

## Chapter No. 2:

# LEARNING HOW TO LIVE IN KHARTOUM

Luck would have it that a lecturer on the Building Department of KTI turned up at Bogdan's house the next day. Maurice Neirouz (42) was a short fellow driving a large American car so that any passerby could hardly see him sitting in it! Maurice was an Egyptian and a Copt by the religion; he lectured the Buildings Design and Draftsmanship at the top two classes of KTI. He was happy to learn that my teaching of the Building Mechanics and Structural Engineering would be complimentary to his subjects. He offered to show me around the Ministry of Education first thing then the compound of German Exhibition which was due to start on November 25. He was doing some design work at a few stands there and he thought that I might have some ideas about how to decorate the interiors. Maurice came to me as a real "Deus ex Machina" who helped me enormously to overcome my doubts and the shock of having nothing to do while waiting for the strike to solve.



*The access alley to the Khartoum University main building*

The Ministry of Education was situated in a kind of army barracks on the main road running along the left bank of Blue Nile River. It was not far from the University and the promenade was a pleasant walk under the shadows of big trees planted on the promenade along the Blue Nile. On this first visit there I followed Maurice all the way through the maze of corridors and dozens of doors with Arabic inscriptions. After many greetings sounding like "Salaam" or "Ahlon" we stopped at the office of the Director of Education who would be my ultimate boss during my stay in the Sudan. The director was not in yet but his male secretary took notice of my arrival and handed me an Almanac (in English) that contained the most important data for a Government official. We waited for a while during that time I started reading first few pages learning two most important instructions I should adhere to rigorously in this climate.

First instruction said to drink at least a gallon of liquid daily that are about 4,5 liters. The next advised that one should take a salt tablet per day. We were advised by the secretary to return "Bukra", that is tomorrow at a certain time when the director might be in – "Insh' Allah" he added.

Maurice drove to the site of German Exhibition where we lunched at a new and well organized restaurant. A few Germans strictly controlled few troops of hired local waiters

who followed their instructions despite having some problems with left hand traffic for that the kitchen doors had to be changed after later. The Sudanese showed particular interest in the kitchen equipment with several automatic appliances and some onlookers gazed through the open rear doors mostly interested watching the dish-washer working.

After lunch Maurice showed me around several cubicles at the German exhibition where he was in charge of general arrangements and decorations. My ability to speak in German helped him tremendously with explanations specifically where one could get certain items or materials locally. In the following weeks we acted almost like twins although we significantly differed in stature and in temperament too.

My first host was happy about me staying in his house but his wife was not easy to please and would often grumble about my being there. So I spent much of my spare time at the University library developing formulae for curved beams that problem was to be the best I could think of just to be left alone. I loathed having to use the latrines and accepted Maurice's invitation to come to his house every day to use his flush toilet - a real WC!

My first letter home I had air-mailed on Monday November 20, 1961. I continued to write at weekly intervals for our three year duration in the Sudan. Maurice took me to the Sunday's Holy Mass to the Catholic Church that was located close to the Nile. It was my secret intention to show my Yugoslav communist compatriots that I do not fit in with their political scheme at all. I hoped that they would leave me in peace in Khartoum at last but it became obvious to me that my "political untrustworthiness" would come to light here sooner or later anyway.

During the next week I spent most days at the Exhibition helping Maurice putting up the decorations in a few stalls enjoying the German food too. Maurice showed me around the city's center, shops and we often stopped in the "sukh" (= market) where he bought some vegetables and fruits. We had some meals at a Greek restaurant that was his favorite.

Together we visited the Director of Education a few times as well so I learned the art of waiting, how to converse and chat about trivial matters (was taught by Maurice) until it yielded results. I heard about Bora having some problems regarding his contract which lead to misunderstandings and disputes. There was an error with the annual amount due to two of us. The smaller salary was wrongly offered to me of instead to Bora who was younger and less professionally experienced.

