

Memories of Sr Elizabeth McCarthy.

“A people who forget their history are a people

with no future ” Pope Francis at Sarajevo May 8/05/2015

This is a tiny fragment of a few episodes that I lived through in Uganda. Unfortunately I am unable to date it exactly, but I recall the events now as if they only happened only yesterday. It happened when the "President-for-Life" Idi Amin Dada was reigning in Uganda.

One memory I have is of a Sunday morning in 1979 when I was at Mass at the Convent of the Poor Clare Sisters in Nyamitanga. The small chapel was full of people when suddenly and without warning Bishop Kakubi came in and said in no uncertain terms: “I want everyone off the hill immediately”. Did we continue until Mass was finished? I have no recollection. I do remember that we scurried off, each one to his/her place. Sr. Katie was busy preparing the dinner and had no idea of the state of emergency. Gradually we got her round to the urgency of the situation. Nor were we fully cognisant of the fact that an invasion from Tanzania was imminent. A getaway was all that mattered.

I remember hurrying down to the school chapel. The Blessed Sacrament had to be saved. So we consumed the hosts, and packed up the car and were ready for the road. What to take? What to leave behind? Where to go? There were two choices: Ibanda and Fort Portal. I would drive the Toyota, a small one at that, to Fort Portal. Dona was there and a lady called Jeanne, who by chance, was visiting and wanted to come with us. Eileen Maher, Helen and Sarah opted to travel in another car. They would stay behind to lock up as much as could be salvaged. They were to follow us later. Perhaps Katie came with us but I don't remember. I don't know if we had any money, Eileen Maher usually took care of that side of things. As we crossed over the bridge, below the school we broke into "Across the bridge, there's no more sorrow, across the bridge is no more tears, The sun will shine on us tomorrow and we'll never be unhappy again". Meanwhile, the Amin army in disarray, was coming towards us.



Naturally they wanted the car, but we explained that we were on the way to Fort Portal and needed the car. That was too obvious, wasn't it! Amazingly they ushered us on. With a sense of relief, we took to the road again and had made a quick decision to call into Mushanga Parish where Fr. Steve Collins, a good friend of ours, was the parish priest. More than a little traumatised, I suppose, we were only too delighted to accept an invitation to a cup of tea (with bread and marmalade!). They didn't know anything about the invasion. So it was breaking news for them. Refreshed for the journey, we continued towards Fort Portal, some 3 hours journey away.

Eventually we reached Fort Portal, and headed for Kinyamasaka. At that stage the community had left the old grandiose house that went with the Teacher training College, under our direction at that time. The Sisters had gone to live in three or four small staff houses. Sr. Margaret Mary Ascott was delighted to see us. Gradually we broke the news that we were refugees. The Holy Cross sisters extended to us the best of hospitality as did the Banyteresa, a local congregation. We got rooms in our place, and were happy to have our hunger appeased and a bed for the night. It was a question of one day at a time with no future in sight for the present. It was an experience of living in the NOW, in practice! I remember a little boy who sat on the doorstep of our house. His little feet were eaten away by "jiggers"- a kind of worm which burrows into the skin. Dona was well practiced in removing them and did her utmost in this case and I am sure succeeded.

A few memorable events:

One day (in Fort Portal) I was driving somewhere, and was flagged by a passing car. An army man was driving and wanted to take our car. Cheekily I said "You have taken our house and we so badly need our car". Amazingly he let me pass on. It seemed that the Tanzanian army was bit by bit taking over in Uganda. "Liberating" was the term used. One night there was a loud knocking at our fragile door. We switched off the lights and betook ourselves to the corridor armed with our rosaries! ... They went away - little or big miracle! That night I remember shaking all over. My way of continuing was to go to the room of Margaret O' and just got in bed beside her until the shivering ceased. I seemed to fall to pieces, and it took me a little while to settle down as Margaret absorbed my shivers and I was on the road again.

