BY CHERYLL Y. GREENE

WORD FROM A SISTER IN EXILE

When revolutionary political activist Assata Shakur (previously JoAnne Chesimard) made a daring escape from prison in 1979, she—like our fugitive slave ancestors—became legendary in the Black community. Here she speaks about her life in Cuba today

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Assata Shakur has been relentlessly called out of her name by government and law-enforcement agencies and the media. Branded "bank robber," "kidnapper," "murderer" and "soul of the Black Liberation Army"—an amorphous group the authorities claimed murdered police officers and pulled off bank robberies during the 1970's—Shakur, now 40, calls herself a revolutionary fighter in the ongoing struggle of Black people for political, social and economic justice. The chasm between those two perspectives reverberates with the historical antagonism between African America and America's ruling powers. As with Harriet Tubman and our myriad other fugitive slave ancestors, Assata Shakur is seen as someone to be protected or to be hunted, depending upon on which side of the Black community you're standing. To tell her side of it, Shakur has written the just published *Assata: An Autobiography* (Lawrence Hill & Co.). (See excerpt on next page.)

Shakur's story reveals a rather typical girlhood and young womanhood in Black communities of North Carolina and New York City, where she was a sensitive, intense person trying to come to grips with being Black and female in a racist and sexist society. The turbulent political and social atmosphere of the sixties heightened her consciousness and propelled JoAnne Deborah Byron through a brief marriage—Chesimard was her married name—and on to become Assata Olugbala Shakur, which means "she who struggles," "love for the people" and "the thankful."

By becoming intensely active first in student groups and eventually in the Black Panther Party and the Black Liberation Army, Shakur (CONTINUED ON PAGE 62)

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joined the thousands of Black nationalists (and some others) the FBI was targeting for intimidation, defamation and destruction through its covert counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO), instituted in 1967 and carried out with the collusion of local, state and federal law enforcement. (Martin Luther King, Jr., was one of its first targets.)

Between 1971 and 1973, Shakur—by then a fugitive—was charged with serious crimes (armed robbery, kidnapping, attempted murder), vilified by the media and slapped on the FBI's most wanted list; a dead-or-alive order was issued for her apprehension. When she and two others were stopped on a pretense by New Jersey state troopers in May 1973, a shootout followed. A trooper was killed and another slightly wounded. Shakur was seriously wounded, and years later it looked to some as if COINTELPRO had done its dirty work. Shakur was incarcerated under shockingly inhuman conditions from 1973 to 1979, and she continued to fear for her life.

The charges that led to Shakur's fugitive existence before the shootout were dropped for lack of evidence, were dismissed or resulted in acquittal, but she was convicted of the trooper murder—on flimsy evidence, it is contended—and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1977. Two events made her name legendary in the Black community during those years: She dared to get pregnant in 1974 during a New York bank-robbery trial (with Kamau, her co-defendant), and she dared to escape from a New Jersey state prison in 1979, vanishing virtually without a trace. Until the fall of last year, when a New York newspaper broke the story of her whereabouts, her fate was generally unknown. "While Assata's story may be unique in its energy, creativity and passion for life and principle," writes her attorney in introducing her autobiography, "it is typical of the ways the United States has responded historically to individuals whom the government sees as political threats to domestic tranquility."

Today Assata Shakur, granted political asylum by the Cuban government, is alive and well and living in Havana with her daughter, Kakuya, who is now 13. She has been writing her book and is currently studying political and social science. ESSENCE interviewed her in the summer of 1987. Here she speaks to us of her life in exile since 1984, of her new role as full-time mother to Kakuya since 1985 and of her hopes for herself and her people. —*Ed.*

ESSENCE: *Why did you come to Cuba in particular?*

SHAKUR: Well, I had to leave the United States, as you know, and I was looking for a place where I could live, where I could grow, and a place where I could be reunited with my daughter. I had read an awful lot about the Cuban revolution, about Fidel [Castro], about the whole process. All my life I had been exposed to an onslaught of anticommunist propaganda, and I wanted to see for myself what a socialist society was like. And, happily, I was able to do that.