This mistake was corrected when we signed the final contract in Khartoum. I was delighted to receive 22% more than anticipated but poor Bora received 22% less than he had thought. Maurice thought that Bora's behavior would make his life difficult in Khartoum and he would not stay for long.

KTI students were still on strike. My family were due to arrive in a few weeks but every time I asked about our accommodation I was told "bado bukra" ("after tomorrow" that meant in Sudan almost as "never"). The Director promised to get me a car from a Government sponsored consignment early in January but likewise he ended each conversation on the matter with an "Insh' Allah" which made me nervous. I discussed these issues with my friend Maurice almost daily.

It was obvious that it would not be prudent to buy a bicycle in this climate. Thus I walked along the Nile promenade often or stayed in the University Library for a while to look through the professional books available there. Maurice really looked well after me and so

I brought up the subject of my family coming soon as well as my problem with their accommodation. There was also the transport problem once I start teaching on KTI when the strike would be over. We discussed all probabilities sincerely but Maurice's tolerance and his optimism appeased somehow me in my worries.

The KTI time table contained 6-7 teaching sessions of 45 minutes per day except on Fridays and the instructions started at 07:30. During the months of December and January the daily temperatures were around 30°C going down say 20°C at nights with very low air humidity of 10% or less. Thus one could not sense any perspiration although the body loss of liquid was very large scale. The body temperature regulation consisted mainly of the skin evaporation causing a considerable loss of body water. I was told that the daily temperatures would start to rise to and over 45°C+ in the shade as from February and mercilessly carry on throughout the following 9 months.



*The dollop-wheel at the left bank of the Blue Nile close to the Khartoum University*

The days dragged on and the first news from Zagreb was not encouraging at all. My wife had problems in getting their passports too. The red-haired officer at the passport office had been giving my wife Ljiljana similar problems. Fortunately Ljiljana knew a man from the UDBA (of the counter-espionage section) from her work as translator of the Hungarian language on the International Trade Exhibition in Zagreb. Part of her duty was to report information she could gather in contacts with Hungarians that could be considered politically suspicious at those times. She contacted him asking for help with the passports. The matter was soon resolved but not until the re-headed officer threw the two passports on the desk in a similar way he did with me six weeks previously.

The German Exhibition closed on December 12, 1961. I never had such an unconcerned life being relatively well paid for doing nothing. The days passed without any urgency, there was no scramble or any particular chaos but it was difficult to endure the waiting. I dressed simply wearing light shirts, trousers and sandals. I found myself disturbed by the stillness after sunset at about 18:00 hours each day.

Ljiljana wrote that they may travel in early in January 1962. She was having trouble paying for tickets and other expenses linked to giving up our household and packing of goods we were allowed to take out of Yugoslavia. A good friend Mrs. Jelka Kappler offered her three large and strong wooden crates she had used when moving house before - free of charge. The Sudanese Ministry promised paying all travel expenses and charges of removal when my family joined me in Khartoum. I followed consciously Maurice's advice and never did I admit that we did not have any savings and that I had to borrow money for our move to the

Sudan. I learnt to control my temperament and to reign in my feelings in front of a Sudanese. In contrast I heard that Bora was making quite a lot of noise around and that the grumbled about anything thus annoying the Director and any senior officer at the Ministry of Education.

My main problem was the accommodation at Kuzmanovićs. I often talked about it to Maurice and his good friend Dr. Shawki Saad to whom he had introduced me soon after arrival. Dr. Shawki was a University professor and an Egyptian Copt too who had a vast experience of living in the Sudan for long time. The three of us went occasionally to the Sudan or Nile Club (formerly British) where we dined on rather large portions of “fish and chips”. This soon became one of favorite dishes. The Nile fishes were always fresh with few bones even in a huge chunk of meat.

