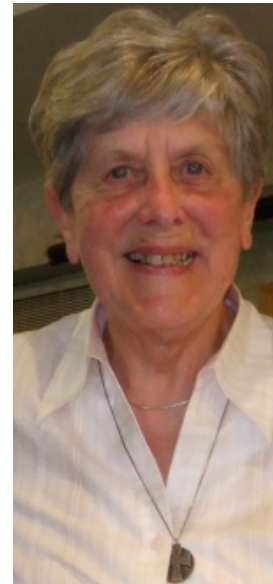


This memoir was written some years ago by Brigid at the request of her family. In recent months Brigid and Helen had a number of conversations. The following account is an amalgam of the two, the earlier text and the conversations. It was originally intended for family and lacks some detail that might be of more interest to DMJ readers. Please excuse omissions!



Memories.

Brigid Stokes.

Joining the congregation.

On 2nd February 1956 I left home to join the congregation of the Daughters of Mary and Joseph (then known as The Ladies of Mary) at Castlecor, Ballymahon, Co Longford. I can remember the day so well! I was dressed in the Postulant's outfit – black dress, shoes and stockings, coat and beret. It was agonising leaving home and saying goodbye to my family. I had been putting off this moment for some years but knew I would eventually have to make the decision. The moment had now come. At 1pm the hired car arrived. And after heart-rending goodbyes, I left home accompanied by my two sisters and a friend. Once the break was made I settled down and adapted well to my new way of life. There were monthly visits from family and I looked forward to these so much. On one occasion Daddy took away with him from the grounds a copper beech sapling. It is now a mature tree in Peter's garden.

After 6 months I became a novice. A year later I went with others to Brussels to complete my apprenticeship. We went via England. I made my first profession of vows in Brussels on 28th August 1958. I hadn't particularly looked forward to a year in Brussels- a foreign country then – but in retrospect it was a very valuable experience as in years to come I would be returning there for meetings.



After profession I returned to Ireland – first taking a ferry from Antwerp to Dover, spending a few days in London and then taking the boat to Dun Laoghaire where I was met by family members. At that time we were only allowed four days at home but some were from long distances away and had extra days for travelling. I who lived nearby was given two extra days with family. Then back to Castlecor to prepare to go to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda to do a midwifery course. This was essential for missionary work in Uganda. It was a one year course ending in October 1959. With midwifery in my pocket I was equipped for the missions and once back in Castlecor preparations for departure to Uganda began. In exploring the possibility of an African mission, Tanzania had been mentioned but that fell through and Uganda

emerged as our destination. Our connection was Fr Stan Lee, an English White Father with Irish origins. He was Education Secretary for the Diocese of Mbarara and worked closely with Bishop Ogez.

Preparation for Africa.

Our habit was a black dress, blue belt and scapular. This was dispensed with in '67 when we changed to secular dress. For life in Uganda the climate had to be taken into consideration and so work began on white dresses etc.

The mission to Uganda was a new venture for the DMJs and I was to be in the first group going there. A black tin trunk was acquired and packed with personal belongings and bits and pieces that would be of use in our new situation. The trunk was packed



for shipping and a case was made ready for the flight. Two English sisters – Kathleen Rathe and Margaret Mary Ascott, one Swiss sister- Silvia Probst and one West Indian Sister, Philomena Anderson were my fellow pioneers on this new mission. It was both exciting and daunting. At the time there were no orientation courses available so it was going into the unknown.

On our way.

We were due to leave after Christmas but the date was put forward which meant that I missed my sister's wedding which was planned for the 26th December so that I could be there. What a pity! I left Ireland on the first stage of the journey to England in the last week of November. England was as foreign to me as Uganda. I knew only a few sisters there and had never met those I would be travelling and living with in the years to come. It was a lonely time. After 5 days in England the second stage of the journey began. On November 30th we set off from Victoria Station by train to Dover, then by boat to Calais, continuing by train overnight to Basel (Switzerland) where we went to visit the family of Sr. Silvia. After a short rest we were on the move again. The family wanted to offer us a trip and the choice was between a visit to the Black Forest or the Rhine. I opted for the Black Forest and that is what happened. It was really beautiful- a Christmas scene, it being December- it was like a fairy land. We returned to Basel. Then we had a few further days of sightseeing; a visit to

Brig in the south of Switzerland where we met Fr Carolan, a DMJ friend. We went by cable car up the Rheider Alp in sight of the Matterhorn. We had tea out of doors with the snow glistening in the brilliant sunshine. It was a magnificent sight. There were several visits to different places and on one occasion as we were travelling, the Swiss priest who was driving us sang The Last Rose of Summer. .. for the homesick little Irish nun!! So it must have been obvious how I was feeling. With all the travelling I was both physically and emotionally exhausted but on we went.

