

Chapter No. 5:

LIVING IN KHARTOUM OF FIRST HALF OF 1962

I will try to describe my personal experience and the problems which I ran into in my first few months teaching at KTI. Fortunately a colleague finished teaching his syllabus on Building Science (actually “History of civil engineering”) and offered himself 3-hours a week to help me complete my lecturing on “Strength of Materials”. I used the method of explaining a problem first and letting the students try to solve it. These students were not accustomed to reasoning and bringing together information or data and so I used general characters instead of numbers in examples.

Of course this caused conflict with the other lecturers, who were seconded here for a shorter period and who were just interested in working through their contracts until they returned home. My career was here and I knew that I had to continue lecturing even if conditions and contents of the syllabus were not to my liking. My irritation was increased by the rising temperatures and the students noticeable dislike of me

First I had to explain the differences between a rigid and elastic material. As an nonsense the lecture of “Elements of Mechanic” (about rigid bodies) included in the subject “Strength of Materials”. In the latter element deforms under a load whereas a rigid does not. I made a few simple models to help explain the differences. I wanted to show my students a simple test causing tension to a steel rod and measuring the deformation against the force but, to my dismay, I found that there was no testing laboratory at the KTI. Disappointed, I talked to the Technical Vice-Principal, Kamal, who admitted that this Technical Institute that it was needed. He gave me a bundle of technical brochures suggesting that I study them and prepare a proposal for equipment and instrumentation needed for an adequate laboratory. He sympathized with my disillusionment and proposed that I should try to arrange excursions for my students to the Khartoum University – but for the next school year.



The performance of South Sudan tribal dances at Omdurman open-air stage February 1962

By the middle of March my students were becoming nervous and to certain extend rude. Too often they interrupted my lectures asking silly or out-of-context questions just for the sake of interrupting. They thought that my teaching way is beyond the syllabus which they considered an almost sacred text. I have to explain the necessity of going beyond the inadequate syllabus and those antique books they were using.

One day a student had interrupted my lecture a few times and was becoming increasingly offensive. Muhammad was complaining that I was not following the syllabus and was forcing them to work TOO hard. Finally I exploded with the student experienced the whole vehemence of my temper for the first time



Another tribal dance with lancers at Omdurman open-air stage February 1962

After a few moments of tension and some whispering between the students the culprit, Mohamed, stood up and said simply “Malleh!” I was taken by surprise as I knew that the word “malleh” means “never mind”. I angrily reverted that I did not find his behavior a “never mind” matter for me at all. Obviously the students understood that they hurt me deeply, so another got up saying that Mohamed’s “malleh” should be interpreted as an apology and that was the way Mohamed actually meant it. Through this incident (not to be the only one) I had learned another useful word the “meaning” of which depends on the tone with which it is said. Insh’ Allah!

My frustration with the misguided syllabus rose everyday particularly as the end of term approached with April 22. Fortunately, I found a colleague who helped me to prepare questions for the exams which were soon due. I prepared the answers at the same time to make them easier to check when the papers were returned from the Lancaster Cheshire Institute (UK).

Daily one’s thirst became more unbearable as one’s saliva was mixed with very fine dust particles which became globules. The latter caused the lack of moisture to be even more unbearable. In due course my students were tried to express their opinion about my teaching in a more polite way by saying that I am doing it in a “more deep” way. Also they found that the standard of lectures to be “very high” but also clear and interesting for them too. So we got on “sava sava” terms again although I could not get used to various KTI’s routines yet.

One of these routines was that the lecturer had to place an order at the store and to bring the ordered items to the students waiting in their classes. Often a student forgot to order a copy-book or pencil or rubber (they were provided everything for their study) and it was the poor lecturer who had to run for it to the stores again. I never did adjust myself to this system. Also a student would only greet me after I had given him a nod or greeted as the first one. Malesh!

At our new home everything was gradually becoming more and more homely through Ljiljana’s hard endeavors and despite the fact that the daily temperatures in the shade exceeded 40°C all day. Our carpets from Zagreb were spread in the dining/living room and

pictures decorated the walls. Beshir moved to his quarters on the ground floor and took on more work helping Ljiljana in the daily household chores. He did almost all the washing and hung the cloths on the roof verandah where they dried within minutes. Ljiljana was fast learning the Arabic words she needed in the kitchen and at the sukh: “kwais” (good), “halas” or “bass” (enough) or “bukra” (tomorrow or never if repeated).



Ljiljana and her helpers at the main Souk (= market) of Khartoum City

She started driving our “Rat” soon after we moved in after a few trials out in the desert getting used to the left-side driving too. However Ljiljana or better to say our car had to make some “scratchy” encounter too. One afternoon she had to get out on her own from the carport in reverse gear. I heard a grating noise from below and I rushed down to found her upset looking at few scratches on the right rear mud-breaker that grazed against the concrete column. She said to me in a blaming voice: “You told me to turn the stirring wheel to the right but you forgot to put it straight when parked in last!” We agreed to leave it at that and Ljiljana drove off happily to Khartoum South where a new township was growing fast. There she found new shops many of them run by Greeks where one could buy fresh bread and other foodstuff like cheeses etc.

