was cold and trembling. The young man who had let us in was Samuel, Mamo's 19-year-old son by his first wife, Aymalem Beru, who is now dead.

Inside we were shown to a dim sitting room. The wood floors were smooth and clean. Incense was in the air. Aberash poured us glasses of talla, a home-brewed beer. "If a guest does not accept the food and drink offered in an Ethiopian home," our interpreter had warned us, "the host feels so bad, it's like a natural disaster."

Aberash lifted her glass and solemnly apologized for Mamo's not being able to welcome me into his house. As we drank, I lifted my eyes and saw, hanging on the wall, Mamo's Olympic gold medal for the Mexico City marathon and his silver from the 10,000. The Munich marathon bronze was nowhere in sight.

"I am so thankful for this," Aberash said. "For your remembering that your runner friend still lives."

I admitted to her that I didn't really know Mamo that well. So Aberash opened a photo album and gave us a thumbnail sketch of her husband. He was born 64 years ago in Ada, about a marathon's distance southeast of Addis Ababa. He is a member of the Oromo tribe. "He is a strict [Ethiopian] Orthodox Christian," she says. "During the Dergue, party committee meetings were on Sunday mornings to keep members from going to church. Mamo solved that by going to church before dawn."

Aberash was introduced to Mamo seven years ago, shortly after his first wife died. "Before, when I was in school, I ran a little, not seriously," she said. "But I read about and I loved them, both of our heroes, Abebe Bikila and Mamo."

She dropped her eyes, a little embarrassed. I don't know what I expected to find in Mamo's home, but the simple, rustic room and Aberash's tender loyalty hardly seemed consistent with a totalitarian absentee master. I took heart, and I asked the questions that I feared the most.

"Had Mamo indeed been a Revolutionary Guard?"

"He told me he was nothing," said Aberash. "He was on a kebele committee--a committee for development--and also coached."

"The prosecutor's office said he will be charged in a killing," I told her. "Was he involved?"

"No," Aberash said. "No. Here is what happened. This was in 1975, at the height of the terror. Mamo said one night he was phoned by [a top kebele official] and ordered to put on his dress uniform, with his pistol, and go to a certain nightclub. Mamo thought this was protocol, that he was to meet an important visitor. When he got there, he saw that the official and some others had a boy with his hands tied. He was about 15. He might have been in some youth group fighting against the Dergue. The official ordered Mamo not to talk. Then the official and another man took the boy out and shot him. Then they told Mamo to go there, to the body of the boy. At first he refused, but at that time to refuse an official was to be dead yourself, so finally he went. The boy was dead. The official told Mamo to shoot the body again because there had to be two holes. The policy. Mamo said he went to three meters [10 feet] away and shot and purposely missed. Lots of people saw him miss. In 1992 many witnesses said Mamo didn't kill anybody. Only one accused him. The official who shot the boy wants to blame Mamo to save himself. But the prosecutors said they had to keep Mamo in detention until they bring charges. But they never do. He just waits."

As I listened, I looked again at Mamo's medals. The Mamo in Aberash's story had acted as I imagined I might act if plunged into a world of such choices. I began to revive a little.

Mamo had been receiving a small pension from his government service. When he was imprisoned, the money stopped. "I couldn't feed my children," said Aberash. "I applied to the athletics people, and now the IOC gives a little every month." Also, Samuel has dropped out of school and gotten a job as a welder's assistant.

Mamo was briefly allowed out of prison twice, once when he was ill and once when he told Aberash he thought he was being freed. Each time he stayed in Addis Ababa with his family. Each time he was re-arrested. In a way, this was the most galling thing I learned, since it seemed to prove that Mamo is no risk to flee his country. "He wants to go to trial," said Aberash. "He wants to clear his name."

If he has to wait, I wondered, why couldn't he wait at home?

Mamo's latest detention had lasted two years and six months by the time I arrived in Addis Ababa. His health had not been good. "He was very sick in prison, with bronchitis, liver and stomach problems," said Aberash. "He's lost a lot of hearing in one ear. He was in the prison hospital for a month and a half, in the winter."

Prison food is terrible, but families are allowed to bring supplemental rations four days a week. "On Tuesdays and Thursdays the guards take the food and tell me to leave," said Aberash. "But on Saturdays and Sundays family members can go in and see the prisoners for a few minutes. You are lined up in a field, six feet apart, with a fence in between. I think Saturday you should try to come along."

So Saturday at noon, loaded with chocolate, cookies and cigarettes for Mamo to use in barter, Kratochvil and I drove Aberash to the prison. She had warm chicken stew in a plastic carrier. She did not believe the prosecutor was being truthful when he told us that Mamo would soon be charged.

