

13. Fr Jan Molenaar:



Congo-memories 1960 -1964.

It all being some 46 years ago I am sure my memory may fail me here and there and my story may possibly even be a self-imagined memory, because time and the unconscious suppression of events may distort one's memory. So, whoever has a better memory of the events that I experienced is welcome to correct the stories which Piet Korse invited me to put on paper.

I was ordained on the 10th of July 1960 in Mill Hill, a suburb of London. We were 19 of us. As usual after the ordinations we, the newly ordained, were called up by the Superior General and were given our appointments. I was appointed to the diocese of *Basānkusu*. I must say only on my way down from the superior's wing did I learn that it meant I was appointed to Congo, which had just gained its independence. Was that on the June the 30th, 1960? Later that same day my elder brother, who with other family members had come over from Holland for my ordination, got me a newspaper, because the news about Congo was not very good. We know that alas things have not been very different since then.

For me the reality of it hit home, when our own Mill Hill Congo men, who worked in *Bongandó* land of the diocese of *Basānkusu* (*Yalisere, Djālu, Yambóyó and Lingomɔ*), reached Holland and we were told the many scary moments they experienced on fleeing the troubles in their area. The only ones that stayed put were Father Jan Hartering and Brother Gabriël van der Eerde. They were stationed at *Simbá*.

Simbá is and was the only mission station of the *Basānkusu* diocese situated just outside the Equateur Province. It lies in the 'Province Orientale'. To get there one had to cross the river *Lofoli*. This river separates the two provinces and cuts *Simbá* off from that part of *Bongandó* land that is situated in the Equator Province. This river and the at-times-forbidden crossing of it were to play a significant role in the story of my stay and of my escape from *Simbá*.

In Holland, in the meantime, the stories of the returned missionaries and their frustrated comments on the situation in Congo, especially on Patrice *Lumúmba* (whose headquarters and supporters were found in the Eastern Province) got splashed all over the Dutch papers. I remember Fr Jacob Bos (my future parish priest) giving an interview to a paper in the North of Holland in Bovenkarspel, where he came from. The next day the headline on the front page of the paper was: "Father Bos says: hang *Lumúmba* on the highest tree." Jacob never said or meant this of course, but that's how the paper printed it and for months it kept Jacob praying that the paper's splash would not turn out to be a reason for stopping him from going back to his beloved Congo. Because if anything, what I noticed in the contacts all the time was that they all wanted to go back...and to go back in a hurry, rather today than tomorrow. And back

they went three months later. I remember that it was on 3 October 1960, the feast-day of St Theresa of Lisieux, patroness of the mission. A very appropriate day, I thought, for me to start my missionary career under her protection! As it turned out she did - so to speak - a good job. Though all young missionaries always go by boat the first time they go to the missions (to get acclimatised), I was told to join the returning missionaries, when they flew back from Brussels to Léopoldville and then by a smaller plane on to *Basankusu*. And so I got my first trip by plane. Together with a classmate of mine, Marinus van Emmerik, I faced an uncertain situation and entered an unknown future. Though nobody said so, the group leader was Piet van Run. We got safely to *Basankusu* and were welcomed with great enthusiasm. It seemed that *Bongandó* land was quiet, but for more than 3 months there had been no news coming from *Simba* and its men, Jan Hartering and Gabriël van der Eerde. The next morning I was told by the bishop that in consultation with Piet Van Run it had been decided that Jacob Bos and I should go to *Simba*. Jacob was to take over as parish priest and me to be his assistant. This would give Jan and Gabriël a chance to go home on a richly deserved break and vacation.