Vesna made good progress at the private school in mathematics and in English so her pronunciation improved almost daily. Still she read almost insatiably all Croatian books brought here. She rested wrapped in a woolen blanket in her bed on the terrace despite the heat of white hours. We could never cover ourselves the same way though it would probably was the best way to preserve body’s perspiration, thus providing the best isolation against heat. Our bed mattresses were filled with “kapok” which, in principle, produced the same effect. Vesna made friends fast with children living in the four blocks and in the vicinity of. She was kept busy playing with this international bunch of children until dark set in around 7 PM each day.

We often visited open-air cinemas and even, once, the amateur theater. The new radio was repaired (a condenser had to be replaced) and I installed a long aerial so we could listen to Monte Carlo and the Vatican Radio as well as many Arabic stations. Radio Zagreb could be received at short wave range but with a lot of interference. Relatives mailed newspapers and magazines regularly, so we had enough to read and were well informed about events in Yugoslavia although with some delay. My mother sent Ljiljana recipes for making various ice creams from fruits so she could start her ice cream production although the high temperatures were a problem at first. The flower pots were filled in with a mix of sandy soil, river sediment and goat manure so Ljiljana started transplanting shoots and cuttings - mostly of bougainvilleas she got from the Director of

Botanic gardens. I always wondered how fast Ljiljana would make contacts when talking to about the flora. She was a genuine Taurus woman, mind you! The terrace plants needed a constant attendance including watering them twice daily. The curtains had to be pulled shut soon after the breakfast and kept closed until late afternoon say 5 PM to preserve the plants. At nights curtains were pulled in and fixed securely until the next morning.



A Bougainvillea in full bloom at the Khartoum Botanic Gardens

For the terrace we bought locally made cane furniture consisting of 2 long-chairs, 6 armchairs and 2 tables, one of which had a glass top. The cane furniture had woven inlays of split cane that had to be painted. This was not an easy task. The painter was soon covered in fine drops of spray paint. Worse still it dried so fast that getting the paint off one's skin afterwards was an unpleasant task. By the end of March our flat was ready to accept guests. Maurice and Abdel Halim Shawki came often to see how the flat was progressing and to advise on where we could find essential items. Halim was very helpful when it came to providing the right paints, as he was dealing with Mitchell Cots stores. Lillian and her husband came to see us unexpectedly one evening to see how Ljiljana and Vesna were doing. On arrival at Port Sudan they stayed with Lillian's sister and were looked after very well. Later Lillian and her husband George introduced us to the Greek and Syrian communities, links which proved to be important for the rest of our stay in Khartoum.

According to the society's rules, a newcomer has to wait to be invited for lunch or dinner by a local resident before inviting them to your house. Thus Galja Kuzmanović called Bora Mikić and his newly arrived wife together with the three of us to her house for lunch. It was a little strained. Thereafter we could follow by inviting our first guests to dinner. We chose the Kuzmanovićs (incl. Natasha to give Vesna company), both Mikićs and our neighbors, the Diklićs. Ljiljana spent the day rather nervously getting the home-style dinner ready by sunset. All was going very well; our guests were impressed with the delicious home food, when the "disaster" struck with the dessert. Ljiljana's ice cream did not freeze properly. However our guests happily enjoyed the cold cream.

Thus Ljiljana learned to make the ice cream a day before, keeping it in the deep freeze overnight. Mrs. Diklić (alias Mira) advised Ljiljana to offer at home parties serving hot tea, soft drinks like Coca-Cola or Fanta and alcoholic long drinks with half liter of soda or tonic water. One could get ready pastries and tidbits, pies and sweets from Greek's pastry shops as well as the sandwich bread rolls all of which made life much easier.

Our next guests were the V-P Technical Sayed Kamal with his European wife and the V-P Administrative Sayed Farah who accepted the invitation for a dinner party with great delight. Following advice and previous experience Ljiljana offered an array of splendid small dishes with home made sandwiches and pastries followed by a bowl filled with superb ice cream. The ice cream was her triumph of the evening and there began a good relation with Sayed Farah, who became one of our frequent visitors. Farah liked to chat with Vesna about her “problems” but we never found out how he knew that there was a ready ice cream in the fridge. The secret behind this was that Ljiljana kept a full bowl of ice cream in deep freeze – to be ready on hand at any time.



