

Reflections of Mary Moran.

Anyone who knows Helen Lane, knows that she will never ask you to do something beyond what you want to or are able to do and when she asks once, she will not pick on you to get on with it! That being so, when Helen asked me to write some part of my memoir as a DMJ, I did not know what to write that would interest any readers. After some discussion, we came up with the idea of my writing something about the Amin years in Uganda. When I used to ask my mother to talk about her childhood years, she thought mainly about the hardships, and responded with “why would anybody want to talk about the past?” or “why would you want to hear that ‘stuff’?” I have some sort of similar reaction. “Why would anyone want to know about that stuff?” Another teacher of mine used to say of life’s events, “do not let go, until the event has taught you one of life’s lessons”. This, therefore is our task—yours and mine—to see what we can learn from stories of war, murder, injustice, oppression, intimidation and the FEAR that leads to such behaviours or the FEAR caused by these behaviours.

I was not in Uganda for the whole period of Amin so the stories of Eileen Maher are much more hair-raising. I will therefore tell you about a few happenings. When Amin took over



from Obote, the first thing he did was go around all the good schools and main universities to try and win popularity for himself. Therefore on one such day a contingent of Amin’s soldiers, ministers and he himself came to visit Maryhill High School. He met the Board and the Headmistress –Cathleen McCarthy—and afterwards, they all dined in the school dining room, where we served, smiled a toothpaste smile, and said “Welcome” many times over. I do not know if at any time the student body was addressed, or whether the visitors simply walked around the classrooms. Eventually they departed with everyone feeling satisfied with the way the day had gone. However, soon after their departure, a board member, Mr. Tibayungwa, who was later taken from his government office and murdered on the orders of Amin, remembered that

we had breached protocol, in forgetting to ask Amin and his people, to sign the visitor’s book. Tibayungwa informed Cathleen that she would have to attend the formal dinner, to be held that evening at the presidential lodge (one in every district of the country as far as I know). Cathleen, who was often very shy in public, asked me if I would go in her place. I agreed and drove myself to the lodge. I explained the purpose of my visit to the various security personnel and was eventually taken to the waiting room of the lodge. After a short wait, Amin sent someone to ask me if I wanted him to come to where I was, or go to his bedroom where he was! What is the tactful answer in such a moment? I answered by saying I would do whatever the president suggested! Soon Amin himself appeared and then came up with an idea “Come with us to table, and I will get all the ministers to sign!”

At table, I was placed two seats down from the President and was very ill at ease and a bit silly in my talk—far too acquiescent and polite for me! I refused the wine and beer, got a soda, and when it was obvious that no food would be served for a long time, and that it was going to be a long “do”, I informed the minister next to me that I feared driving in the dark, and requested his cooperation in having the book signed by the president and the ministers, so that I could excuse myself from the other formalities. My only fear was that he would suggest sending an escort with me if I waited for dinner. Thank goodness, no such chivalry, so after the required signing I shook hands with the president thanked him for his hospitality and left for home!

Is this the only time I dined with a murderer and smiled graciously—some would say treacherously? Actually no!

A few years later when we knew of all the daily and nightly assassinations, when all of us had adjusted our life styles to live and work in a very violent milieu, I received a visitor to the convent in Nyamitanga. She, the Indian wife, of the African governor, came to ask me, Sr. Mary, to be her friend, as her husband did not allow her to mix with the local population. No wonder, as there were nightly raids and murders going on in the town and as I came to learn, the governor’s duties were to make sure that the wishes of his immediate boss, Amin, be followed, without question. I asked this woman how she got my name and I think what happened is that she had given birth to a child in Nsambya hospital, Kampala, run by Franciscan nuns. As she was a Muslim, she thought that her “Sr. Mary” was the one and only in Uganda, when in fact the majority of the nuns were named Sr. Mary something or other. In any event I told her I would get in touch with her a few days later. I then went to see the Bishop and asked him what I should do. He said it might be wiser to acquiesce and simply to choose my moments! This woman invited me to a number of their celebrations—often the governor was absent—and there I used to meet some of the local politicians, people like me, playing a diplomatic game. I liked this woman but never felt at ease in these gatherings. One evening, in her house, on my way back from the toilet, I met the governor arriving back from one of his forays into the community. He was wearing guns around his waist, I commented that he was still wearing his “jewelry” -probably a very inappropriate remark-, which he immediately proceeded to take off, and I felt sure he had just come back from an ordered killing.

