

Chapter No. 1:

BEGIN OF THE JOURNEY

This was the first time that I had ever been on a plane and I was palpably nervous both about the journey, and my final destination. I boarded a DC3 of JAT ((Yugoslav Air Travels) at the airport “Lučko” of Zagreb on Tuesday late afternoon of November 14, 1961. Thus I have started my long travel that first leg took me to Beograd.

A few hours ago I said goodbye to Ljiljana and Vesna at JAT city terminal where I got on a bus to the airport for a ride of about an hour or so. I traveled light, with one large cardboard suitcase which was subjected to such close scrutiny by customs that I wondered whether this was because of its final destination or my evident nervousness. With me I carried a small boarding case and a leather handbag that were thoroughly checked too. However my final destination was Khartoum in the Sudan.



Our family's house VRBA (a former tavern) on the Island Hvar in the Adriatic Sea

I was left clutching my leather bag on board while I reflected over the previous six months. I was in my last term of three years as Assistant at the Civil Engineering Faculty of the University of Zagreb. It was the third time application that was to be the last possible one. I was supposed to make for a PhD first if I wanted to continue with my scientific career enabling me to advance to the higher position levels at the University too. I had applied a dozen times for a scholarship which would enable me to study abroad for my PhD thesis which I needed to get on the next rung of the career ladder. My intention was an advanced study in a renowned Laboratory for Testing Materials abroad. Such a stipendium would allow me to support my family by gaining the necessary freedom in time to concentrate on the subject of my chosen thesis. All twelve applications were promptly rejected without any explication. I knew all too well the reasons what that as I was life witness of a war crime that was an absolute taboo theme in the present Yugoslav regime.

Since my release from the POW camp at Kovin on August 14, 1945 after surviving the death march from May 15 until June 2, 1945 I was “persona non grata” for the present regime. I would never dare to talk about this to anybody through the many years to come. Even Ljiljana, my wife, knew very little about my ordeals only guessing something of the terrible experiences 1945.

In spring of 1961 Univ. Professor Zlatko Kostrenčić, my senior and chief of the cathedra “Strength of Materials & Testing of Materials” showed me a letter from the Khartoum

Technical Institute (KTI) in the Sudan. They were looking for a Senior Lecturer in Civil engineering on structural subjects. He suggested I apply as this would be a good chance for me to get abroad. Kostrenčić spent one year lecturing at the Khartoum University but he could not tell me anything about KTI or how would my family settle in Khartoum. There was one small hitch I would have to learn teaching in English and I spoke not a word of. Without really caring or understanding much about the job or conditions I sent off an application to the Sudanese Embassy in Beograd. It was more than just a vague attempt but I really did not care about the outcome – it was my thirteenth job application in the series after all.

To my surprise a few weeks a reply arrived several pages long with a proposed 3-year contract, some information about how to get there, accommodation for my family and holidays and some more details which I could not understand at that time. I was invited for an interview in Beograd which would be conducted in English then, if I found the contract acceptable, I would be invited to sign it. With no better choice and a lot of help from my family whose English was only marginally better than mine I composed my first letter in English. Then I set about learning English in earnest using tapes and books. For hours I also read aloud from some basic coaching books too.

On a day in June 1961 I took an express bus to Beograd arriving at the Sudanese Embassy in the hotel “Majestic” ridiculously early. I waited an hour for the office to open for business and another for the Consul to arrive. The Sudanese officer was delightful, but, with my limited English, I stuck to brief answers ‘yes’, ‘yes indeed’ ‘not necessarily’ etc. He handed me a book in English about Yugoslavia geography indicating that I should read it aloud to him. Despite many words which I had never heard of I stumbled along until the disaster struck with the word “peninsula” – how should it be pronounced by Jove? The Consul gently suggested that I might go for an English course in UK during the next school holidays in 1952. So I provisionally signed the contract and prepared to travel to Khartoum early September assuming that I succeeded in obtaining passports and visas for the family. Because I did not expect any particular problems to arise I decided to spend a pleasant summer holiday at the family house in Starigrad on Island of Hvar.