A festive dinner for our good friends like the Diklićs, Radojčićs and Vlatkovićs in our flat

In April the holiday season started and many Yugoslavs on governmental contracts left Khartoum reducing the number of Yu-Club attendees significantly. Many nurses and some specialist tradesmen were in demand in the Sudan despite the Government’s efforts to reduce the number of ex-patriot staff. Hearing crickets chirping from the lawn below my girls started longing to be in Starigrad on Hvar Island, where Ljiljana’s mother refurbished an old house for family summer holidays.

We were invited to use a former US swimming pool for the whole family on Wednesdays. Sunday afternoons were for ladies only. We could use a smaller swimming pool in the University compound. This lessened our longing for a good swim in the Adriatic. The lawns in Hai El Matar compound were irrigated on Mondays and evenings were more pleasant after this. For some days the place was full of small insects swarming around the lamp stands being burnt on the hot bulbs so one had keep one’s own hair at a distance. Sometimes large grasshoppers reached the fourth floor and Vesna screamed when she was struck by a 10cm long hopper.

By mid April the wind direction was changing from north to south so more fine dust got to terrace from aircrafts (BOEING & CARAVELLE) landing or starting at the nearby airport. My “Beetle” needed no washing but one had to sweep off fine dust that just deposited everywhere. I had also noticed that the mud breakers paint abrades from the grinding sand on roads most of which were not tarmac. We often received a shock as static electricity leaped between the blanket and bed’s steel frame. It felt like being struck by lightning but was fortunately of very low amperage but of high voltage. This phenomenon caused a car’s engine to run on for a few seconds after switching it off. One had to be very careful getting out of the car not to touch the steel body before both feet were firmly set on

the ground. The VW workshop solved the engine's after-running by exchanging original spark wires with much larger ones. Some people had chains or copper strips hanging down touching the road surface. In Khartoum one drove with open windows so that one could stretch out the right hand to indicate a change of direction as because of the bright light electric indicators were hardly visible. We learnt to be very careful not to touch the hot window frame as temperatures often exceeded 60°C if the car was parked in the sun.



Mogrem Island at the confluence of White (left) and Blue Nile (from right) at low water level

In April daily temperatures went over 40°C so the car body was warmer than the skin. Anything one put on, like shirts or underwear felt warm as the air temperature around them was warmer than the body temperature at all times now. The bed clothes likewise were warmer than one self and perspiration started instantly one climbed into bed. The constant perspiration meant that one drank one gallon of liquid daily. We drank literally gallons of black or hibiscus tea, avoiding soft sweet drinks which did not quench the thirst. One learnt that tepid drinks were more refreshing than cold. We stopped using the bathroom water heater since the water from the faucet was about 40°C too. Taking a shower became a cautious get in and out. Soon we learnt to fill the bathtub to brim and allow the intense evaporation to cool the water to a pleasurable temperature



View from our dinning/living room at the terrace towards Khartoum South City

I was getting increasingly fed up with the teaching and absconding students as the exams approached. The heat became almost unbearable with temperatures never falling bellow 40°C. I wondered how the students of 150 to 210 could crowd into one large hall. The invigilators were carefully selected so that one did not supervise ones own students at the

exams themselves. The internal exams would start on April 24th and continue after a short break with the external (British) part to end by May 20th 1962. Students could score up to 40 points during the study year and another 100 points from both exams thus making a maximum of 140 points. In principle a student would pass the year scoring at least 56 points of 20 points to collect throughout the year and the rest of 36 points from both examinations. About 30% were expected to have to reseat in August. The lecturers were able to maneuver the scoring system. Soon I would learn about more variations of how to combine student's score points from different exams so that he could pass the year. This scoring system was too frustrating for me as it opened doors to mishandling any score just to achieve an acceptable result in a class – the magic 30% number for re-examination. The student just should not lose a year!



We reached the end of tarmac still very far of Port Sudan and saw the first real Fata Morgana

We clocked up 2,500 km in three months and it was time for the car to go for a service. We drove out to Khartoum North, passing new township Shabbat and came to the new double-lane autobahn with a tarmac surface but it was only 17km long. This highway should link the capital Khartoum with Port Sudan. Completion was expected by mid 1963 - Insh' Allah. We sped up to 100km/h against wind that was howling through the open windows and causing an intense dehydration of our skin and our mouths. We turned back at the end of 17km tarmac stretch stopping shortly to have a long drink and to watch the hot air playing funny scenes over the desert sand – this was the “Fata Morgana” which we saw for the first time. The scorching sun caused the tarmac to get sticky and with wind our car speed reached 110km/h on the way back to Khartoum City. That was our first excursion outside of the Greater Khartoum to be for some time too. Back to Khartoum we drove along Blue Nile cornice to “Mogrem” where the Blue and White Nile converge to make the mighty Nile River. At Mogrem we relaxed in a shaded open-air terrace from where one overlooked the convergence of a dark bluish stream with a light beige one and eagerly sipped cool drinks of lime juice.

