A Memory from Ann Strahle (née Cowan)

I entered with the DMJs in September 1967, leaving in July 1969 after deciding that I did not have a vocation to the religious life. I regret nothing of those two years; I met many interesting, lovely people some of whom I am still in touch with. One of them was Jennifer Condron who was in the final year of her novitiate when I entered. She had worked in Uganda previously and was keen to return there. She inspired me with tales of Africa… “Ann, you must go to Mombassa – its heaven on Earth girl!” A couple of years after leaving the novitiate I had a contract to teach in a government school in Zambia. I met up with Jen who was on leave from Ugand, and she said that for my first Christmas in Africa I must spend it in Uganda with her and the rest of the sisters. So it was that in December 1972 I headed for Uganda. Idi Amin was at the height of his powers, and friends in Zambia were horrified to hear of my plans. They varied from “They won’t let you in…” to “They won’t let you out”! But Jen hadn’t mentioned danger, and I trusted her, so plans went ahead.

The British Caledonian Airways plane was late leaving Lusaka and I wasn’t cheered by the fact that their representative told me that I was the only passenger for Entebbe, and that his would be the last plane to land there, my return trip would have to be via Nairobi. It was after 11pmwhen I arrived – and no sign of Jen at the airport, only an official who stamped my passport for 24 hours and told me to report to immigration the next day. Luckily I’d been given the address of a convent in Entebbe so I got into a taxi and gave him the address – not mentioning that I had no Ugandan money with which to pay him! On arrival at the convent (which was locked up for the night) the driver hooted and lo and behold, there was Jen at the window – a most welcome sight. She opened the gates, paid the driver and welcomed me to Uganda!

A hair raising start to a wonderful holiday. I spent a couple of weeks in Fort Portal, a couple in Mbarara, visit to a Game Park , stood on the Equator, experienced the birth of a baby while visiting the hospital and all the while enjoyed the good company of the sisters. Mona Maher bought a live turkey for Christmas dinner which she proceeded to kill, clean and cook. Teresa Clements, another close friend, was there too and we all enjoyed a great time! I found the diary I wrote at the time recently and I had written that it was the best Christmas ever.

The shadow of Idi Amin was of course there too. We had to say goodbye to Sr. Maureen Burbach from the USA who had planned to work at Fort Portal but who was unable to obtain a work permit. The man himself came to Fort Portal to instal the new Uganadan Bishop, and the sisters helped prepare the banquet for him.

Alas Jen, Teresa and Peggy are no longer ith us but I’d like to extend a big thank you to all those great sisters who helped to make my first African Christmas so Memorable.