As St. Patrick's Day approached, we decided that the moment was appropriate to pay a visit by taking a back route to Ibanda. We packed up whatever we could manage and made some home-made cards. I no longer remember who the brave envoys were but we sent them off with a blessing. All went well until they came across a road block. The St. Patrick's Day cards created a problem. It was suspected that they contained secret messages! In a war situation everything is suspect! We were so happy to see them safely back. We also learned after weeks that Helen, Sara and Eileen were taking refuge at the Administration in Mbarara. An account of their escape from near capture is another story. God was taking care of us all.

As the country was becoming liberated news was getting through that the liberators had crossed the bridge of Katanga which meant that Kampala was in sight. In Fort Portal we were still in unliberated Uganda. I remember that on Good Friday news came that the Tanzanian army was on the way. I remember sallying forth with a bunch of daffodils to wave in our liberators. There was a general feeling of resurrection. As is the case with Resurrection, it has Passion and Death as a prelude. In this case too liberation did not come without a cross. The liberators were demanding and robbed, pillaged and raped the local population. We saw that the time of our being refugees had happily come to an end. I

remember how we made a brief visit to our house in Nyamitanga. Many spools of film were scattered everywhere! My room was bleakly empty except for a small earthenware pot on the floor. That would be my souvenir I thought. Setting off in the car were Diane driving and Mona Maher, Bernadette McLaughlin and I. Mona and I were leaving for Ireland - we thought. Bernadette was accompanying Diane to Mbarara. However "Ni mar siltear bitear" as they say in Irish. "Things are not always as they are thought to be". I remember calling in on the Medical Missionaries of Mary in Kitovu. There was a huge crater in front of the house where a grenade had fallen, very near the convent. We moved on to Kampala.

The town of Masaka was badly shelled but we managed to get through and we safely reached Nsambya where we would stay overnight. However another saga was waiting to unfold.

The Entebbe Road:

We set off early for the airport. As we rounded a bend, not far from Kevina House (Kevina being Mother Kevin, founder of the Franciscan sisters). A vehicle drove up parallel with us and waving us down. A gun pointed from the window of the car in our direction. I remember saying "The keys Diane". Dutifully Diane handed over the keys. We were there confronted by four army men. A man facing me was wearing a redshirt, and repeated "I could shoot you, you know". I didn't say anything but thought and prayed all the more: "If my time has come so be it Lord". I was amazingly calm and didn't have the least fear of dying. Then from nowhere a thought came to me. One of the priests, Fr. Peter Kanyandago called me into his office before we left, and said "I have a message for you", "Freely you have received, freely give". Just that! There was something prophetic there, I thought. It came to me suddenly, quickly on the Entebbe Road. I wondered if there was something I was holding back!

Yes, my Dannimac coat for Ireland! Quickly I took it off and rather ungraciously threw it at him and off he went joining the others as all four drove off with screeching brakes. We stood there all four, shaken but unscathed. Our car, a brand new Toyota with all our belongings, was gone! Fortunately for us a minibus came on the scene and guessing our plight stopped and offered us a lift to Kampala and to the police station. One of the police officers proffered a pair of spectacles at me. They were indeed mine. After that he gave me a telephone number, which was in my coat pocket and was that of the father of Dr. Veronica Cotter who lived in Cork and was supposed to be contacted by me. Without further ado we set about cancelling and renewing our tickets. There was no Irish embassy nearer than Nairobi so they furnished me with a scrap of paper, representing a passport. Mona's ticket allowed her to leave for Ireland a day before me. Eventually I got on a plane bound for Brussels. There was no one there to meet me: I had no addresses of our houses in Brussels and felt lost on the planet for a while. Eventually either upstairs or downstairs, I found Bernadette Lecluyse. It was still dark when we reached Rue de Lindthout. The sisters were gracious and welcoming and it was relief to find a room for the night and a bed to fall on. I

remember that some time later I was with my sister in
Patricks Street in Cork and gave vent to tears. Delayed
shock!

Later I returned to Maryhill.

We lived to tell the tale.