Our next stop was Milan and we spent a day there seeing the Cathedral and other sights. Then on we went to Rome. We arrived at the wrong station in Rome. A White Father waited at a different station to meet us. There were no mobile phones in those days but eventually we linked up. We stayed in a Hotel that accommodated missionaries who were en route to Africa. Ours was a Raptim flight and there were about 200 missionaries booked on these flights and awaiting departure. We had four or five days in Rome where we visited the Holy places including Subiaco. We had Mass in the Catacombs. An audience with the Pope had been planned for all the missionaries who were travelling. There were two scheduled flights but it happened that we were on the first flight and so missed the audience with the Pope.

Arrival in Uganda

We left Rome on December 8th at 6pm and stopped for refuelling at Cairo. Mass was celebrated on the plane- unthinkable now, but given that it was a plane full of missionaries, it was normal at the time. We arrived in Entebbe, Uganda at 8.30am on 9th December 1959. Uganda was a British Protectorate then and Entebbe was the seat of Government (translated to English as Entebbe, meaning a 'seat' or 'chair'.) It is situated on the shores of Lake Victoria so you can imagine the panoramic view we had as we flew low over the lake as we came to land. We had a tough time going through customs- the Ugandan customs officers were not very welcoming. The country at that time was leading up to independence; the British were not in favour and since we had come from England we were all considered British. On arrival there was a delegation to meet us. Bishop Ogez from Mbarara Diocese was there and Fr Stan Lee who was in charge of education in the Western Region. There were personnel from the Catholic Education Offices of the Secretariat. The first bombshell that greeted us was the news that the Canadian Good Counsel Sisters who had been running St Helen's Primary School were withdrawing and moving to Mushanga. It would fall to our lot to take over the management of that school as well as bringing a new Secondary School for girls to birth in Mbarara. We heard that news with dismay as we were such a small number- four teachers + one nurse and Silvia among our number who had both trainings. I was quite at sea during those early discussions as education was the main topic on the agenda. However, I soon got accustomed to it and later found myself involved.

The drive into Kampala was memorable. It was a colourful scene. I marvelled at the vibrant colours of the bougainvillea, the acacia trees with their profusion of yellow 'candles'. It

looked such a fertile country and indeed it is. I noticed the little markets at the side of the road, the banana trees and the thatched huts. Nearer to Kampala the shanty towns/villages came into view with the evidence of poverty. Yet on reaching Kampala itself the city centre was full of modern buildings. It was a scene of contrasts and colour. Many children ran around happily bare-footed.

Our next stop was at Nsambya where the Franciscan sisters had a convent and ran a large hospital. We stayed there for two nights during which time there were umpteen meetings to attend and much shopping to be done. Srs. Silvia and Kathleen Rathe paid a visit to the Ministry of Education.

First sight of Nyamitanga, Mbarara

A vehicle is a must in mission countries as one has to travel long distances so we invested in a station wagon which was later stolen when I had it in Kampala. Business completed, our trek to Mbarara began- 175 miles on a mainly dirt/murram road. It took five hours. By then I was bone weary and happy to arrive at our little house on Nyamitanga Hill. All mission centres seemed to be established on hills. This house- later called Bethany- had been occupied by those who taught the catechumens. It had four cubicles and one bedroom. There was a dining room, a kitchen and a chapel. We purchased it from the Diocese and I have no idea what we paid for it. Initially we were supplied with cutlery etc to start us off. Later we were billed for these supplies. This was our home while the convent was being built. We discovered when we arrived that we had walked into a hornet's nest. There was a conflict in full swing. A banana plantation had been cut down to provide a site for the new school and convent. It seemed that it was done on the Bishop's orders but without consultation with the Parish Priest who considered it his territory. Thus bad vibes all round!

Nyamitanga is the Diocesan headquarters and it was here that we put down our roots. While the main reason for our mission was to start a secondary school for girls (there had been none as yet for girls in the Western region of the country) it had been agreed beforehand that two of us who were nurses would work in the local Government hospital. However, this never materialised. (We suspected that there might have been fears that we would try for death-bed conversions!) So when the academic year began in January- and we had by then been landed with the Primary School- I was asked to take on the teaching of English at the lower level of the school- from senior infants to 4th class. This was a new initiative as prior to this the teaching of English began at P5 (fifth class) and now it was to begin with infants. Having no experience or training in teaching, I simply taught as I had been taught myself. However, I did recognise that the English Education system which was used in Uganda was quite different from the Irish one to which I was accustomed.