We went to the open-air cinemas sometimes. I was surprised when Maurice told me to take a pullover and long trousers. He brought pillows and woolen blankets because we sat in steel sheet armchairs in the open at temperatures near to 25°C with air humidity less than 10% was rather chilly and one felt like freezing. The Sudanese wore only their standard white linen “galabia” – a type of long dress with wide long sleeves. They bound around their heads the traditional white turban of about 9m long linen cloth and a woolen neck scarf in the cold months – provided one had it.



***The Blue Nile Hotel was the best one at times next to the road along river left bank***

My accommodation was getting really critical when Bogdan disclosed that he had to go on a week-long excursion with his students. At the same time KTI announced that the regular teaching would start on a Saturday December 16th so my transportation became urgent too. My good friend Maurice invited me to move to his house instantly and offered to me his upstairs bed-room as for my accommodation. He believed that I could stay with him even if my family arrived as we all could arrange somehow to stay together as long as needs must. Although my transport to and fro to KTI had been resolved for the time being I still hopped that I would get my car – a VW1964 “Beetle” in a matter of weeks.

I immensely enjoyed this change for the better and settled quickly into Maurice’s bedroom despite the many religious pictures and icons hanging on the walls. The bed was quite hard one with a kapok-filled thin mattress resting on wooden boards. I was so happy to have a WC, wash-basins and showers that existed in Maurice’s two storied house. The upper floor was a bit shorter in length than the ground floor which extended deeper along a narrow garden. It contained a dinning room, kitchen, stores and a servant’s quarter at

the far end. The house was located in a main street on the way to the Railway Station and closer to the center of Khartoum City too.

Ljiljana's letter of 22.12.1961 gave details of their travel arrangements and told me that the crates were packed with all items listed to be ready for the customs inspection. She had to declare all books, items of arts, crockery and cutlery, utensils like sewing machine, radio etc. The custom officer had to inspect and seal the crates then move them by train to Rijeka harbor where they would be laded on a Yugoslav cargo ship. This cargo ship takes a few passengers on its tour and would visit few Mediterranean harbors and pass through Suez Channel to reach Port Sudan harbor in the Red Sea. This was the first time I heard that my family would travel by sea and to take a train from Port Sudan to Khartoum depending on the day of their arrival there. These travel arrangements were obvious - Ljiljana seriously had to keep down the expenditure as much as possible. The royalties for publishing of my booklet on "Steel Scaffolding" would suffice to pay back my parents for the borrowed money and pay for the travel tickets including other official formalities. Later I learned that my mother-in-law had to sell a complete six-set of the jubilee Rosenthal golden-rimmed porcelain to pay back part of our debts there. Thus we left Yugoslavia almost "poor as a church mouse" but without anything unpaid but being free to start a new life after all.



***My new VW "Beetle" on "Railnas" Street of Khartoum with the President's Palace in far background***

It was time to start with the preparations for my first lectures in English. To be on the safe side I was writing the lecture text in standard KTI copybooks. KTI students got all items such as books, copybooks, pencils, pens etc. free of charge. The KTI syllabus was coordinated and supervised by the Lancaster Cheshire Technical Institute in UK who also supplied the books to be used by the lecturers. To my surprise these books were rather old publications some even from 19th century others contained chapters which made no sense in the Sudan. Why should you teach about puddle-steel, cast iron structures, snow load or a staircase in a multi-story building – none of which existed in the Sudan? I was astounded that such impracticalities and absurdities were to be taught in the 20th century in a country which required a different and realistic technical education.

On my first visit to KTI Maurice offered to introduce me to the Principal Sir El Khatim El Khalifa but he was out of the Sudan of course. We went to see the Administration Vice-Principal Sayed (= Mister) Farah M. Farah who was in office and greeted me amicably and with an enthusiasm I really did not expect. Sayed Farah was almost gigantic and for a Sudanese he was very dark with such a strong handshake that he almost picked me up. He told me would teach the subjects "Strength of Materials" in class B6 and "Theory of

Structures” in both of the two postgraduate classes B6 and B7. I was happy about because both subjects were in my line of lecturing back in Yugoslavia particularly the first one. What I did not know at the time was that the subject “Strength of Materials” included a series of lectures on the “Mechanics of stiff bodies”. The later were incompatible with the main subject that of the elastic-plastic characteristic of any material and structure. I went home and opened the books that I was supposed to use in my lectures preparing the students for the final exams at the end of school year in June. I got a genuine shock when I found out the year of publishing and the books’ contents. Never mind, let me concentrate on teaching in English first in writing the text to be cited that included definitions, formulae derivations and their usage. At last I had some proper work to do.