So we boarded a truck with all kind of provisions and left *Basankusu*. Being the youngest I was put on the back of the (open) truck and in no time the red dust made me into a (good-looking) Red Indian! Apart from the warm welcome in the various missions on the way I remember little of the 602 km journey. But in my mind I do remember vividly my first sight of the *Lopoli* River where Piet, Jacob and I arrived after two or three days. It was around midday. The wooden ferry was on the other side of the river. It took four or five people to pull it across the stream using wooden hooks along a wire that was hanging across the river. I was more than a bit nervous and apprehensive, but Piet being well-known shouted across in *Longandó* and the men readily came to pull us across. The people of the *Lopoli* village were happy to see us and so were the Christians around *Simba* mission. And though Jan and Gabriël looked thin and tired and a little harassed, they were sound of mind and body. Apart from many sometimes unpleasant visits from swaggering soldiers they seemed to have come to no harm. And boy, oh boy, were they happy to see us and to hear some first-hand *Basankusu* news for the first time in three months. I remember little of what was said or what the situation actually entailed for us, since all was so new and strange to me.

The church was an impressive red-brick church and the house had a spacious eating room. On each side of the eating room there were three sitting rooms. At the back of each room there was a bedroom and a shower. The toilet was a hole dug in the ground and situated some 20 yards away at the back of the house. The toilet-pot was made of wood and the shape was what everybody is used to in a toilet; only there was no water to flush the toilet. Well neither did we have this in my home in Holland.. in the fifties! The kitchen was at the back of the house too, but not too near the toilet. A big veranda ran all the way round the house with - in front of the dining-room - a patio with four solid home-made armchairs. It is there we had our coffee or tea and in the evening a drink, if there was any. We had no electricity, but a pressure lamp called Petromax or an Aladdin mantle lamp provided enough light to sit by on the veranda in the evening or to read by when in one's room. On the veranda at the back of the house, opposite the dining-room, there was a pump, with which we pumped water into three petrol barrels of 200 litres each that had been put on the loft. From there the water flowed down by gravity providing all the rooms with water for the more-than-welcome daily shower. Via the gutters rainwater was collected from the roof of the house and directed to a deep pit, which had been dug and cemented all the way down. It was an ingenious system and a real blessing in a heat that was pretty constant.

A day or so later Piet went back to *Yalisele* and that left the four of us by ourselves. According to Jan Hartering it was not easy at all to leave for Europe. Moreover, the only way was via

Stanleyville and not via *Basankusu*. And nobody was sure of who was in charge along the road or in Stanleyville itself. Things sometimes changed overnight. This made a trip to Stanleyville not something to look forward to. It looked pretty unsafe and uncertain. So the fact that Jan had to stay a little longer was, I think, a godsend for the four of us, because Jan knew the *Bongandó* people as none other and also knew how to handle the soldiers and their (new) way of thinking following their recent independence and the fact that they held the gun. He, Jan, always seemed to be a step ahead of them.



One of the many ferries in Congo.

To give an example: Jacob took care of the schools. Before the independence one of the priests was the overall manager and also headmaster of the mission school that was right next door to us. Since independence the oldest local teacher, Simon *Ilonga*, had been made headmaster of this mission school, but he continued to stay in one of the teachers' houses that were built in the

teachers' quarters behind the school. Jacob's room in our house (for teachers and pupils this was the headmaster's room) was at the end of our veranda. One day Jan told Jacob to move into another room of the house, because as he said: 'One of these days the soldiers will argue that the new headmaster should be living in the 'headmaster's room', if independence were to have any meaning.' And true enough a week or so later the soldiers asked why the headmaster was not living in the headmaster's room (in our house), since he was now the boss. So Jan took them to Jacob's former room and said: 'See, we are preparing for that. The room is empty already.' The soldiers left content. Simon *Ilonga*, the new headmaster, did, however, not want to live with his family and all in the house of the missionaries. It would be too much of a disturbance, he said, with the small kids etc. Anyway, he did not feel comfortable in what for him was the fathers' house. So some school items were put in the sitting and bedroom room for the 'show' and life went on as before.

I also remember one day Jan came to me and put a parcel with money in my hand and said: 'Hide it well and don't talk about it to anybody. One of these days, the soldiers will demand the key to the safe, because they have not been paid for a while. The safe should then be nearly empty. And you being the youngest, they won't ask you anything.' And again it happened the way he thought it would. The safe was nearly empty and his explanation to the soldiers was: 'We have no income, because we are not allowed to cross the river in order to fetch money at our headquarters at *Basankusu*. And we don't have any income from the people either, because we are not allowed to leave the mission compound or to visit our Christians in the bush.' The explanation was accepted and for another couple of days our anxiety was allayed once again.