An unexpected request.

At the end of March three months into the school year a most unusual request was made to the Bishop's office. The Governor's wife, Lady Crawford, was terminally ill at State House, Entebbe. Lady Crawford was South African with some North of Ireland ancestry. The powers that be were aware that there were two nurses among this recently arrived little group and so the Minister for Health had phoned the Bishop to ask if we two nurses would

go to State House to nurse her. She was expected to live for about three weeks. The minister was aware that we had not been accepted at Mbarara Hospital. He had himself worked as a medic with sisters in the East and it seemed he appreciated the work done by missionaries. This request was quite contrary to what we had come to do- work with the poor. The Bishop, a friend of the Governor, Sir Frederick Crawford, said of course we would go! Within days a State car arrived with a uniformed driver to take us to our new assignment. What can I say about it? It was a totally different world. A sweeping driveway to State House- leading to a magnificent house that overlooked Lake Victoria. Fantastic lawns and gardens. The entrance hall was expansive with two elephant tusks arching the main stairs. We were assigned our own quarters- bedrooms, sitting and dining rooms with a SERVANT- dressed in white uniform and wearing a red fez to take care of our needs – serve us at table etc etc. It was the colonial life-style. There was always a car with a chauffeur available to ferry us wherever we wanted to go. It was all so strange but it is extraordinary how one can adapt to situations. We operated a nursing rota with one of us on day duty and the other on night duty. When Lady Crawford had a good day we accompanied her on trips and to the occasional sundowner. Our stay which had been foreseen as three weeks turned into five months. Five months later our ministry came to an end when Lady Crawford died. On her death another dilemma arose. Would we attend her funeral or not? She was Protestant and at that time Catholics did not attend Protestant funerals or ceremonies. Following the guidance of Bishop Ojez, we attended the funeral much to the surprise of other missionary groups. In fact, it was such an unexpected occurrence that it made headlines in the national newspapers next day. 'Catholic Nuns attend Lady Crawford's funeral.' Looking back on our State House experience- strange as it was- I can see good in it. For one thing, I had always been a very shy person and this took me out of myself.

Back to base.

September saw us back in Nyamitanga. Every mission set-up has a dispensary to help the medical needs of the Parishioners. So it was decided that I would be the one to get it going at Nyamitanga. In preparation I went to Virika Hospital in Fort Portal to get experience. After six weeks there I was ready to start. The dispensary opened in December 1960 and is still operating. I ran it for about five years. While having this as my primary work, I was also Matron of a Junior Secondary School for girls that we had inherited. This involved buying food for the boarders, supervising the cooking and the general upkeep of the school. For about two months I was roped in to teaching anatomy in the Senior Secondary School which we had begun. The convent kitchen was also assigned to me. It all made up a very full life and ministry.

Our numbers increase.

Around this time a lot of change was stirring among us. In September 1960 Cathleen McCarthy had arrived and later became the first Headmistress of Maryhill. In December the dispensary opened. We were asked to take over Kinyamasika Teacher Training College in Fort Portal from the White Sisters. Srs. Mary Dominic and Bridie Doherty arrived in Uganda – also destined for Fort Portal. In 1961 we took over Kinyamasika. Mary Dominic and Bridie arrived in FP while I was still on my work experience in Virika Hospital. In January

Philomena Anderson and Silvia joined them. Thus began our years of service in Kinyamasika TTC.

In 1961 we began planning the Secondary School for girls- our *raison d'être* for being invited to Mbarara diocese. Over those years our numbers increased further. Hazel Ingold and Francesca both came to Uganda and worked in the headship of St Helen's Primary School. The building of the convent was in progress. We moved in to the new convent in October 1961. The building of the school was also moving ahead at that time and Maryhill High School opened in 1962. Doreen Drake came as a teacher in 1962/3. She had been known to our sisters in England having taught in Guildford. Prior to coming to Uganda she had spent some time working in Rwanda. Peg came in '63. I met her at the airport. Margaret Mary taught in Maryhill. Teresa Clements worked in the Junior School and later at Kinyamasika. Jennifer came initially as a lay teacher and lived in Bethany with Doreen Drake and Dolly Cotter. At a later stage Doreen lived alone in Bethany for many years with her four dogs- Tintin, Tom, Sanyu and Small Dog. Many other DMJs- some now former DMJ- came to Uganda and worked for periods of time. Mary Moran worked in Maryhill for many years, Liz McCarthy, Eileen Maher, Mini Day, Margaret King... etc. etc. ... Matthias, Katie O'Farrell was a legend in her own right. Diane lived and worked in both Mbarara and Ibanda for many years. I simply offer some small memories and in no way a comprehensive history of our presence in Uganda.