Outside the prison gate perhaps 200 people--women and children and old men--were shuffling into one end of an open shed that had four long rows of benches. At the other end guards took names and allowed 20 people at a time to enter the prison. Through the open gate we could see them being searched. Kratochvil had my tiny panoramic camera hidden in his voluminous white scarf and was blazing away at the prison and the people.

Many of the visitors were obviously middle class. The children stared at the faranjoch out of wonder rather than want. Down the rows went urchins selling peanuts, bad fruit and Olympic lottery tickets that had Abebe Bikila's picture on them. I bought five tickets for 10 birr. The seller shook my hand and wished me luck. I began to feel a wild hope. We just might waltz in here.

But when we stood up with Aberash and the people near her and moved toward the gate, we were cut out as if we were hyenas among goats. A comely female guard explained to us that foreigners were simply never allowed to visit a prison. It was a matter of national security.

While Aberash was inside, the guard went on to say that the only one who could conceivably authorize our entry was the police commissioner. As we were asking his whereabouts, Aberash came out. There were tears in her eyes. "Mamo said to tell you that your remembering, your coming has restored his morale and his faith," she said evenly. "He feels both great happiness and sadness. Happy at your coming. Sad that he can't greet you properly."

I had the same emotions. It suddenly hit me what a long shot I must have seemed to him. Hell, what a long shot I really was. It was good to have let him know he wasn't forgotten, but I was damned if I was going to go home without seeing him now.

Working our way up the chain of command, we went to four police stations in search of the commissioner. Our story became better with each telling, until Mamo and I were long-separated brothers. The higher their rank, the farther out of uniform the Ethiopian police officers were. The shift commander's candy-striped shirt was no match for his paunch. He had a Texas longhorn on his huge belt buckle. He told us that the commish wasn't available until Monday morning. We made an appointment.

The next day we gave Aberash and Samuel a lift back to the prison. Kratochvil had brought a larger camera this time, and he took a picture of Aberash in the waiting shed. His action was seen, and suddenly we were encircled by police. One of them kept repeating that they'd had problems with people saying terrible things about their country. "Everybody in every country," guard after guard repeated, "had to know taking pictures of prisons and police stations was forbidden."

Kratochvil said he had not taken any pictures of the prison, just of Aberash, and offered them the film. They took it, but this did no good. One guard, a skinny, wasted man with a warped hand, kept yelling that we were incredibly cunning foreigners, and it was their duty to consider everything we said a lie and simply arrest us. Finding himself in the minority, he held out for summoning higher authority.

Aberash stood up for us so forcefully that she was instantly made to sit down in the waiting shed and was ordered to shut up. Calls were made, and we were told to wait. After half an hour Kratochvil, our interpreter and I were ordered in through the gate and put on a butt-polished wooden bench against a wall facing a sandy courtyard. "Now we are detained," said Kratochvil.

We waited. The prisoner's visiting family members were being searched in front of us. The female guards who were going over the female visitors were anatomically thorough, to the point of running a hand up under skirts and deep into crotches.

We waited. I told the members of my team that no one is as patient as a marathoner, and they should hang in. All nodded. I took myself literally and strove for that frame of mind you want in the first 20 miles: alert but with aggressiveness in check, anxieties suppressed. And as has been known to happen in a marathon, a familiar question arose: What the hell was I doing here?

The answer came more easily than it does on the road. I wasn't just hoping that Olympic commonality might mean something to some sadistic prison guards. I was trying to do a little good. I remembered what Irish miler Eamonn Coghlan had said to me a few years back, when I told him that I was envious of his sub-four-minute miles after he turned 40: "Runners don't exactly win men out of bondage. But journalists can."

Well, this was the first time I'd had a chance, so it didn't seem hard to discipline myself to be calm. Besides, how brutal could a night in an Ethiopian prison be when Mamo had done a thousand of them?

As if in answer, a guard loudly slammed a magazine into his AK-47 and watched our reaction. "So arrogant," whispered the interpreter.

I looked at the ground. If one of these guards had an accident with his gun, this tiny peak of black basalt protruding through red pumice could be the last thing I'd see. I am not an adrenaline junkie. It didn't take getting into this fix to teach me that risks have to be well justified. But once you are in a fix, it doesn't really matter whether your aim is noble or base; you have no choice but to see it through.

In my mind, I started listing recent events of suffering--the Serbs shelling the Sarajevo marketplace, Zaire's president trying to force a million refugees back into Rwanda, Kashmiri separatists decapitating a Norwegian tourist--as if to imply that Mamo's was but a drop in the bucket, that his suffering was not worthy of real sacrifice to alleviate.