Anxiety was, however, a constant in our lives, always wondering what the next day or night might bring. Jan was - nearly day and night - listening to the radio for any station he could find: Holland, Belgium, England or the Voice of America, in order to get as much news as possible on the Congo situation. No doubt, one of the most anxious days in my memory will always be the day that Jan heard on the radio that Patrice *Lumumba* had been killed. Was it in February 1961? In the Eastern Province *Lumumba* was the political hero and saviour. And for the soldiers he was their top brass commander. Jan told us to pretend to have no knowledge of

Lumúmba's death, if and when the soldiers would come. And they came soon enough, in full force, some 30 of them in two trucks. With guns drawn they jumped out of their trucks and took up position around the patio, where the four of us were ordered to sit down. You could see the soldiers were angry and their attitude was very threatening. The commander asked: 'Had we heard?' Jan said: 'Sorry, no, we don't get any news, because the batteries in the radio are finished and there are none in the village shops.' We were then told of *Lumúmba's* death, killed by the Belgian colonialists. Would they know the difference between Holland and Belgium? For them we all were whites and colonialists! I do not remember whether Jan or we sympathised. All I remember is the icy cold that descended on the patio and the hateful looks that were directed at us and the readiness in their eyes to turn violent and shoot, if one of us even made so much as a move or said a wrong word. The silence lasted for hours with guns pointed at us all the time and not a word spoken, neither by us nor by the officer or the soldiers. Till today I remember the heavy, depressive and threatening silence that could explode into violence any moment, though we did not know what would trigger it or when. And there was not a soul around, just the four of us and the angry soldiers. Not a soul from the village or a teacher from the teachers' compound dared to approach our house. Everybody stayed away, hoping and praying the storm would blow over. That was a very sensible thing to do indeed. If I remember well, all this lasted for some three hours, but it felt like it would never end. And I am sure I now know what eternity feels like. Then, all of a sudden, the commander and the soldiers got up in silence, climbed into their trucks and drove off. I still don't know what made them do so, but it certainly was an answer to our desperate prayers. We thanked God. We knew we had escaped death by an inch. I believe it was soon after this episode that a 'security officer' (we called him the 'government spy') came to stay with us. He took up residence in one of the rooms in the presbytery so as to keep an eye on us. He actually only slept in the room, but did not eat with us and to tell the truth: he was fairly reasonable and most of the time he did not cause us any trouble. But he was there all the same. For us his presence was very disquieting. Just as well that *Mupe Adólefí* (Gutersohn) wasn't around anymore to have to witness all this. That world of his was gone forever and here was the new reality and what a different world it was. But it was great how well Jan could read their minds and sense what independence did to the soldiers' way of thinking. And the greatness of it was: he was able to accept it, live with it and act wisely in accordance with it! We will never know how many times we were saved by those insights of his, which he then translated into the right practical action.



I, the young missionary,

Soon after my arrival we were told not to leave the mission compound and to stop visiting our Christian communities in the bush. We had to stay put. For the others it was very hard because

going to the bush normally gave great satisfaction and on top of that in the mission itself there was little to keep oneself occupied with. For example, in *Símbá* we had no oil or rubber plantation to look after like most other missions had to. Those plantations gave people work and kept the mission going financially. I don't know how *Símbá* was kept afloat. I don't remember anything about church tax like there was in Cameroon, where I was appointed after my stay in Congo.