A major turning point in our lives was when the first Ugandan sister joined our ranks. Josephine Beebwa was the first entrant and went to England for her formation. Later she undertook many different leadership roles- the first of which was Headmistress of Maryhill. During those hard years of insecurity she struggled to safeguard the students and maintain standards.

Medical

While running the Nyamitanga Dispensary we had out-posts where we went for day clinics. A nurse called Aurelia (from Texas) formed part of the team. Sr.s Mary Fintan and Josephine O'Neill also worked in the dispensary. There was no mission hospital in the area and the hope was that one would come into being. Ibanda was one of the places where we had an outreach from the Nyamitanga dispensary. At that time the road to Ibanda was very bad- 50 miles of a murrum, pot-holed road. In '64/'65 I moved to Ibanda on a permanent basis with Josephine O'Neill and Mary Fintan. Initially we stayed in a room attached to the Parish; later we lived in a little house in a banana plantation. We had one room with three beds, a tiny kitchen and a dining cum sitting room. We were there for a couple of years.

Meanwhile Silvia was a key player in planning the hospital and dealing with organisations. Misereor in Germany financed the building of the hospital. Silvia and I undertook the huge job of equipping the hospital – out-patients, wards, theatre, x-ray, lab, nurses' hostel etc. Everything had to be planned for (down to dust bins!) and ordered from Europe. It was Trojan work and at the same time a good experience. A house for doctors was also sponsored by Misereor. The builder was Mr Kimbowa (who was later imprisoned by Amin

and on release fled the country). A representatives of Misereor came from time to time to ensure that the building was up to standard. Our little community moved from the plantation house into the doctor's house and stayed there until the building of the convent was completed. (perhaps '67). I was to assume the role of Hospital Matron and in preparation for this I came back to Europe for experience in 1966 and spent three months in the Mater Hospital in theatre and in '69 I spent 6 months in Mayday Hospital in Croydon for general experience, followed by 3 months in Sorento Hospital in Birmingham for midwifery. My first home leave was in '64- 3 months, 3 weeks of which I was allowed to spend at home with my family. By the end of the decade I could spend all my time at home.

Opening of the Hospital.

Opening of Ibanda Hospital



The Hospital was officially opened in April 1970 by the Minister for Internal Affairs, Basil Bataringaya, who was a friend of ours. The German Ambassador also attended the opening- honouring the contribution of Misereor to this project. It was a great blessing to have had one of our own community there as a medical doctor at that time. Sr. Helen Conway attended the opening and served in the hospital for several years. The building of the convent was financed from other sources. Silvia got funding from other organisations; the congregation of her sister in Switzerland assisted and our sisters in California gave money for the building of the Chapel. The first volunteer doctors came from Memisa in the Netherlands; Dr Henry and his wife Clementine; Dr Kees and his wife Dr Jacqueline; Drs Kees

and Diedrick later; Dr Tobias and Jokka and then happily there were Uganda doctors in a position to take over. In these years we got medical supplies from the Netherlands.

Once the hospital was up and running there were many sisters and volunteer medical staff who worked there- Among the sisters were Bridie Doherty, Eileen Hanrahan, Francis Burke, Maria Marti, Diane, Nora McCarthy, Breda O'Toole, Candida, Brigid Rowe., Peggy McArdle. Josephine O'Neill. (The risk with naming people when you are my age is that it is very easy to overlook someone... please excuse any oversights).

Silvia went on to develop many other projects in the Ibanda area: a Nutrition Unit, A School-leavers project which taught skills/ trades such as carpentry, tailoring etc; a Baby Home. She had a pioneering spirit and great resilience. Any set-backs were dealt with in a philosophical way- with humour and understanding of human weakness. She was never embittered even when there was a sense that she was 'let down'. She could rise above the petty and see everything in its context. She had great skill in dealing with funding organisations. I remember at one time she returned from a trip to Nairobi where she was buying equipment for the school-leavers project. On arrival she announced that she had bought a pick-up truck from the 'change' that she had.

Tragically our friend the Honourable Basil Bataringaya was later killed during the Amin purge of 1972. His wife Edith continued to visit and befriend us until she in turn disappeared and her burnt body was found on their family land (approx. 1978).