This was a sign that my nerve was eroding exactly the way it does in a long, hard marathon. Your thoughts turn fatalistic. There is no hope of winning now, you think. It's as good as over. Why keep hurting?

This you learn to fight. It's never over. If you can't win, you can pass someone. If you can't finish, you can shoot for the next aid station, and then the next. So I tore my thoughts from hopeless mass misery and fixed them on Mamo Wolde, the specific, fragile, 64-year-old man locked in a cage a hundred yards away, and I was back running with him in Munich. This time, when my cramp hit, when he turned and winced, I imagined him finding words. "Hold on," he said to me. "Hold on."

Suddenly a four-door pickup roared in, and a young man with a leather jacket and blue suede shoes got out and inspected us. This was someone who identified himself simply as Major Negesse, and all around deferred to him. The whites of his eyes were the color of strawberry jam. We explained everything all over again to him, after which he went inside and called his superior.

We waited. It seemed a good sign when a uniformed guard moved us into the shade on the other side of the courtyard. But from there the interpreter could hear the insatiable hunger for our heads expressed by the man with the crippled hand.

We'd been held for four hours. It clouded over. We were moved back across the courtyard. They kept asking for our passports. We kept saying we'd left them at our hotel.

Over the wall wafted the melodic voices of a women's choir from the nearby Ethiopian Orthodox church. Amid their angelic music, our salvation arrived, in the person of a man introduced to us as Captain Shanbel, maybe 35, with a pointed, freckled nose. He was holding a hissing walkie-talkie. In English he told us that we had to prove who we were. We asked him to let us go get our passports at the hotel. He said we could, with an escort.

Outside the gate Aberash and Samuel were still waiting. They were told to go home, so they watched us set off across Addis Ababa with a policeman in the back-seat of our car and a huge armored vehicle with half a dozen officers in it right behind. You should have seen the face of the Hilton doorman when we pulled in.

As Kratochvil and I ran inside, Kratochvil dashed ahead and was safely up in an elevator before officers Neguesse and Shanbel caught up with me in the lobby. By the time they'd accompanied me to my room, appropriated my passport and told me that I had nothing to worry about as long as my papers were in order, Kratochvil had already flushed the undeveloped film of the previous day's photos of the prison. The officers took his camera for good measure. We said we would see them on the morrow, and then spent an hour calling everyone we knew. We tried to sound calm. We've, uh, been in the prison and, uh, they held us all day, and now they have our passports. If you don't hear from us, say, by tomorrow night, you probably should contact the U.S. Embassy....

We got up early the next day and drove through mists to the office of the police commissioner, who took one look at us and said he wouldn't be responsible for faranjoch. Be serious. We had to go to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The interpreter swallowed hard.

The downstairs courtyard at the ministry looked like a crowd scene from Gandhi. Hundreds of rain-soaked people were mobbing the office that issued exit visas. By contrast, the tiny office for foreigners had cobwebs on the desk. We were sent upstairs to a room where the sign on the door read only the chief. It had bustling secretaries. The power went out. The secretaries opened the curtains. The power returned. After an hour we were ushered in.

The chief was Internal Affairs Minister Mahete. She wore a red dress. Her angular face was forceful, and she looked a little sour, perhaps because on her desk was a volume titled Immigration Laws of the United States.

As the interpreter made our pitch, I tried to seem nonthreatening. I must have looked like one of the kids begging at the stoplights. She stopped the interpreter, made some calls, shook her head, called in a secretary and dictated a three-sentence letter to the prison authorities. She had given me permission to see Mamo.

At the prison we held her letter before us like a cross toward a vampire. The gate rolled open. The guards who had hassled us the day before looked at the document and fell back against the walls. We were given an escort down a stony path. The buildings--one with no roof--were spread apart, with weedy land between.

Major Neguesse bowed us into his office. He gave us back our passports and camera. His eyes were still red, but now he looked almost friendly. He said he hoped we understood that they had only been doing their duty. We understood.

"Well, then, let us see your friend."

A cluster of guards led us down a sloping path toward a two-story building that could have been an old theater. Wooden rails on posts ran out under an awning from its double doors, as if to keep a great many men in line. No prisoners could be seen, only guards. I peered in through the doors. A staircase led up. Guards were coming down it, and among them was a slender man in a green-and-white sweater and a distinguished widow's peak.

I threw aside my guards. He fought through his. He and I embraced on the steps. He was bony through the sweater, but warm and strong. And excited. "It all comes back," he said. "I remember you had a goatee."

"I thought you would be gray."

"Thank you, thank you from my family for this. Remember me to the brothers, the Olympic brothers."

