

My impressions of my time in Uganda

A Former DMJ

I went to Uganda on the 4th of May 1976 with Sr. Frances Burke from Kilrush, Co. Clare. I met Frances in Brussels; she traveled from England and I had come from Ireland. I did not know Frances nor did she know me. She had my plane ticket with her for us to travel to Uganda. Luck was in it and we recognized each other. Neither of us knew then that there was a time difference of one hour in Brussels, so we thought that we had plenty of time to get the plane. While sitting in the restaurant, we heard the last call for Sr. Frances Burke and myself from Sabena for our flight. Lucky we heard it. It was quite a walk to the gate. Neither of us had seen a travelator (moving walkway) before and we got in on it. It was like magic.

After settling ourselves on the plane and enjoying the meal, it was then 11:55pm. I announced to Frances that it was my birthday today. Her reply was that it would be her birthday in five minutes time (4th & 5th of May 1976). We stopped in Sudan at some small airport to refuel. We were allowed to get off the plane. Both of us were dying for a cup of coffee, but we had no local money. There was a priest on the flight (Mill Hill?). He said that he would get cup of coffee for us – and he did. When we drank the coffee, he then announced that he did not have any local money either. He put some Sterling or Dollars on the counter and off we went. They were not happy with us.

Back on the plane to Uganda (this bit sticks in my mind to this very day), the plane descended over Lake Victoria. I held on to my seat as we skimmed over the lake. My heart was in my mouth - couldn't think, just went numb. Anyhow, we hit the runway, to my relief. That last part took all the good out of the journey. I suppose if I had to look at a map before leaving, I would have had an idea that the lake was near the runway.

The next amazing thing that I saw was on the road from the airport to Kampala: fellows on bicycles going to the market had three chickens hanging down on either side of the back of the bike. The poor chickens were trying to twist their heads up to get some air. On the way down to Mbarara, on the side of the road, people were cooking meat and corn on the cob. It was great to pull in for food.

I thought that the house in Ibanda was amazing, better than what I left behind in Ireland – things looked good. On the other hand, when I got working in the hospital, things were different. People were so sick. I worked with the children and men, while Frances worked with the women and maternity patients across in the other building. She often shouted across to me. I have a vivid vision of all the women at the hospital busy washing themselves and their clothes every morning. I must say, the hospital was well laid out and Sr. Brigid Stokes had the grounds full of roses, it was an amazing sight with the colour.

I enjoyed learning Runyankole, it was a bit of fun and it all made good sense. I was not good at it but I had enough get by. I could understand it, but my replies were short.

Things got tough as time wore on in the country in the build up to the war. Medical supplies got scarce. Trips to Kampala to get supplies became fewer and fewer due to the lack of fuel and it got dangerous on the road with soldiers' road blocks stopping and searching the traffic going to Kampala. Our food was quite scarce during the war, not helped by the dry weather.

Breakfast consisted of soapy tea which was bought in the local *duka* (shop) as it sat on the shelf beside the soap. I was grateful for it, anyhow. We also had one slice of pineapple - not two.

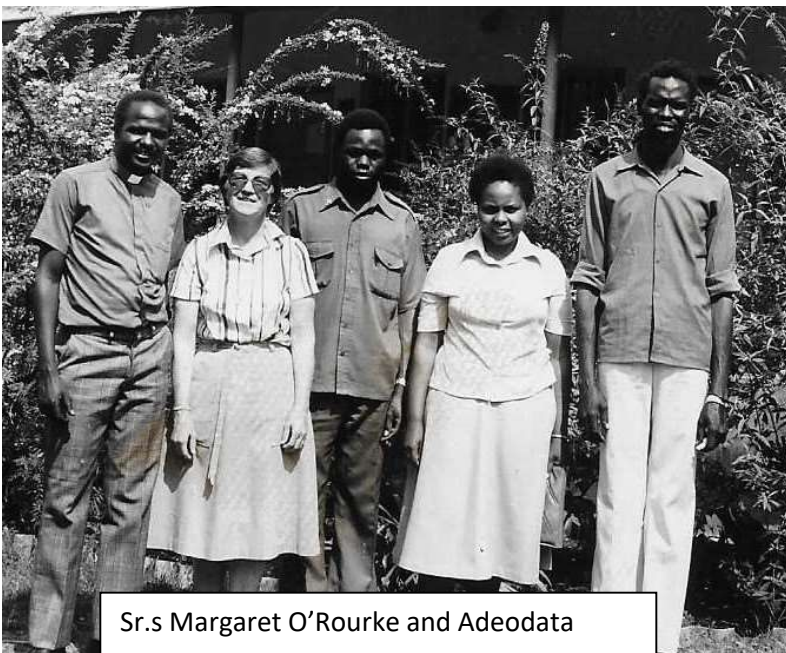
The dinner menu consisted of potatoes which tasted of petrol or paraffin oil as they were bought on the side of the road and put loosely in the boot of the car with the jerry cans. The lids on the cans were not great so the petrol splashed out. We had cow that was killed in the local area for meat which we went with the bucket to collect. That too, tasted good in my book.