Tensions

In 1971 Obote was overthrown and Idi Amin took over. The country began a downward spiral- with scarcity of essential commodities, disappearances, fear and silence. Trying to keep hospital and schools going was a major challenge. Not long after gaining power Amin came to visit our area- which included a visit to the Hospital. It was spick and span. .. and he was charming. I took him round and he promised all kinds of help and support – none of which materialised. He laboriously signed the visitor's book. He always travelled by helicopter and we dreaded the sound of a helicopter overhead. One day a helicopter hovered over the hospital and came to land outside the gate. In fear and trembling I went to meet whoever it might be. Thankfully it was only an air force pilot from the area who was coming for a funeral. What a relief. We all feared the army who generally were nasty to us at road-blocks. However, it is true that we were treated much better than the Ugandan people who were often beaten and tortured on the spot. One Saturday army trucks drew up in front of the hospital. What now? They had come to check on the supplies in our stores. We had acquired a supply of soap powder from Nairobi- a precious commodity- not available in Uganda. Imports from Kenya were prohibited. With bated breath we waited as soldiers went from store to store quizzing us. Thank God they left without confiscating anything from our supplies.

It took some time before we realised just how awful the Amin regime was. There was a genocide in the army and any soldiers of the same ethnic group as Obote were targeted. Lorry loads of soldiers were driven naked to the Nile at Jinja and ordered to jump in. In some cases the last few were told to run and they made their way naked to the nearest mission seeking refuge. In '72 some journalists visited our community at Nyamitanga. They explained that they had come to investigate the stories of genocide in the army. The community advised them to drop their quest and not venture to the barracks. That advice was not taken and they were never again seen alive. Their bodies were found near Mushanga.

On another occasion Cathleen McCarthy and Mary O'Connell (a lay teacher in Maryhill) were travelling from Kampala and had almost reached Mbarara (Biharwe) when they were stopped at a roadblock and not allowed to continue to their destination. Some political crisis had occurred- an attempted coup or something comparable. They sheltered for the night in a little house by the roadside. Next morning they were awakened to the sight of guns. The army had heard they were present there and came to investigate. They were taken under armed escort to the local barracks (the same barracks from which the journalists disappeared). There they were interrogated. Finally one of the officers who knew of Maryhill, corroborated their story and they were released- unharmed but shaken.

Still on Amin's army, I recount a tale possibly told by others too. One morning in Nyamitanga (while I was visiting)- March 6th 1978- we were met at the door at 7am by a

group of soldiers; 'Get back in or we'll shoot you!'. We promptly obeyed. After some time they entered the house and searched every room but didn't seem to find what they were looking for. Having searched the whole mission hill- Diocesan Administration, sister' convents, teachers' houses- and in the process harassed many, they moved on to Ibanda to search the hospital. We heard later that it had been reported that we had imported guns- they were seen being transported to the mission and then to Ibanda. Crates of stuff had been taken there alright but they were beds for the hospital that we had received from Holland. It was a very scary morning. As with all such critical situations, there was inherent humour in the tales told thereafter... including Mary Moran in her bedroom trying to 'act normal' while waiting for the soldiers to appear and when they did she met them at the door with : 'You're very welcome!'.

We were all aware of places in Kampala- one near General Motors and also the Nile Mansions Hotel- that were centres of incarceration and torture. They were places to be feared and avoided and vultures hovered over them ominously.

Rome.

From October '74- June '75 I had a sabbatical year in Rome. It was a very enriching year with many opportunities for renewal. There were pilgrimages to many holy places, including Assisi and the Holy Land and of course, throughout Rome itself. An incident not so pleasant occurred as we were leaving the Holy Land at Tel Aviv. Because of the hijacking of an ISr.aeli plane at Entebbe some time earlier, I was advised to get a special passport for ISr.ael. However as I was also going to Greece I also had to take my other passport. There was very tight security at the airport so when I checked out **and we were checked out** my two passports were discovered. I was held back and questioned over and over and my passports taken away to higher authorities. I was left 'hanging' for about half an hour in a cubicle before the documents were returned to me and I was let go. It was an anxious moment for me and for the rest of the group who were waiting for me.

It was during the year in Rome that Mammy passed away. Thank God I was able to make it home for the funeral. The following September I returned to Uganda to continue where I had left off as Matron of the Hospital. There were several other sisters who worked in Ibanda Hospital over the years. Sr.s Francis Burke, Nora McCarthy, Eileen Hanrahan, Helen Conway, Breda O'Toole, Brigid Rowe and Candida, one of our Ugandan sisters who sadly died at a young age. Somewhere along the line Silvia was offered Uganda citizenship by Idi Amin as a mark of her service to the country. At that time one could not hold dual Uganda-Swiss citizenship and Silvia wisely didn't not relinquish her Swiss citizenship. Thus the newly offered Uganda passport went uncollected. Whether this or something else turned the tide, Silvia fell from favour and was given 48 hours' notice to leave the country. She went to Kenya accompanied by Fr Steve Collins. That began several new chapters to Silvia's colourful life.