Maurice helped me with the pronunciations and I learnt by heart complete sentences to be dictated to the students later. At my first lecture I was rather nervous but the students helped me whenever I mispronounced a word. There was a great laughter when I wrote the Greek symbol “pi” saying “pee” and students corrected me to pronounce it like “pie”. No, I said stubbornly as the “pie” means a cake. Then they asked why not to teach in Arabic and I had to admit that coming to the Sudan it meant that I do teach in English. I also explained that all their technical books are in English and that they have to pass exams in English too. Later I stunned them by explaining that we use the decimal system invented by an Arabic scholar but we have to write ciphers in Latin but calculate using Imperial size units. From then on we became “sahba sahba” (pronounced “sava”) that is for “good friends”.

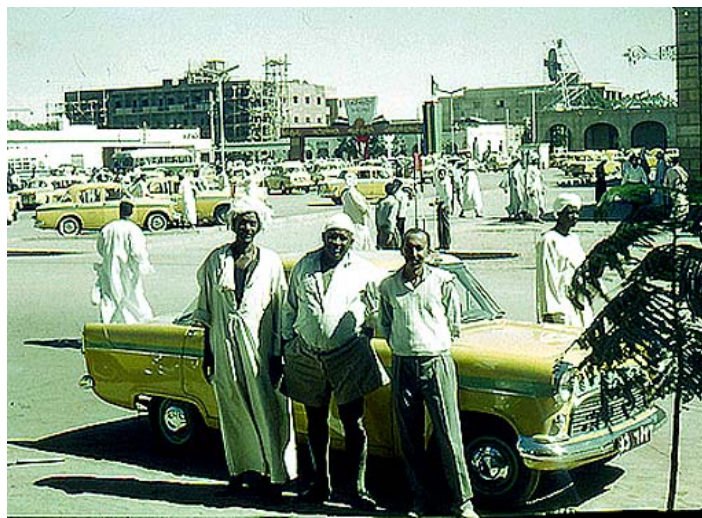
There was a short break for the Christmas festivities but I felt lonely celebrating it without my family for the first time. We had a party at the Yugoslav Club in Khartoum South where my countrymen had a good time waiting for the changeover from 1961 to 1962 New Year. I just could not stay in the company of my fellow countrymen thus I went outside to stroll into the desert looking at the stars that were so different here. I wondered what would bring the year 1962 to us who decided to leave our home for good. I said to myself “Pass the buck!” Also thinking about our families and friends I continued in saying “I left for good and you stay here doing whatever you like!”

The event of New Year 1962 was officially celebrated at the Yugoslav Embassy with the opening of the Yugoslav exhibition of industrial products. In one of the pavilions there were presented photographs of the Belgrade Conference of Non-Aligned States. I knew that this was just a pure propaganda which I so firmly abhorred now. In the early evening General Ibrahim Abboud, the President of the Supreme Council of Sudan, invited some 2.000 guest of honor to celebrate the sixth anniversary of the 1962 Independence Day in the State gardens next to Blue Nile River. General Abboud came to power in a military coup d’état in 1958 and ruled until his government was toppled by a civilian coup d’état in August 1964.