I was shocked at the progress I was able to see; in 25 years the Cubans have really accomplished a lot. It makes you ask a lot of questions—for example, how a person in a small underdeveloped country like Cuba can go to the hospital and not have to pay one cent, can go get braces and not have to pay a cent.

ESSENCE: *How easy or difficult did you find the adjustment to this different culture and society?*

SHAKUR: Politically it was real easy. Politically it was just wonderful to find myself in a place where I agreed with the government. We have the same kind of priorities in terms of struggling against apartheid, against imperialism. I feel in the life here a r[illegible] commitment to bettering the lives of [illegible]ople in Cuba and also throughout the world. And the fact that I saw Cubans who were willing to go to Angola to risk their lives to fight against the racism of the South African regime made me love Cuba and made me love Cubans—if for no other reason. But there were so many things that touched me—so in that sense it was a really easy kind of adjustment for me.

Personally, it was a little more difficult. I had to learn Spanish, which was a struggle. I had to adjust to living in an underdeveloped country. And that means that you have to get another consciousness. You have to raise your consciousness about simple things: You live in the States, you take water for granted; then you go to a Third World country, and you realize that people in many places don't have water. It makes you so much more conscious of what's going on in the world. But also I had to really deal with being an exile, really facing the fact that I am an exile. I can't go home and talk to my mother. I can't visit my friends. I can't go to the fish place—those kinds of things. But the things that I found I missed most were African-American people and culture.

ESSENCE: *How have* [CONTINUED ON PAGE 120]

From Assata: An Autobiography

My mother brings my daughter to see me at the clinton correctional facility for women in new jersey, where i have been sent from alderson. I am delirious. She looks so tall. I run up to kiss her. She barely responds. She is distant and standoffish. Pangs of guilt and sorrow fill my chest. I can see that my child is suffering. It is stupid to ask what is wrong. She is four years old, and except for these pitiful little visits—although my mother has brought her to see me every week, wherever i am, with the exception of the time i was in alderson—she has never been with her mother. I can feel something welling up in my baby. I look at my mother, my face a question mark. My mother is suffering too. I try to play. I make my arms into an elephant's trunk stalking around the visiting room jungle. It does not work. My daughter refuses to play baby elephant, or tiger, or anything. She looks at me like i am the buffoon i must look like. I try the choo-choo train routine and the la, la, la song, but she is not amused. I try talking to her, but she is puffed up and sullen.

I go over and try to hug her. In a hot second she is all over me. All i can feel are these little four-year-old fists banging away at me. Every bit of her force is in those punches, they really hurt. I let her hit me until she is tired. "It's all right," i tell her. "Let it all out." She is standing in front of me, her face contorted with anger, looking spent. She backs away and leans against the wall. "It's okay," i tell her. "Mommy understands." "You're not my mother," she screams, the tears rolling down her face. "You're not my mother and i hate you." I feel like crying too. I know she is confused about who i am. She calls me Mommy Assata and she calls my mother Mommy.

I try to pick her up. She knocks my hand away. "You can get out of here, if you want to," she screams. "You just don't want to." "No, i can't," i say, weakly. "Yes, you can," she accuses. "You just don't want to."

I look helplessly at my mother. Her face is choked with pain. "Tell her to try to open the bars," she says in a whisper.

"I can't open the door," i tell my daughter. "I can't get through the bars. You try and open the bars."

My daughter goes over to the barred door that leads to the visiting room. She pulls and she pushes. She yanks and she hits and she kicks the bars until she falls on the floor, a heap of exhaustion. I go over and pick her up. I hold and rock and kiss her. There is a look of resignation on her face that i can't stand. We spend the rest of the visit talking and playing quietly on the floor. When the guard says the visit is over, i cling to her for dear life. She holds her head high, and her back straight as she walks out of the prison. She waves goodbye to me, her face clouded and worried, looking like a little adult. I go back to my cage and cry until i vomit. I decide that it is time to leave.