War and rumours of war.

In January 1977 my life took a new direction when I was elected Provincial Superior for the Uganda Province. This was a three year term. At the end of '79 I was re-elected for a

further 3 years. I continued in charge of the hospital for a few years – though the going was demanding. I suppose what made it hard was the political situation in the country. We were always on edge not knowing what the next day might bring. We always looked to the day when we would be liberated from oppressive regimes. We were aware that the ‘exiles’ (those who had fled the country during the Obote and Amin years) – in Tanzania and the UK were planning the overthrow of Amin but as we waited things got worse and worse even when one thought it couldn’t deteriorate further. Everything was in very short supply. In the villages people suffered enormously. They had no soap or other basic commodities. As we came to the end of ’78 rumours were rampant- the rebels were on their way. Museveni, then a guerrilla leader- was mythologised- reported to be seen here and there in disguise... even taking on magical forms- like the cat and the talking tortoise. He was hero and saviour. As time went on the sound of shelling reached us. It came from the Uganda -Tanzania border. Mbarara was 40 miles from the border but the sound of gunfire reached us across the 40 miles. One particular evening one of the local sisters, Cecilia Nyangoma, came to our house to say that the rebels planned to reach Mbarara that very night and take over Maryhill School and use it for a base. We took turns staying awake throughout the night to keep watch. It was eerie- not a sound to be heard. Nothing happened. In fact the bones of the rumour were accurate but the timing inaccurate.. the plan was to be enacted later.

The sound of the shelling came closer and closer. One Sunday morning in January ’79 we woke up to tanks at the entrance to our house. Amin’s soldiers were fleeing and encouraged us to move away too. They were very nice to us – for a change. The Bishop also sent word to move out to Ibanda and Fort Portal where we had other houses. The school had to be evacuated too, all of its 600 students who were boarders. It was a morning when the rain poured down. A decision had to be made to see who would remain to see them off and close up the school. Katie was in the kitchen cooking the Sunday lunch- liver. She was adamant that she would not leave. Nothing would dissuade her. Finally Sr. Margaret O’Rourke who was a member of the General team and visiting Uganda took Katie to the Chapel and under the vow of obedience told her to pack and leave the house with the others. Three remained- Eileen Maher, Sarah Durkan and Helen Lane. One car left for Fort Portal, another for Ibanda and a Volkswagon was left for the getaway of the three remaining sisters. The students ran on foot with their luggage on their heads, many of them leaving their shoes behind in their rush to get away from the danger zone. I went with the group to Ibanda. There we were safely out of the way of gunfire and shelling but we could hear the boom of the long-range missiles now 50 miles away at Mbarara. We were totally cut off from all news of what was happening. We presumed that the three sisters we had left in Mbarara had made their way to Fort Portal- 150 miles away. It was only on St Patrick’s Day that we discovered that they had not been able to get out. There was a lull in the shelling and so they had decided to stay on.

Lent was an anxious time for us all- the shelling was coming nearer and nearer. Then on Good Friday the Liberation Army arrived into our area. We welcomed them- we were being liberated but after a day or so we realised that they were robbing houses, abusing women etc. Some came into our house to look around- probably to see what they could get. But luckily we lost nothing. On Holy Saturday I went to the Commander in Chief to get

permission to go to Mbarara. He reluctantly gave it, saying that the town had been destroyed- there was nothing left. However, we did set off the next day- Easter Sunday- and all we saw along the way was desolation. Every government building had been shelled and as we got nearer to Mbarara it was even worse. We couldn't believe the scene that met our eyes. All the buildings were in ruins. En route to the Parish- we met an old friend and asked about our sisters, to be told that they were no longer in the Convent- it had been taken over by the army. The sisters were now in the administration block. As we approached, the hill was teeming with Army. The people were coming out from Mass and the place looked chaotic. The Bishop wasn't too pleased to see us and told us to return to Ibanda as soon as possible. We did meet the three sisters who were stranded and the strain of the six weeks of 'imprisonment' showed in their faces. Before returning to base it was arranged that they would be got out of there as soon as it seemed safe to travel. Within a week we were reunited. We weren't allowed into the Convent that day. It was still occupied by the army. When we eventually did get it we found that almost everything had been looted and the place was a shambles. Every door had been cut into pieces, books that weren't of interest were strewn everywhere, rooms and cupboards had been used as toilets. (the water system was out of order).