One day he asked me to accompany him to a Catholic primary school about 60 miles away, as he wanted to place his son there. In the Mercedes car, he asked me to drive, just for the experience. I did so but was very slow, over cautious and changed after a few miles. The school in question, run by Christian Brothers, was very popular at this time in Uganda. As an educationalist, I was very curious to know what these brothers did to keep people coming to this school and to keep his teachers in the classroom. Owing to very high inflation, the majority of teachers in Uganda, had adopted the habit of taking on three or more “full time” teaching posts, getting three or four salaries and teaching only a quarter of classes in each school! They also had to make time for travelling between one school and another. Brother answered my question with the simple statement “I make sure the teachers have sugar and salt”.

At that time, sugar, soap and salt were sold in government depots and headmistresses had to get special forms allowing them to purchase a limited, assigned amount for their schools. I have never forgotten his response, which any personnel manager, after years of training, would affirm as the key to success in any “people” organization. If you want staff to work to the best of their capacity, put their needs high on the priority list.

The day that government soldiers raided all the missionary and religious institutions on the “Hill”—what we called our location—, when the Bishop ran into the “bush”, when many priests and brothers were made to lie down on the ground outside the Cathedral, when doors were broken down in one convent, we were lucky, as they arrived in our compound at 6.45 am. It was bright as the sun was rising. I remember the time very clearly as Anatolia was on her way to 7am Mass in the Cathedral. As she walked out on the path, suddenly some armed soldiers, “appeared” and told her to go back or they would shoot. What I was told, was that Anatolia reversed back into the convent—not wishing to be shot in the back—and informed the rest of us about what was going on.

If you were to see a video clip of the next 60 minutes or less, you might be excused for thinking it was a comedy strip revealing the differences in individual personalities. Each one behaved and spoke as if we were all on trial and doing what we would do to save our lives. Was it Josephine Beebwa (I think so), who as headmistress said “we have to keep the girls in their dormitories and not allow them to class”. Eileen Maher either volunteered or was asked to go to school. Quite calmly, as Eileen always is, she went out the back door, facing the school dormitories. The rest of us went into the dining room as there were soldiers looking in the windows and we wanted to “act normally”. Someone would begin a story in a low voice. Another would remark, “do not speak so low or they will think we are talking about them”. Someone laughed and then “do not laugh, they will think we are laughing at them”. After another few failed attempts at normality (I think someone suggested inviting the soldiers for breakfast, but decided this was not normal), we left the dining room and then went about our own normal lives (except go to school where we were supposed to be teaching),



Sr. Josephine now with her award for services to Education

I went into my bedroom and began to hide all my valuables (a radio cum tape recorder) under my folded clothes. When I had finished, I rethought, and decided it is not normal to hide one’s things from gunmen. I therefore proceeded to take them out again! I left my room, walking confidently and happily (normally) back towards nowhere. I met a group of soldiers coming in my direction, put out my hand, welcomed each one into our cloister!, and a soldier remarked “you are very happy” to which I agreed and kept on walking in the opposite direction! I heard that Liz Mc Carthy, when she met them, asked them if they

would like to go to the Chapel! So far you are seeing a few of us carrying out “what to do when your house is invaded by soldiers, who kill when asked, without much discussion”. They were not looking for my valuables as I found out. They were looking for hidden weaponry. They looked in our bedrooms, showers and toilets and then asked to go to school. Josephine Beebwa accompanied them to the dormitory, but could not get in, as the head girl had locked it from the inside. There was complete silence and she could not get anyone to respond to her appeal to have the door opened. The father of the head girl had been killed by Amin’s soldiers, so eventually, after much pleading from Josephine, when she, Angelina, emerged she was shaking so violently, she was unable to put the key into the keyhole. Josephine then asked her to put the key out through an opening in a honeycombed wall and the soldiers entered the dormitory. I went down to inform teachers of what was going on. The first teacher I met, a man named Jackson, was on his way to class. We greeted with a “good morning” and then I told him the soldiers were on the compound. He did not ask a single question, he made a 180 degrees turn, saying “Oh! My God! My children!” and proceeded back to his staff house.