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ASSATA SHAKUR

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you changed or grown since you've been here?

SHAKUR: Well, in one area, I've been able to relax. Because when you live in the States and you are involved in struggle, involved in the types of things I was involved in, you're under so much pressure—you're being constantly persecuted, constantly followed, your telephone has funny sounds in it. It's a life with a lot of tension. In Cuba you find people don't have that tension. They aren't worried in the same way that we are worried. Living here has given me the opportunity to cool down a little and know myself in another way, to see the world in another way. Because in the States my whole focus was on the struggle of Black people inside the country. Here I've been able to have much more of an international perspective—really *feel* the struggle in El Salvador, for instance, because you see people from El Salvador, and you see African children studying here, learning here. You see a picture here—that life is difficult all over the world, but that people are coming together everywhere to try, on their level, on their piece of the earth, to make this a better place. And this is a place where I've learned a much higher degree of hope. I feel a kind of hope that is invincible.

My being here has allowed me to reunite with my daughter. And that has changed my life completely. For me it has been a great experience just watching her grow and blossom, and I think for her this has meant everything. I think she came here saying to herself, "Why do I have this weird mother? Why can't my mother be like everybody else's mother? I know that Black people need to struggle, but why does it have to be her? Why can't she do something else?" My being in prison was really horrible for her—this little child having no relationship with her mother except in those cold, ugly concrete visiting rooms.

It has been really good for us here. I've discovered so many new ways of loving, just in my relationship with her. It was so difficult at the beginning: Here she is with a strange mother in a strange country, and here I am, just wanting to give everything I have to this little girl who has been deprived of so much. I think we've got it pretty well together. We both learned to smile in another way.

ESSENCE: *It seems you have gone through your daughter's academic process with her. And this has been done in Spanish, in two years?*

SHAKUR: Yes. When she came here, she didn't speak one word of Spanish. And she studied for about four months in the language school. And then we studied together. Now it's embarrassing—she speaks Spanish fifty times better than I do. She's always correcting me. And yes, the first year she was here we did all of the sixth grade work together.

She's very clear on what her job is: "You're the mother, I'm the kid. You work, I study—and that's *my* job." It has gotten kind of political now. She has got this sense of "this is my duty." She says, "I don't know what I want to be, but whatever it is, I want it to help, I want it to contribute." She has had a chance to really see and be exposed to the struggles of other people here, to see that life can be better and that people can take action to change their life. The process of assimilating that idea was not an instant thing for her.

She went to a good school in the States, and she was always a good student. But she told me, "I didn't know all these countries existed. We never had geography." In Cuba you have to study geography, not only physical but political and economic geography. She studied feudalism—in the sixth grade—feudalism in China, Asia, Africa. I was shocked. My whole concept of feudalism was the lords of Europe, and