Food was scarce but the people were good to us bringing bananas, beans etc. Did I mention that at the beginning of the 'emergency' we bought a sack of flour, considering ourselves lucky to have got it. When it was opened it was full of weevils which apparently have several stages in their life cycle – insects, maggots and moths. In time moths/ butterflies appeared and flew out from the flour leaving behind a thready/woolly substance. All had to be sieved before baking and even then the bread had a bitter taste.

Following the overthrow of Idi Amin in 1979 there were several short-lived and interim governments up until 1985 when Yoweri Museveni took over the reins of the country. He remains in power to this day.

In November '84 I was diagnosed with cancer of the uterus. Arrangements were made and within days I was on a plane back to Ireland to have surgery. Thanks to the connections with the Mater Hospital (Sr. Nora McCarthy was a nurse tutor and had good connections) I was admitted the day after my arrival in Ireland and had surgery.

This was followed by a period of recuperation. In 1985 I attended the General Chapter in California and following the Chapter had the privilege to do a little sight-seeing- a day trip to Mexico; a scenic ride down the west coast- visiting some of the old Missions en route. The flight home was scary- had to turn back and ditch fuel after sparks and turbulence led to our being told we had 'hit' a flock of birds. The paper next day talked about engine fatigue.

A dramatic journey.

In early September of '85 I packed for my return to Uganda. It became clear when I arrived at Entebbe that once again we were on a brink of 'war'. There was a palpable air of tension in Kampala though the locus of rebel activity was the west- where we lived. We set off in

convoy for Mbarara and Ibanda- four vehicles in all. We were a mixed group- sisters, priests, a Protestant missionary and his family. We felt the safety of numbers. All went well until we were half way. We did get some fuel for the vehicles at Masaka and there we were advised to go no further. However, on we went for about another 40 miles till we reached a small town. There wasn't a soul to be seen. We continued for a few further miles, rounded a bend and came face-to-face with 'the enemy', the front-line of the army (Government forces). There was no way we could pass. An officer approached us. 'Where are you going?' 'To Mbarara', we replied. 'You can't go there. It's enemy territory.' 'But we have to get home.' (How naïve we were!) He then called the commanding officer. Along he came – for all the world like Amin. His only words were : 'Go back to where you came from.' And we did turn back but just to the little town a few miles back where we knew there was a road through the bush that would take us to Ibanda. This was around 1pm. The road wasn't too bad for the first few miles but it gradually got worse- we lost it completely at times and then found it again. After travelling for what seemed like hours we came to a steep hill, rutted by the rains. Some cars couldn't get a grip and skidded into the side. We had to unload and carry the heavy items up the hill in the heat of the day. This included cylinders of gas, vegetables and other foods that had been bought in Kampala. It took over an hour before we were ready to continue on our journey. Some time later we discovered we had lost our way and at 6pm we discovered that we were only 14 miles from where we had started BUT we had reached the Rebel's front line!! Soldiers milled around and in truth we were surrounded. Interrogation followed the same line of questioning as before when we encountered the enemy front line but in addition we were told: 'We were monitoring you from the time you left the main road. You were missing for an hour. Where were you?' When we explained who we were and where we lived they calmed down, saying that they presumed that the white people in the group were mercenaries. We were reprimanded for daring to travel when there was such insecurity. The result of all this was that we spent the night at the front-line on our cars. During the night we were well guarded by the soldiers – perhaps in case we absconded. During the night we could hear the shelling but we felt secure because these rebels were our friends. It was only the following afternoon that we were allowed to continue our journey- this time with an escort until we were out of harm's way. We reached Ibanda at 7pm- 36 hours after we had set out on the journey and much to the amazement of the sisters as news had reached them that the road to Kampala was closed.

First Impressions of Karamoja.

Karamoja is about a 5 hour journey from Kampala. The first stretch to Mbale is tarmac and from then on it is a red soil/ murrum road. In the dry season travelling on that road isn't bad but when it rains, it is another story. On this particular journey we rattled along in a crowded bus for several hours. In addition to the passengers there were live chickens and a variety of veggies together with personal belongings. It was very crowded and hot. We passed through quite fertile land in the early stages –the road was smooth and not too many twists and turns. Then a mountain loomed ahead and I could see a road passing along the side. Would the bus be able to climb this with all the weight it carried? But climb it did, winding around corkscrew bends along the escarpment.

(I had an experience on this same escarpment some time afterwards myself. Returning from a shopping trip in Kampala I braced myself for the climb. The landrover, now quite old, was not in good condition. I had five passengers and shopping and many other accoutrements. The weight was one issue but to make matters worse the gear lever was slipping. As we chugged and crawled up I prayed as I'd never prayed before. Had the engine stalled we would have slipped backwards. Thank God we got safely to the top!)