Čedomil Buchberger (my brother-in-law) leads my parents moving from VRBA to their new accommodation

When we returned to Zagreb I received a call from Mr. Ibler whom I knew to be the architect of the top ranking Government offices calling me to an important meeting at his office. There his explanation came to me like a stroke of lightning out of blue sky. I was to act as the structural engineer on the project for Marshal Tito’s new residence in Zagreb.

The Special Committee had made this commendation based upon my successful design work for the Yugoslav Pavilion at the World Fair in Bruxelles 1958. Now for me this meant to be extremely difficult task in persuading Mr. Ibler and the Committee that I would not be able to take up this chore. I explained that I had signed contract with the Government of Sudan and that this would involve a long absence. Finally I got out of it by suggesting another colleague who would this job.

My reflections stopped abruptly with the landing in Beograd. Unlike the flight time passed unnoticed on my return as I was thinking intensively. After disembarking I left my heavy suitcase at the left-luggage store and boarded a carrier's bus to get to the downtown terminal. I found an inexpensive room in the close by hotel "Metropol" and went out for a quick dinner. It was an unpleasantly windy and wet evening so I quickly returned to the hotel to make phone calls to my family in Zagreb and my parents in Osijek. My mother-in-law in Zagreb whole heartedly supported our decision to emigrate but my parents felt very differently. My mother was very worried about our survival in such a strange far off country and she may have felt that we would not return to Yugoslavia at all. Father did not like my idea of abandoning a safe career and a relatively secure home: our small flat in Zagreb. It was a difficult conversation full of reprimands and cautioning. I found it difficult to talk to my parents on the phone and impossible to describe the extent of my experiences and set backs in the past several months and before too. I just could not talk about all problems not even to my parents and not on the phone in particular.

I could not sleep for several hours after that with one thought chasing the next as I contemplated exactly what I was thinking of doing and why I had to leave my home country for good. But the more I thought the more convinced I became that it was the right thing to do. There followed some very frustrating and humiliating six months trying to obtain a passport. I had to postpone my departure to Khartoum several times as the police passport office repeatedly turned down my applications without any reason. I was fully aware that my "politically intimidating" past history of 1945 must play a definite role in my misfortune with the police. Trying to hide my frustration I visited all the UDBA (Department of State Security) offices starting from the lowest level to the top ones too. As the last I went to the UDBA of Croatian Republic that was the top most of all police institutions.

All of these institutions were informed concerning my "problem". They knew everything about my political behavior and conduct since 1945 but it was not their decision to stop the Passport office in its doings. I visited few times the Faculty representative of UDBA and the University Rector who learned about the constant passport withdrawal.

Finally I was called by the passport office and the red-haired official who I had learned to hate. He opened his booth and producing my passport said: "Here, get it if you must go". He threw the document over his desk with a most disgusting glare. I will never forget the expression on his face: it reminded me of those many humiliations and disgraces that I had experienced in the Death March as a Prisoner of War in 1945. Get out of this morass where you and your family live fast. Then, burn the bridges behind yourself!

The following day exhausted by bad dreams and short sleep I arrived an hour before time at the hotel "Majestic" and waited in the lobby watching the Sudanese staff arrive at work. The Consul arrived around 11 hours at last. I was issued with the necessary instructions and S£25 cash (Sudanese pound was rather weak at those times) for travel expenses. I had to rush to find a bank before closing time and found one just as the doorman was about to lock up. My desperate look must have convinced him of my urgency and he let

me in to exchange the money. Perspiring heavily I ran to catch the airport bus at 11:30. Now I could relax for an hour or so until the bus stopped at the JAT departure gate.

