

A running-away bag.

Sr. Eileen Maher



Some people are more practical than others and Eileen Maher is one such practical woman. Sarah Durkan, Eileen and I opted to remain in Mbarara in February 1979 on the Sunday that the Bishop in panic told us that an invading army was only miles away and that we all should vacate the house, the area and flee. I have no idea what we thought we might achieve by staying but stay we did. Never having been in a war situation before and anxious to offer something positive to the situation I suggested that we fill containers- bath included- with water and lock wardrobes. The first proposal proved useful and the latter foolish as all doors were subsequently hacked open.

That began a two –month period on Nyamitanga hill most of which was spent as refugees in the Diocesan Administration building. We spent the first couple of days in our own house in trepidation as shells and bullets fell around us. We prayed. One particular afternoon the noise of the shells was deafening and we rushed to the pantry which had a solid stone shelf and we crouched on the floor with our heads under the shelf to protect our brains and we must have looked a bit like ducks in a pond. We were in that undignified and embarrassing pose when the now Archbishop Paul Bakyenga, Brother Francis and Fr Peter Kelly arrived to say that Bishop Kakubi insisted that we come and stay at the Administration. By then we were happy to go anywhere that might be a bit safer. As we left we wondered if we should drive our VW up the hill to keep it from being stolen. Unsure of whether that might be a target for a shell, we left it behind. Next day it was taken by the soldiers along with our fridge and anything else that could be transported.

Thus began the two months in the Admin building where we shared an office which had been fitted with three beds. There was a rat in the room which scurried around at night bumping noisily into things. Shelling and counter-shelling went on daily and the noise was terrifying. We watched the shells streak overhead. We watched the blue sky and the beautiful vegetation and it seemed a desecration to have such violation of nature and beauty. As the days and weeks went by we were aware that the time might come when the best option would be to ‘run for it’. Brother Francis had a sense of the route that we would take through the bush and he estimated about 20 or 25 miles to the Rwanda border as the crow flies.

This is where practicality came into the question. Eileen suggested that we pack a running-away bag. We conferred as to what would be included. We certainly would not want to be encumbered by baggage if we had to walk in the heat of the African sun to the Rwanda border. Minimalism was the name of the game. Of course we would need drinking water. And there were some things we would need like a change of clothing. My memory is that we were allowed one comb between the three of us. Yes, a change of clothing and underwear. We could have our own toothbrush but one tube of toothpaste would be shared. The running-away bag (as we named it) was meticulously packed and a list made of the items. If anyone removed something from the running away bag, they had to indicate it on the list to ensure that it would be replaced and that all we would have to do at the crucial hour was grab the bag, confident that the necessities were contained therein. Of course we didn’t follow the rules. Sometimes Sarah and I would remove something from the running-away bag and later Eileen would ask: ‘Did one of you remove x from the running-away bag?’ .. and shamefacedly we would have to own up and replace it.

A moment came during those months when officers of the Liberating army came to the Administration, took our particulars and offered to give us safe-passage to Tanzania. Having

considered the offer, we declined- fearing that the last state might be worse than the first. Our liberation came at Easter when Brigid Stokes, Anatolia and Maria Marti got a laissez-passez from the army to come to Mbarara from Ibanda. They found all three of us with various ailments- colds and boils, etc. Some days later we got permission to travel to Ibanda. The sight of the car travelling along the Ibanda road was such an unexpected one to the local population that they stood and waved and cheered. It was like Palm Sunday. Maybe it was a sign of normality returning. We stopped at Rubindi Parish where the local people and the sisters rushed out to greet us. They had heard rumours that the Cathedral in Nyamitanga had been bombed and the sisters and priests killed. They asked how things were in Mbarara. Sarah struggled to say in Runyankole that our house had been badly damaged- all true. The closest she could come to saying it was: 'Enju yaitu yagwa ahansi.' 'Our house fell down'. This, of course, was an unintended exaggeration. My Runyankole was much more limited than Sarah's but I knew enough to know that the house was still standing so I said: 'Sarah, that's how rumours start.' When I visit her now in the Nursing that story and despite her memory loss she always laughs.



Sr. Sarah Durkan now

Happily we didn't need to use the running away bag but sometimes in subsequent years I have felt that situations can be such that it's no harm to have a running away bag at the ready and no better woman than Eileen Maher to advise you on what to pack in it.

Helen Lane.

PS Eileen Maher swears that there was no rat – that, in fact, it was an ill-sealed flask that hissed. However, I adhere to my memory of a noisy rat. It just shows how subjective our memories are.