For me these were the most boring 45 minutes consisting of hanging around not knowing anyone well enough to start a conversation. I had time to marvel at the collection of arms hanging at the pompous entrance walls most of them captured from British soldiers. A black marble board on palace stairwell marks the place where General Gordon was killed following the defense debacle of Khartoum siege in 1885 when the Egyptian government withdrew its army from here. Actually the Sudanese insurgency started in 1881 under the guidance of their mystic leader Mahdi who died in 1882 before the rebellious forces conquered the City of Khartoum in 1885. His successors Khalifa Abd Allahi lead the Sudanese warriors to a victory and ruled over the Sudan 2.5Mio km<sup>2</sup> until General H. Kitchener defeated him at Omdurman in 1898.

In the New Year I took possession of my first car: that was a deep blue Gulf Sedan de Luxe VW1961 aka "Beetle". It was registered on a number K7243 on January 9, 1962. I started driving with utmost caution as I was not used to left hand driving or the erratic and speedy Khartoum yellow taxis drivers. At first I stubbornly drove at 40km/h behind faster Maurice's Ford who soon became impatient with my crawling speed after a while.

We lunched often at a Greek restaurant "Athena" where food was tasty but also oily. We bought a lot of our fresh vegetables and fruits at the main open sukh near the city's center. For me it was quite unusual to get on that sukh fresh grape, mangos and guavas (never tasted before), few kinds of bananas, oranges, mandarins, huge water melon and imported apples. There was a plentitude of tomatoes, potatoes, cucumbers, cabbages and salads, but the eggs were small having a thin shell. Various meats (seldom pork) under strict veterinarian control came from a refrigerating plant and was sold in a covered shed together with live poultry. The best of Nile fishes were huge tilapias or the perch.



***Khartoum City's central square with the taxi central parking lot***

Of the animals the most interesting were the almost hairless camels that roamed around the city too. There were a few donkeys and some kind of goats grazing almost anywhere what was growing or even paper as such. Many dogs strayed everywhere - Muslims do not like dogs because some of chased Prophet's darling cats - and certainly went after any cat they came across. The abundant charcoal black ravens owed their safety to their efficiency as scavengers and rubbish cleaners. The gardens were flooded a foot deep on an ordered day once per week. The water pumped from Blue Nile was distributed via a maze of shallow channels around the urban part of Khartoum City. This methodical system of watering produced green gardens and surprised me one day when I found Maurice's garden flooded knee deep. The water reached up to the verandah and house walls which was not very good for the buildings later.

On Sunday January 7, 1962 Maurice celebrated Christmas according the orthodox rites to which religious Copts adhere to. On this occasion the Kuzmanovićs organized a party inviting Maurice, Dr. Shawki and myself. My former host was surprised that I felt so comfortable staying with Maurice as he had a reputation for being an ascetic loner. For me he was far too important as a good friend and showed me a culture I had never dreamt about. A few days after the Yugoslav ambassador's party I met the Vlatkovićs, an elderly couple, who informed that their son from Belgrade told them that Ljiljana and Vesna boarded a Yugoslav tramper-ship and left Rijeka harbor on January 7, 1962.

So my family was on their way to the Sudan and I could expect them to arrive at Port Sudan around the 20th earliest. They would have to travel from Port Sudan to Khartoum by train because the air transport was not reliable. Maurice agreed that it was too expensive and arranged through a director of Mitchell Cots Co. Ltd. (Sudan), that they should be met at Port Sudan and helped to board the train instead. He would also arrange for the transport of their crates and luggage.

The next good news was that the Government Board would meet sometime at the end of January to allocate the flats to prospective expatriate staff in six new buildings which were almost ready. Two of these buildings were near Maurice and they had 3 stories with 2 large flats at each. The car ports and rooms for the servants were on the ground level. Four more buildings were closer to the airport and thus named “Hai El Matar” blocks that had 4 stories with 2 large flats at each. The ground floor arrangements were similar. Then it would be time to start looking furniture and furnishings for our new home. Ljiljana would be delighted to get on with these matters - I was absolutely sure about.



*The Main Post Office is located on the Blue Nile access road beyond Maurice’s Ford blue car*

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