Going back to the mountain that loomed into sight, I later discovered that it was known as the Sleeping Warrior and was visible from our house at Lorengedwat. It was near sunset when the bus reached our destination of Lorengedwat. It was like being in another country. The scenery and the culture in no way compared with what I was used to in the west of the country. There were clusters of villages close to the mission/ parish centre. People converged near the mission for safety and proximity to health and education services. The clusters of houses were enclosed in a kraal - a thorn fence with a low entrance which would be filled with a removable thorn bush to allow entry and exit. It provided safety from predators. It ended up that I spent 8 years in Karamoja mainly involved in dispensary work.

Ministry and life in Karamoja.

At the centre we had a small dispensary- two rooms in which everything was done- seeing patients, giving injections, handing out medicines, doing dressings- all that in one room. The second room was used for examining the patients and storing our medical supplies. Despite the limitations we treated all kinds of illnesses from malaria, chest infections to meningitis, gunshot



wounds, fractures etc. The Karamajong are cattle keepers with huge herds. They are tall and athletic and look a little like the Masai. They are a warrior people. Cattle are a very precious commodity and cattle rustling from one tribe to another takes place especially in the dry season when the footprints cannot be traced. The footwear consists of sandals made from car tyres and known as 'firestones'.

During my years in Karamoja we had many experiences of these cattle raids. First you hear an outburst of shooting as the 'enemy' draws near. Then an ululation of alarm from within the village being attacked. This is followed by an exodus from the village with the women running for their lives- often with babes in arms- and the bigger children trying to keep up. The men- warriors- remain behind to protect the cows in the kraal. The raid can last for minutes or hours or even days. There was one right beside us that lasted for two days. We had to deal with the casualties- gunshot wounds and fractures. Twenty six lost their lives on that occasion. The bodies are left in the bush for the vultures. It is a taboo to touch a dead body- and practically speaking, it is near impossible to dig a grave in the rock-like soil. The cattle raids generally take place at night and in the moonlight. Once there was a raid a few

miles from us. 'Our' folks were the guilty ones. One was shot but managed to get away and back to our dispensary. However, the 'enemy' traced him- by the trail of blood that he had lost on the way. Soon the dispensary was practically surrounded, waiting for him to emerge. We quickly dressed the wounds, gave him a supply of antibiotics and dressings, then pushed him through the hedge that surrounded the dispensary. On the other side a catechist locked him into the engine house where he stayed until dark. We thought he wouldn't survive but 6 weeks later he arrived back with a big smile on his face.



To continue with our activities there: we had a few outposts which we visited weekly. These centres were also outstations from the Mission so we would set up our stall in the chapel which was very basic. – mud and wattle- no windows, just openings. Sometimes we would find that the goats had taken refuge there. Towards the end of the dry season there was always a severe shortage of food. We generally received food from the UN to help out during this crisis time- beans, oil, salt, maize and milk. We also treated those who were ill. Some of the children were very malnourished- skeletal and pot-bellied. We mostly lived on rice and pasta with whatever was in season- beans, pumpkin,

tomatoes, beef, goat. All organic! We did have bread and our cook made very good yeast bread. He had been trained by the Italian sisters who were there before us. At times there was tinned food and supplies brought in by Don Vittorio. He flew in foodstuff including panettoni at Christmas from Italy. A bit like manna in the desert, we soon got very tired of it!

All of this was based on the foundations laid by a pioneering spirit Brigid Rowe. Brigid went ahead of the rest to reconnoitre. She approached the Concern team who were leaving and secured their appliances and some furniture for what would be the new community house. Over the years that we were there many different sisters ministered. These included: Francis Burke, Sarah, Adeodata, Margaret O'Rourke, Anastazia, Teresa, Christine, Marie Claire, Hediwg, Kate, Bea, Dr Jean Waldron, Liz, Salome.

Conclusion

This account has rambled around the main chapters of my life as a DMJ. There are other episodes and areas that I have not gone into. A bit like the Gospel of St John.... Books would not contain the whole story.

There are many sisters with whom I lived and worked who were a very important part of my life. Some have gone to God. Others are still with us. Please excuse omissions. As I said earlier this is an overview rather than a comprehensive account and selects only a few areas to focus on.

The people of Uganda hold a special place in my heart. We formed close bonds of friendship with the people of the western region and the people of Karamoja. I cherish those memories. It is a joy that our African sisters are now carrying forward the DMJ vision in many different ways.