AFRO reporter savors Summit experience

This was a typical scene that greeted the Gorbachev's large crowds of on lookers wherever they went.

By Hamil Harris
AFRO Staff Writer

WASHINGTON

You'll never guess what happened to me during the summit: I could have reached out and hugged Michail Gorbachev.

It was incredible; I was just that close. You probably think that I'm exaggerating, but I'm not. Just ask my wife. Well, maybe not — she wasn't there either.

But my visit to the historic meeting nearly didn't come to pass.

Although I had Summit credentials,that pass only granted me entry to the press room to gather a bunch of papers on Nuclear weapons, Lithuania, German reunification and everything else the two leaders talked about. Only the BIG news organizations had special credentials for the good seats.

But, on Friday afternoon, things began to change. The White House press office told me that the AFRO was going to be in one of the smaller pool of reporters, who would go to the Soviet Embassy to cover a series of special presentations given to Mr. Gorbachev by Coretta Scott King and other prominent Americans.

It was wild to ride down the street with a police escort, with the red lights of a police motorcycle flashing in front of the vehicle I was in instead of behind me.

On every turn between the international press center at George Washington University to the Soviet Embassy on 16th Street, people paused and looked at our bus. I didn't know whether to wave or take a picture.

Although the Soviet Embassy reminded me of an oversized row house, I was not prepared for what I was about to see once I walked into the building on 16th Street. After a delay the legion of security men gave us the cue. It was almost like stepping into the USSR. There were Soviets everywhere; some were in military uniform, others were in suits with glossy red buttons. You couldn't round a corner without coming shoulder to shoulder with somebody.

The entire place looked like it needed some serious remodeling, but finally after walking through another metal detector, we were lead upstairs to an old, yet ornate. room — and that's when it

Having taken courses in the Russian language, I began to practice a few lines with a security official.He smiled back while constantly reminding me to stand behind the red velvet barrier.

I thought I was doing right when all of a sudden I was told to get back against the wall. My tape was gently kicked away and all of a sudden Mr. Gorbachev came out of a side door right in front of where I was standing.

I could have reached out and grabbed him; he was just that close. He quickly retired to a holding room and then the ceremony began.

While I was savoring the moment, the endless procession of presentations began. At this instance, it appeared that what all these groups wanted was a photo opportunity. And why not? It isn't everyday that the Soviet president comes to town.

By that time, however, Mrs. King's award was somewhat upstaged by an international group which said they were giving the Martin Luther King Jr. award to Mr. Gorbachev.

After the presentation, people got up to leave but at the last moment aides to Mrs. King shouted above the roar of the crowd that the widow of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. — and the only "official" representative — would like to make a presentation.

Before I left the Embassy I saw Mr. Gorbachev's interpreter, who probably had the hardest job in the Summit. He took the time to give a warm hello, despite a busy schedule that found him translating discussions between the super power leaders.

I left the Soviet Embassy that day thinking about what I would tell my wife. I also wondered if she would believe me.

My temporary occupation with daydreaming was interrupted when I noticed that the Gorbachev motorcade was about to leave, so I took a gamble scramble to get to 15th Street because it looked as if the motorcade was coming that way.

Then as if it were a replay of his previous visit to the nation's capital ,the motorcade came to a halt as Mr. Gorbachev got out of his limo right before my eyes!

I couldn't believe it! There was the security official I had just met trying to protect his president— along with the other Soviets— and they all looked terrified.

He saw me and I quickly yelled "moy drueg!", which means "my friend" in Russian. Then,I quickly put-FF-20my body between the Soviets and the crowd as they rushed to the limo.

It felt like a goal line stance.

Looking back ,it was simply too much for one day:Gorby — three times, and up close, at that. I hadn't seen my own president that much. Still, the memories will never be forgotten.

"How about that?', I thought to myself while walking to the bus stop. In a small way, I saw a part of Glasnost on the streets of D.C.

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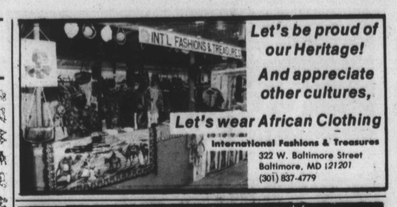

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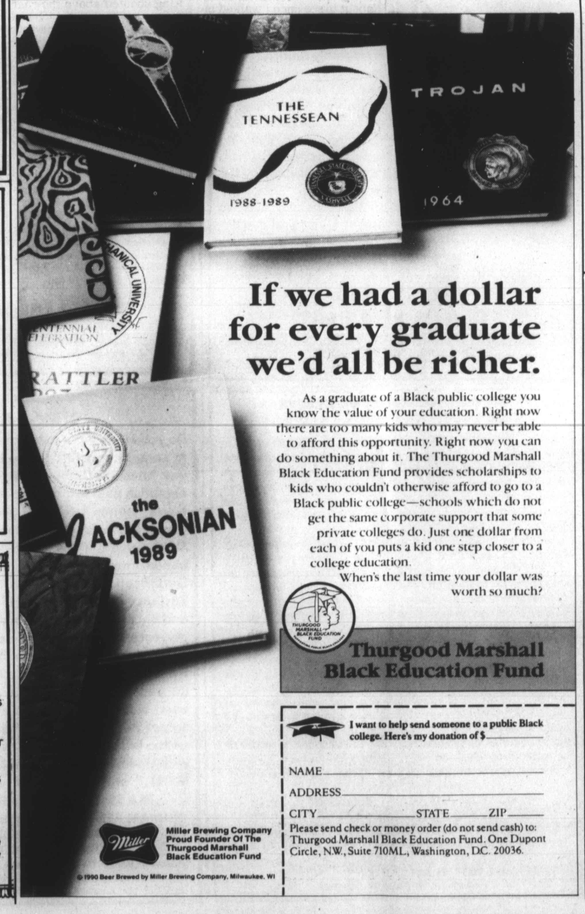

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