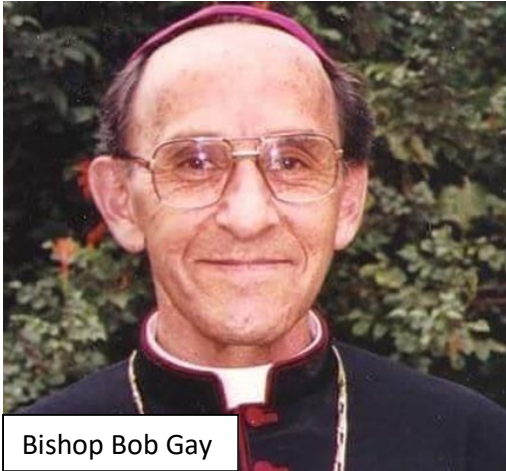
On two occasions I had guns pointed at me. The first time when I did not drive fast enough for the military vehicle behind me, they passed me, with open windows and guns pointing directly at my face. As soon as they passed, I crossed the main street of Kampala and then pulled the car over to the side of the road and parked as my knees were shaking so badly I was unable to accelerate. I was alone so I walked over to a hotel for a cup of coffee and told my story to a waiter. Of course every waiter had his or her own story of dealings with the soldiers and also nobody ever knew the mindset of the one you might be addressing and fear kept us all very reserved.

The other occasion of being apprehended was in an evening where I was driving back to Nsambya convent with a friend. The friend got sick and asked me to stop the car and pull over to the golf course for a few moments. Neither of us was aware that the golf club had been taken over by soldiers. When I parked the car, within minutes the car was surrounded by soldiers, who questioned us about our comings and goings and then one of them shot a gun into the air beside me and told me to move! Again driving away was a mix of fear and gratitude, fear of anything happening, gratitude that so far nothing had happened.

My longest and most personal meeting with soldiers was after I had made an international call to Israel in the International hotel in Kampala, having first verified with the manager that this was an okay thing to do. When I went to pay for the call, I was told to step into the manager’s office and he informed me that the lines were tapped and I was to wait in his office for questioning by military personnel. This was in the aftermath of the Entebbe raid and relations between Uganda and Israel were at all all-time low.

I will not recount the whole episode which lasted a few hours, most of which took place in another building in Kampala, where I was taken by soldiers, in their vehicle, with four armed men, guns out! While waiting in the manager’s office in Kampala I asked him to allow me make just one call to the provincial of the White Fathers, as I wanted someone to know what was happening. I phoned, said, “I am at the international hotel in Kampala, can you come”. A sign of the times, not of our relationship, was that he did not ask a single question, he just came. He was not allowed to come into the vehicle with me, but he was allowed to

drive behind, and this made me feel safe. If you have ever read “One Day in the Life of Ivan Ivanovich” by Alexander Solzhenitsyn then you will have a good idea of the procedure of questioning an innocent person, while insinuating that the person is guilty. I was questioned by at least four different people groups. It felt a bit silly telling them everything they asked, wondering how many times I was going to be asked the same questions, and wondering what the outcome would be.



Bishop Bob Gay

Eventually a plain clothes man, a tall man in a white suit, questioned me about my relationship with Israel, and then let me go. When I left the building (and to this day I do not know which building I was in, what direction we took in Kampala, and I could never have directed anyone in future to that location) Bob Gay, later Bishop Bob Gay, now deceased Bob Gay, was waiting for me. He did not ask me any questions, just asked me what I needed in order to feel calm and ready for the return journey to Mbarara. He took me to a meal in the Fairway hotel and eventually took me to the bus park to get a bus home.