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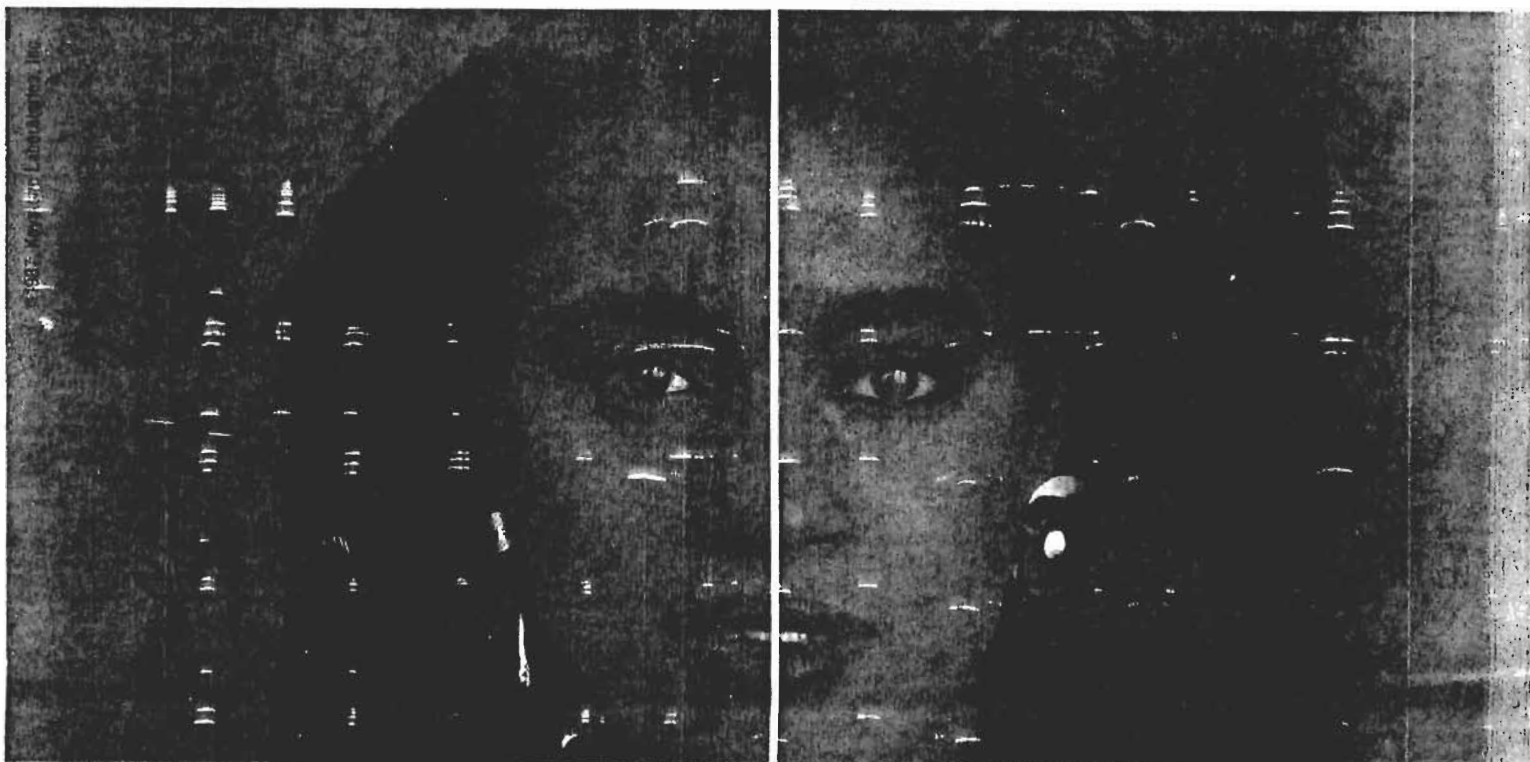

ASSATA SHAKUR

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that was all I was ever taught. I see her learning things in a context that's not Eurocentric—which makes me feel great—a kind of integrated education, not just things in little slots. Last year she had botany, this year she has zoology and physics—in the seventh grade. I'm impressed with how her mind is developing.

ESSENCE: *Has your stay in Cuba had any influence on your racial outlook?*

SHAKUR: This has been a learning experience, because I came here, like most Black people from the States, very suspicious, looking at everything, asking questions. And it took me some real time before I could realize that the history of Cuba is very different from the history of the United States. And seeing people work together here—Black, white—I've learned a lot. It certainly opened up my mind. I was forced to reevaluate some positions I'd taken earlier. And I'm still analyzing the society. I think racism in its institutional form has really been all but squashed in Cuba. My experience here has given me a chance to see some of the possibilities of Black and white people working together that were very difficult for me to see before.

ESSENCE: *Do you feel a part of Cuban society?*

SHAKUR: Basically, yes. Up to now I haven't joined the CDR [Committee to Defend the Revolution], which is like the block association. And I haven't joined the women's federation. Most Cuban women and men are members of a CDR, and most women are members of the Cuban Federation of Women. I've been writing the book, and I've been dealing with my daughter, and I don't want to take on a commitment that I'm not able to see through. But I'm anxious to become more and more involved in what's happening in Cuba. Even though I feel part of it, I know that there's much more here that I want to learn and experience.