The Principal of KTI invited all lecturers and other staff members to a dinner party. A considerable number of guests congregated in a wide garden of a prominent mansion in English style. For a good hour we stood around talking and gossiping while soft drinks (Fanta, Coca-Cola, Bitter Lemon etc.) were served in large glasses but the liquid was lukewarm by the time it reached the guests. As I was getting hungry a number of roasting spits with well-cured lamb or goats were placed on long tables with many dishes holding traditional Sudanese tidbits and pastry. Sayed Farah was in charge, distributing pieces of meat to those whom he liked using his strong fingers to carve of any piece of meat. I got a large chunk of excellent lamb thigh on my paper plate.

Because of the temperature interest and conversation about home leave intensified. Our financial situation did not allow all three of us to travel so it was decided to concentrate on the best solution for Ljiljana and Vesna to travel alone. There was a slim chance that they would get a paid passage from the Ministry of Education so we would have to pull all our contacts to get a positive result. Halim has been helping with his connections and to make us happier he called us to visit his house.

Friday April 27th Abdel Halim has invited us to dinner to his home for the first time. His wife Amna has prepared for us an array of Sudanese dishes that was a welcome to their country. Vesna has stayed close to Sayeda Amna throughout the whole evening which immensely pleased our host. Vesna told us later that “aunt” Amna reminded her of the “lesser” grandmother (my mother) but “aunt” Amna was much darker. Amna was a devote Muslim and she has already made her pilgrimage but could not speak English so Halim had to act as a mediator and translator the whole evening. A plentitude of local meals and tidbits were offered, all very tasteful, but for one very hot one that caused Vesna to wail. I was enjoying some fried tiny sausages until Halim mentioned that they made of lamb’s intestines. We enjoyed the evening thoroughly.



Vesna met new friends during a visit to Abdel Halim’s home in Khartoum South

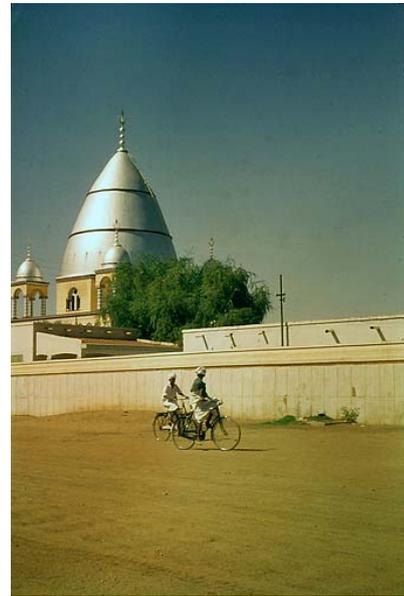
The chatting went on until the small hours as we learnt more about the Sudanese way of life and its customs. In Khartoum women mostly did not cover their face but wore a white veil of light material which covered the head and was wrapped around the body over in a knee length whitish gown. Amna also told us about the scars on female faces (she had some too) that to my mind made many girls’ face unsightly. On one side you see a delightful face the other half of the face however is blemished by a series of awful looking scratch marks. We were told about female circumcision that was ongoing despite the Government’s efforts to introduce laws to forbid both the scratch marking and the female circumcision. But native practices live long and die almost never!

Ljiljana was busying herself making light dresses for Vesna and for herself from the plentiful materials found in local shops. We enrolled Vesna in the 3rd class of the Khartoum Comboni Sisters School for the school year 1962/1963 due to start 1st August. Much to our dislike, Vesna had to attend the children’s performance in the Yugoslav club on the occasion celebrating the 1st May. We did not go to the Club unless it was politically reasonable so we celebrated Ljiljana’s birthday in secret too. Ljiljana’s best present was posted to me two days later. It contained the approval for home leave for my girls. Despite daily temperatures getting close to 120°F that is well over 45°C we started frantic preparations for their departure. We booked a flight from Khartoum to Port Sudan where

they would wait for the arrival of M/S "Varaždin" to proceed for Europe. This was the same vessel on which they have traveled to Sudan in January 1962. Again captain Mifka was in command and he was accompanied by his wife on their home bound voyage which was due in Port Sudan by end of May.



Vesna and Ljiljana visiting the main market aka Souk at Khartoum City before living for holidays 1962



The Mosque of Omdurman with the tomb of Prophet Mahdi

Back home Ljiljana was busying herself making light dresses for Vesna and her from the plentiful of materials found in local shops. We enrolled Vesna in the 3rd class of Khartoum Comboni Sisters School for the school year 1962/1963 due to start on 1st August. To our most dislike Vesna had to attend the children's performance in the Yugoslav club on the occasion of celebrating the 1st May. We did not like go to the Club unless it was politically reasonable so it happened that we rejoiced Ljiljana's birthday on same day in full secret. Ljiljana's best present was posted to me two days later containing the approval for a home leave for both my girls.

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