What is worth remembering about many of these episodes, is the feeling of personal guilt, at being harassed by soldiers. Perhaps there was a belief that if we did everything properly, nothing would happen to us, we would avoid these scenarios. Yet so many of our friends and others were killed for no reason whatsoever, other than that in the mind of the leaders of the country, they posed a threat of one kind or another. Living in a regime of such political autocratic power has an effect on so many of the decisions we make on a daily basis. This time strengthened our relationships with Ugandans as they no longer saw us as “Imperialists” left over “Colonials” but as people who would not betray them, as people to whom they could entrust their thoughts, experiences and lives, as people who could not be bought, not because we were better than others but we did not have our families to worry about. Ugandans were more easily scared with threats about what could happen to their families if they did not do this, that or the other.

A big lesson for me from this time of Amin’s regime was the awareness that when our lives are in danger it is not easy to be brave and to stand for justice. We made rules for our safety. Never go out in the dark. Do not leave Kampala for Mbarara in the evening. If soldiers stop you and ask for your car, your clothing, your money, give it to them. Do not question. Do not intimidate. Do not act tough. Keep away from places where it is known that soldiers will be around. Do not say what you think in class or in the staff room. Don’t get involved with politics. Elisabeth McCarthy was forever trying to be a voice for standing up for right and challenging the status quo as a coordinated Church, with priests, religious, lay Christians speaking out together. Of course the tactic of Amin’s government was to prevent any mass gathering of Christians or Catholics or Religious or of any group that could pose a threat. For whatever reason we justified the wisdom of our Silence. It is so easy to ask questions about other situations in history—why did the people not stand up for right? Why did Germans allow the Jews to be demonized and killed? Why did the South Africans

allow such evil as existed in apartheid? Why did the world allow the Rwandan genocide, the Bosnian genocide?

Why, now at this present time in Ireland, is the nation blaming priests and nuns for the abuse of pregnant girls and their illegitimate children, for the sexual abuse of children and for all the other crimes perpetrated against the children of Ireland in the past? When are we going to admit that it was the families of Ireland who gave birth to these boys and girls who one day would become nuns and priests or fathers and mothers? Where do we think they learned deviant sexuality and condemnation of young girls who got pregnant, possibly without even knowing how such a thing happened? The Church in Ireland had more power than in most countries, because of the historical political role they played in our fight against "heathen" England! Power corrupts and a lot of power corrupts a lot!

It is amazing and shocking to me, how much money we are spending in looking into the past, and trying to find out what happened back then. Yet today in our homes, as well as in our public systems of education and health there is bullying of adults as well as of children. In our homes in the past and in our homes today there is violence, sexual deviance, incest, cruelty and there is still cover up. We need to spend time listening to those who are suffering today. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, if there is a rapist out there, I am the rapist. If there is sexual deviance going on in our country, I am guilty. If children are being abused, I am guilty of abuse. I really hate the fact that we are not spending more money in education and health of the living in Ireland. I might be stoned if I spoke my thoughts in public. I regret our past history. I regret the fact that we grew up in a very judgmental Church. I regret the fact that although Jesus proclaimed only messages of love, compassion, non judgement and forgiveness, and although St. Paul taught us 2000 years ago that love, not the law should be our guide, yet we placed so much store on obedience to the law and were never trained to speak of our weaknesses simply because we feared the judgment of others.

I feel grateful for the path of my life. I have not a single day of regret for the five years I spent with Louis nuns in my secondary school, for the three years I spent with the Dominican nuns in my training college, and for the many years of spiritual training I received as a Daughter of Mary and Joseph. I spent 34 years as a DMJ, made lifelong friends, received countless opportunities of further education, travelled to many countries, and if there is any good in what I do, think and say today, it is because of these many years of grace in my past.

I am grateful for all the wonderful experiences I have had in my years as a lay missionary. Just as soon as I returned to Uganda, many gifts have come my way. Two of these are very special. One is the training in mindfulness and compassion which I got from the monks and nuns of Plum Village in France. The other is that St. Francis Family Helper Programme has again gone into the hands of a DMJ.