There were a few passengers for the flight to Athens at check-in counter. Athens was to be my next stop. I went for my large suitcase first and proceeded for the check-in that I finished quickly. It was agreed that I would post home all local currency Dinars not needed anymore. Thus I went to the Post office and after I finished the transfer next step was to stroll over for the passport and custom inspections. This done it was time to relax in the Departure lounge until the flight time was due.

In the Departure lounge were not too many single passengers waiting I joined a passenger about my age and after introducing ourselves we went on talking about our journeys. He was traveling to India on a similar arrangement as mine with the Commission for foreign cultural relations of the Yugoslav Federal Executive Council. There was a group of people talking excitedly among themselves. They soon left saying goodbye to a younger man who joined two of us soon after. He introduced himself as Bora Mikić and was on his way to Khartoum via Athens and seconded as the Lecturer to KTI too – like me.



A good rest in the shade of Amphitheater mantle piece below the Acropolis

I was getting hungry but soon we were called to board JAT flight to Athens on which we were served a good meal. No wonder as there were a few passengers only on that flight that was uneventful as we flew above the clouds and nothing was to be seen. The DC3 aircraft landed in Athens around 16:30 and the stewardess was rushing Bora and me to join her to go together to the office of JAT. There we got our overnight voucher for the hotel and meals as well as the information that our onward tickets are to be collected at the Sudanese Embassy in Athens. All sounded rather intricate but we two inexperienced world travelers took it easy. Riding on the bus of JAT reached the center of Athens and found our hotel nearby the terminal.

The hotel caretaker obviously knew how to deal with such two adolescents. He suggested we take the tour “Athens by night” that included sightseeing and an original entertainment evening in a local “Old Athens” in Piraeus. He concluded his proposal asking with some expectation: “Do you remember the song ‘Never on Sunday’?” We found the offered price “reasonable” for our pockets and had enough time for a light meal before we boarded the bus. Bora and I returned to the hotel short of midnight after we had a great time in Athens that night.

Next morning found us strolling around the city centre where we watched the changing of the guard ceremony in the front of the Parliament while waiting for the Sudanese Embassy

to open its doors sometime after 10 AM. Our tickets collected we stood contemplating how to spend the time until the flight departure as 20:45. We took our hotel caretaker's advice again and booked a day-tour of Athens and visit to the Acropolis including a lunch too. For me it was rather exciting to view and visit so many places I remembered from my school days regarding the Antique culture and Greek history.

The sightseeing of Acropolis made me forget about the too many uncertainties linked with my onward journey. The great temple impressed me profoundly as well as the Caryatides supporting the roof beam of a smaller temple. Sitting on a stone bench in the amphitheater I wandered in my mind off to the performances in the Antique. Soon these imaginings faded away with the reality that we had to conclude this tour and return to the hotel to collect our luggage. We took the shuttle bus at the terminal for the airport that to reach the flight departure well on time.



Tired Zvonko find a hard sit close to the Acropolis

Time dragged on and 22 hours passed already when the Sudan Airways departure was announced at last. We left Athens at 22:30 and I was happy when the meal and drinks were served after all the excitements of this **Thursday November 16, 1961**. The aircraft was a DC-4 with 4 four turbo-engines the largest airplane I've seen yet. The night flight was good for a nap so I woke up when we landed at Cairo for refueling. All the passengers had to disembark when the hot air and haze hit me despite it was well before dawn. So this must be Africa after all – what would it be like in the Sudan?

Soon we were in the air again and below spread a broad, brownish wasteland stretched far as long one could see anything when the haze or clouds parted during the ongoing flight. We arrived to Khartoum International Airport soon after 5 AM. After we had cleared the formalities and both of us stepped out into a rather simple arrivals lounge. It was rather hot but before we thought about doing anything a gentleman approached and welcomed us to the Sudan. Univ. Prof. Bogdan Kuzmanović was the Head of the Faculty of Civil Engineering at University of Khartoum. He had waited for two of us as the Yugoslav Embassy informed him about our arrival.