I kept myself occupied with learning the local language. Again I was lucky in that Jan himself was the expert on *Longandó*, the local tongue. The first grammar (in Dutch) was written by him and with it a dictionary of about 100 pages, all hand typed! And Jan was also keen on collecting proverbs as they gave a great insight in the mentality of the people. At the same time he translated the Sunday gospels in *Longandó*. He was a good teacher, especially in pointing out to me what the tonality of the words sounded like. And tonality was of the essence for speaking the language correctly. During the day I learnt the grammar and some new words whilst in the evening I used to walk over to the teachers' compound to try out my new words or to sit quietly around their kitchen fire to listen to their talking and storytelling. I wondered whether I would ever understand all their abracadabra. But everybody was as helpful as possible in trying to make me understand what they were talking about and quite pleased when I made a little progress as the weeks and months passed by. After some six months of hard work I was able to say Mass and preach in *Longandó* quite well. A year or so later I even tried to translate the Sunday epistles. Jan Hartering and I had many a discussion with teachers on the meaning of a word. Recalling those days, I must say Jan was very patient with me. He was also good in giving me a lot of room and freedom in what I wanted to do whether or not he himself liked it or agreed with it. For himself, however, he stuck to what he was used to. He usually said: 'You go ahead, but don't expect me to do the same.' He did not want to tell me how he baptised 40 catechumens in one hour or so. 'You do it your own way', he used to say. I was lucky to have him as my first parish priest because I learned a lot from him and how he dealt with difficult times, besides his knowledge of the people.

Concerning the *Bongandó* people Jan knew in detail what he was talking about.

Let me give an example.

When after our house-arrest we finally were allowed again to go to the bush to visit the Christians, Jan said: 'You go'. So I went on my first trip. It was great. It felt as if I was saving the world. There were lots of confessions, baptisms and three marriages. Jan's comment later was: 'What! Three marriages, that can't be right! There must be something wrong. I have not had them in ten years.' But after my explanation he said all was done by the rule, but he still thought it looked strange. When three months later I went again to the bush I had Jan's specific instructions to find out how the marriages were doing. I did. I found out that two marriages had broken up.

In the discussion with the catechist as to the reason for such a quick separation, it turned out to be as follows: in our *Basankusu* diocese there was a rule that the dowry of those who married in church, could not be demanded back when the couple broke up. The reason for this rule was that once the dowry was paid to the family of the bride, that family would use that money to procure the bride's brother a wife. Therefore if a woman wanted to break up her marriage, her parents would tell her: 'No way, we have no money to pay back the dowry. Stay with your husband.' But then - whoever the clever lawyer and theologian was! - someone came with the bright idea that, if women would marry in church, they did not need to pay back the dowry in the case of a divorce. And that's what had happened. The theological implications about the invalidity of such a marriage were clear to me. The next morning I waved a self-written letter and I told the people that the letter came from the pope, being an official instruction on Christian marriages. The letter said: 'The church marriage of a

Christian woman who contracts marriage in order to avoid having to pay back the dowry, that kind of marriage is null and void from the very start.' The letter was signed by the Pope himself.

There was great commotion. Everybody understood the implication. I read this letter in all the churches which I visited on that trip. When I returned to the mission, Jan Hartering asked me what the pope's letter was all about. Some catechists had come to tell and ask him about it. Jan could not help but smile at me playing the pope. However, I never got another marriage in those four years. Jan understood the people all right.

Brother Gabriël I remember as someone who was a great handyman, as most brothers are, and a sensible and good companion to have around in times of crisis, though he could be a little cynical at times. And there was enough reason for cynicism. Times were difficult and all those years there was little gratitude for what we, the missionaries, were doing. He was a mechanic and good at the job. Even repairing a watch was no problem. And he was the man who taught me how to drive Jan's pick-up. We practised on a small one-kilometre-long airstrip nearby, where at least one could turn the car. After two hours of practising Gabriël said I had passed. He was so sure that, when two weeks later I got a sick-call at night from the bush (half an hour's drive) and I asked him to come along, he said it would be fine if I went by myself. And so I did and I remember that all the way to the place I had only one worry: how to turn the car on such a small road so as to be able to return to the mission. I must have done it, though I no longer remember how. But anyway, it was a good practice for later when I had to get onto the *Lopolí* ferry via two planks that were only slightly wider than the wheels of the car. And in the rainy season it was worse, because the level of the ferry used to be one or two metres higher than the embankment where the car was standing. Driving unto the wet planks of the ferry one looked straight up into the sky; by day all one saw was the blue sky and at night only the starry heavens. Tricky business, but practice makes perfect, though there was always the danger of making a mistake. The critical point was the moment when one got over the hump of the planks where they joined the surface of the ferry, since the ferry itself was only two or three yards longer than the car itself. The mistake would be to step on the accelerator instead of on the brake. As we know there is little space between the two and when one is a little worried and nervous...! I was told that once upon a time, well before my time, this did happen to Jan Hartering and he plunged straight into the river with car and all. The car was lost but, thank God, Jan was safely picked up downriver by a canoe.