ESSENCE: *Tell us about your book. Why did you decide to write it?*

SHAKUR: I really had no great desire to write this book—it was hard and very painful. But I felt that it was something I should do, because there are so many people who just don't know. There's a new generation coming up who don't know anything about the sixties, the Black Panther Party or SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] or the struggle against the war in Vietnam. They live in another time, and they don't learn about these things in history classes or read about them or see them on television.

I feel like one of the survivors of a time. The sixties was a time of action, and then after I got out of prison and had a little time to think, it dawned on me how many people are not here anymore. How many friends, how many people who struggled, are just not on this planet anymore, or they're in prison, or some of them just haven't made it—they've been driven mad by the pressure of it all. I felt really, really lucky to be one of the survivors and to still have that same faith in us, in struggle. And so I felt that I should try to share that with people.

When I read old newspaper clippings about myself, I seem like someone who dropped from some strange place—a monster woman. But I feel that my experience is not that different from that of anybody else who has grown up Black in America. For me the difference, the kind of curves my life has taken, has been a result of the struggle and of the extreme opposition that Black people had to suffer as a result of COINTELPRO. A lot of people don't know what that program was all about, that the FBI and other government agencies actually set out to squash the Black-liberation movement by any means necessary, whether it meant killing people outright like [Black Panther member] Fred Hampton, imprisoning people—and a lot of those people are still in prison—Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Native Americans. The prisons are used as a tool of oppression, and the COINTEL program was just one part of it. People are not aware of the level of government oppression that occurred during the sixties and is occurring again now. Reforms such as the Freedom of Information Act that came into effect or were strengthened in the seventies as a result of Watergate and Nixon, all those are disappearing now. What you have under the Reagan administration is pure legalized terror against the Black community.

ESSENCE: *Are there particular issues you've been thinking through and studying in relation to the activist movement and general conditions in the United States?*

SHAKUR: I've done a lot of reading on self-determination and what it means for Black people. Also, I think one of our real problems is that we're just so disorganized. One of the most important things related to struggle is being organized. I've been studying how people do it in other places. I've been thinking a lot about education, political education, and where we are politically in the States. We have got to develop an accelerated program of becoming more politically aware. Today there's a whole body of revolutionary political science available to read and understand, there are struggles going on all over the world, and we've got to become more acquainted with this political science and become able to use it, to apply it to our situation. I think we've got to do a lot of work in that area.

ESSENCE: *Do you think you might ever return to the United States?*

SHAKUR: Well, obviously, under present conditions it would be somewhat difficult. But if I take the position that I'm never going to return, that's defeatist. I think the situation is going to change. And as time goes on, one of the things that will be important is pushing for amnesty for political prisoners. That will have to happen before I can go back. ◆

Cheryll Y. Greene is executive editor of ESSENCE. This interview was conducted with James Early of the National Alliance of Third World Journalists, Washington, D.C., chapter.

● WOMAN OF AZANIA

[Dedicated to Winnie Mandela and all other women whose men languish in South African bloody death traps]

woman of Azania
sweet enduring fountain
from whom hope flows like cool water
to quench an extinction plan

woman of Azania
sweet beautiful branch, turned plant
strong plant of faith
on whom starving children
must cling like sick fruits
yawning with hope
as they mourn the absence of a father
trapped in the bleeding jails of South Africa

woman of Azania
sweet mother of Africa
for you I sing this song
as we wait
with a heart so heavy with love
and pain
for the return of father and love
trapped for years in the gold mines of South Africa
and shackled by the bleeding chains of apartheid.

woman of Azania
for you I sing this song
as we wait for the birth of dawn
when your deprived children will crawl
on a father's warm chest and grow
to wipe the cakes of blood in your heart
banishing the heartless ghost of apartheid
into a depthless grave.

—CHIJI KRIS MADUKA

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