We did have a bag of flour during the war for bread, since we were the richest in the locality! The bad thing about it was that it was full of 'cotton wool', (a result of weevil infestation). Since Sr. Sarah Durkan was one of our war guests, Sr. Bridget Stokes had a plan to keep everyone busy and not to be pondering on the war, the missiles overhead and the comings and goings of the Tanzanian soldiers. It was Sarah's job to sieve the flour and to peel the *kabaragaara* (small bananas), slit them in two and put them out to dry in the sun on a wire tray. We called them Kerry Creams.

Since it was busy in the hospital during the war, I would come up late in the night and quite hungry. By then Sr. Helen Lane had arrived. Helen would be sitting there in candle light "hoping not to burn too much candle." Now I must fill you in - Sr. Eileen Hanrahan was in charge of the daily food rationing. The bread came under that. At night, Helen and I would carefully lift the lid off the enamelled bread bin without making a noise. It had a very distinctive sound that everyone knew. The pantry window opened onto the courtyard which carried the sound of the bread bin as it echoed down the bedroom corridor. For anyone who knows the layout of the Ibanda house, they will understand. Two decent slices of bread were silently liberated and we both enjoyed every bite. All this was done in a whisper. We were hoping that Eileen would not notice the size of the loaf the following morning.

After the war, I went home on holidays. The BBC workers in Kampala asked me to bring a reel of film all about the war to London where a BBC person was waiting for me in Heathrow. I had to be careful with the reel that it did not get x-rayed. I duly handed it over at the airport.

I returned to Karamoja which was a different world - a new language to learn. Again, I got the hang of some of it. It was fun and some of the locals were interested in teaching me. I had lessons from the Italians, so it was a mixture of Italian and Karamojong. I was glad that they had their own fruit trees and plenty of Italian food. It was brought in by plane by a wealthy volunteer from Italy called Don Vittorio. Karamoja was very dry and barren. I was six months there before anyone else arrived. I lived with the Sacred Heart Sisters and the Italian Verona sisters. During that time I heard that the Concern staff were withdrawing. They had been very active during the famine in Karamoja but when the worst was over it was time for them to move on. I went and asked what they planned to do with their furniture, fridge etc. They were happy to donate it to us. I got it stored till the others came and we had a house of our own.



Sr.s Margaret O'Rourke and Adeodata

Frances Burke, Margaret O'Rourke and Adeodata joined me in our new mission in Lorengedwat. Frances and I started a clinic in the back of the church. Later we got a lovely building. We also went out to out-stations (e.g. under a tree and locally built churches). We had folding tables and chairs and everything was transported, set up from scratch and folded up at the end of the day. People got used to us and each day more and more came to the clinic. There were a lot of cattle raids

going on between the different tribes, Matheniko, Turkana, Pokot and

many more. The raids were ongoing the whole time. 'The enemy is coming' was a constant refrain.

Water was very scarce there so when they could get it, it was amazing. The women had to walk miles to the bore hole to get water and then it tasted of sulphur. The women built the huts and appeared to do most of the work. The men and the chiefs held meetings under big trees.

At one stage I got hepatitis – I was yellow as an egg. I even looked worse as my best nightdress was yellow. I went from Matany hospital to Nsambya hospital. When I was admitted to Nsambya hospital the nurse told me that a prisoner died in my bed the night before and that Sr. Marie Marti died in the room opposite, the week before.

These are some of my impressions of my time in Uganda; they were good, tough and frightening at times. Many thanks to all the people I lived with and met.