Slightly dazed by lack of sleep and the long flight I could not really grasp what was going to happen to Bora and me. Our luggage was placed in Bogdan's large car and he drove us towards the Khartoum Town on a tarmac road with desert each side until we came to some residential low-built dwellings with some greenery to be seen protruding above high garden walls. Bora was supposed to stay at the University's Student House until he arranged his own accommodation with the Ministry of Education. Bogdan invited me to stay with his family in their large house provided to him by Khartoum University where he

was lecturing. Bogdan's wife Galja and daughter Natasha met us at the house entrance joined by their Boxer watch-dog. After the introduction formalities were over that included dog's sniffing acceptance, Bogdan had suggested I take a shower and some rest before lunch time. It was **Friday November 17, 1961** and there was nothing I could do as it was Muslims Day of prayers and relaxation. The great majority of Sudan Northerners are Muslims and the Islam is the state's religion.

The access to house was from the main road on a graveled path through a gate in a high massive wall. We came to a shadowed portico passing a narrow garden strip with grass that stretched along the whole length of plot. The one-story house was really large and built in the old colonial style, roofed in with tin sheets of slight slant. Below tin sheets was a gap that allowed the breeze to pass between roof and the structural support of room's ceiling below. Thus I learned the importance of a twin-shell cover to be very essential in all hot climates particularly with extreme sun daily heating up. Inside the house the rooms had rather high ceilings and openings at top of walls with blinds thus allowing good natural ventilation too. There was a spacious bathroom and few washing fountains in recesses along the long corridor leading to the kitchen and a pantry too. But where is a toilette or a proper WC?

Soon I learned the answer to this mystery as Bogdan showed me two separate wooden huts attached onto the rear tall dividing wall at far corners of the backyard each. The larger hut was servants' accommodation and the other small one had two compartments with doors which reminded me of the old country latrines at home. Inside the latrine looked exactly like those at home with a round cover cum handle that closed the "gloomy" opening. But there was a significant difference in what was below that opening. There was no pit below the seat board but a large bucket behind that an opening in the wall was closed with some kind of sliding-door. Unfortunately this sliding-door was the easiest access to an intruder and most thieves came in that way.

Soon I would learn about the "Khartoum Midnight Express" that was to be the communal buckets' content collecting system. There was a narrow pathway behind the adjacent backyards between the neighboring plots of private residences. The servants entered from this pathway to their backyard huts as did the Midnight Express that traveled the same way too. In the old colonial days a column of camels carried the buckets but now a tractor dragged a rubber tired, low-platform trailer with buckets and into which latrine buckets were emptied. This ghastly work was done by South Sudanese as a Sudanese Moslem would never do such a "job". Strangely enough there was almost no smell because of the dryness (less 10% of humidity).

In the afternoon Bogdan drove Bora and me to meet a Yugoslav elderly couple living at another of University's residential areas closer to the airport. The Radojčićs were both mathematicians – he a professor at the University and she the senior lecturer at KTI. Over a very British tea ceremony we chatted about the newcomers' future in Khartoum. Then as if in passing Mrs. Radojčić told us that the KTI students were on a strike that may last for several more weeks and there was therefore no hurry to visit the Ministry of Education. But both Bora and I felt it essential to get organized here promptly and to find accommodation for our families who would hopefully join us shortly. We soon learnt that life in Khartoum runs in a complete different way and at a much slower pace than we were used to at our distant homes.

Next day Bogdan took us to the Yugoslav Embassy to meet the staff and other Yugoslavs living here. But soon I was extremely happy to get out of this place because such a kind of

meeting reminded me about those I have had to attend before. I have sincerely hoped that I would not have to go to such meetings that always included some kind of political indoctrination. This was the case back in Yugoslavia that I learned to abhor so much.



The aerial view on the town of Starigrad town that is located in a deep bay of the Island Hvar north side. House VRBA is at lower left corner of the large park

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