"You are remembered," I said. I told him I was carrying the best wishes of the IOC, the IAAF and at least a dozen friends from the Olympic movement, as well as a standing invitation to be grand marshal of the Honolulu Marathon, back in the islands where I now live. As the list went on, he lifted his eyes and arms. "These are words from God," he said.

I hugged him again. He didn't seem bruised. He had on flip-flops and blue socks. I said, "We just have to get you out of here."

"This is a good government now," he said, an eye going to the listening guards. "It will release me soon, I'm sure. It will see that the charge was false. It will realize it was a bad man trying to save himself."

"Is there anything that you need?"

"I never got my house from the emperor. I had to live all these years in the mud house you saw. All I need in the world is to get out, remake it in stone and live with my children in safety."

We had maybe eight minutes together. A guard must have given Mamo a sign, but I didn't catch it. He took my forearms in his hands. "It restores my soul," he said. "It is something I can feel in my body, that people outside the country remember." Then they led him back upstairs.

Later I would call prosecutor Abraham once more. He now felt Mamo might be charged "before the end of the year." Every time I asked, it seemed, the date receded further.

Granting that Mamo had to stand trial, I said, could he not be bailed out in the interim? The prosecutor replied that Mamo's was not a "bailable offense."

"It's been three years," I said. "Doesn't the Ethiopian constitution guarantee a speedy trial?"

"It does," he said. "But it doesn't say how speedy. Remember, we are investigating a government that conducted systematic, state-supported human-rights abuses for 17 years. So guarantees of rights may not apply in these extraordinary circumstances. But I assure you, the delay is not intentional. It's simply budgetary. We have so few resources."

I was inclined to believe him. But I was also emboldened, by my sharpened sense of the man Mamo Wolde is, to include in this account the prosecutor's telephone number and address (011-251-1-120-828, or P.O. Box 6842, Addis Ababa), so that the world's Olympians and human-rights activists might respectfully remind Ethiopia that justice delayed is justice denied.

There was a feast that night at Mamo's house. Aberash, who had been astounded at our success, prepared traditional injera, a wheel of spongy, sour, fermented bread made from a grain called teff. This we used to sop up several kinds of wat (stew). The talla flowed, and at the end Aberash performed an elaborate coffee ritual, roasting the beans on the charcoal brazier, grinding them in a mortar and then putting them in a pot on the same coals.

While she waited for the coffee to strengthen, she warmed frankincense in a little clay pot. The children crept quietly into the fragrant room. The rain rang on the roof. Even Kratochvil seemed to be at peace, although he had revealed that he had taken my little disposable camera in his pocket into the prison, and that it had practically killed him not to be able to photograph my reunion with Mamo.

It seemed absurd then that I had thought that coming here had been some sort of moral risk. We were Olympians, Mamo and I. In the rage of competition we had obeyed the rules. We had each denied the voice of our inner killer and settled things the honorable way. I had always known that much about him, and it was always ample reason to press his captors for fairness.

The traditional Ethiopian coffee service has three rounds. We drank two and left the third, to symbolically ensure our return.

I closed my eyes, savoring, and in that moment I saw Mamo again, in his threadbare sweater, going up those prison stairs. But this time I was the one to turn around and give the long look back. This time, I was the one to cry out that this is wrong, to tell him that this isn't the way things should be happening.

B/W PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONIN KRATOCHVIL [Aberash Wolde-Semhate holding photo of Mamo Wolde]

COLOR PHOTO: JERRY COOKE Memories of their 1972 duel compelled the author to visit Mamo's house. [Kenny Moore running against Mamo Wolde]

B/W PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONIN KRATOCHVIL [See caption above--Kenny Moore talking with person in doorway of Mamo Wolde's house]

COLOR PHOTO: BETTMANN NEWSPHOTOS Mamo's golden moment came in Mexico City. [Mamo Wolde on medal stand]

B/W PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONIN KRATOCHVIL At the prison, as at home, Aberash (center) waits for Mamo. [Aberash Wolde-Semhate and others]

B/W PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONIN KRATOCHVIL For almost all Ethiopians, life is a marathon through poverty and squalor. [Ethiopian street scene]

B/W PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONIN KRATOCHVIL This shrine is the sole reminder that this is the home of a champion. [Awards and trophies arranged around framed photo of Mamo Wolde]

B/W PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONIN KRATOCHVIL The view from the author's ancient Beetle is of Mamo's neighborhood. [View of Mamo Wolde's neighborhood from Kenny Moore's car]

B/W PHOTO: PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONIN KRATOCHVIL Despite his medals, Mamo is separated from Addiss Alem. [Addiss Alem Mamo and hand holding medals]