One more experience relating to Gabriël. One day the government nurse prescribed him some injections. The nurse ran the clinic which before independence had been run by the sisters. Gabriël, however, asked me to administer those injections to him. That day I learned I was not meant to be a nurse. Try as I might, the needle would only bend and not penetrate the skin of his posterior! That was the end of my nursing vocation. I was better at being a wet nurse. One day a woman gave birth to a baby but suffered from postnatal depression and refused to breastfeed the baby. The nurse called me in, because he had no powdered milk and hoped we could provide it. But we could not help him either. Anyway, I went to visit her and talk to her. And wonder oh wonder. When I presented the baby to her to breastfeed it, she accepted her child and as long as I held the baby in my hands she fed her baby. This I did from then on every three or four times a day for about three weeks till she went back home to the village, where they found a 'mama' to help her out.

I am not sure anymore in which year Gabriël or Jan left for home. I believe Gabriël left first somewhere in 1961 and Jan was definitely gone by 1962. Maybe it was the other way round. Anyway, that left Jacob as the parish priest and me as the school manager. Of those days I remember a couple of things that stand out in my mind.

The first was a game of soccer. One day we organised a football match, I forget between whom and whom. But I do remember I was part of a team and a teacher called Lucas was on the other team. By half-time they were leading by two goals and then the tumult started. As we changed sides the goalie of the other team picked up something behind his goalpost which turned out to be some 'juju' to prevent us from scoring. The discussion became heated, the other side denying it, including the teacher Lucas. In the end we got together as a team, said a prayer and as good believers we convinced ourselves that prayer and our faith would win. And with 'mon Père' on their side who was to doubt it? And so we got on with the game...and win we did! They never had a more convincing sermon. As people say: God never sleeps!

Presbytery and church in *Simbá*



Another time I had trouble and this time it was about school discipline. I was the school counsellor. Lucas was again involved. Because we were not allowed to cross the *Lopolí* River, there was no contact with *Basankusu* and we did not get any money to pay the teachers' salaries. This went on for months to the detriment of the teachers' motivation and the school discipline. In a meeting with the teaching staff I proposed that they should stop either teaching altogether or should take teaching seriously so that the kids would benefit from the school and pass their exams at the end of the year and be able to continue their education. After a long discussion they came to the conclusion that stopping would be detrimental to the development of their children. Moreover, they probably would lose their salary, since they would be on strike illegally. When they promised to continue teaching, I, on my part, promised to recommend to the Education Secretary that they all would be awarded the highest bonus a teacher could earn. At a given time Lucas, who also was a relative of the area's chief, lay down on the job. Even after a couple of warnings things did not improve. In consultation with the headmaster I informed him that, unless he complied, he would not receive any bonus and I would suspend him as well. He then informed the chief that I was acting like the colonialists of former days. The result was that the chief summoned him and me and all the teachers and some parents to a 'closed' meeting. However, as the meeting took place on the patio of the mission veranda, the meeting was as public as you can get it! Lucas told his story and I told them my complaints of Lucas' behaviour and what I expected of him as a teacher following the agreement we had made. The discussion went on for about two hours, but in the end everybody, including the chief, agreed that Lucas should change and I had a right to correct him for the benefit of the children. That settled that. However, the situation was tense at times. At the end of the year I wrote my recommendations to the Education Secretary, who did not agree and asked for an explanation. This would look too incredible in the documents he had to send to his bosses. So he accorded them the second best bonus. But that was not what I had promised to do. So I put my job as counsellor on the line and told the Education Secretary that I would no longer act as counsellor. Would he inform the bishop of this! Nobody else was keen to come to *Simbá* due to our difficult situation; so it was not difficult to put my 'job' on the line. I don't know which behind-the-scene consultations took place, but the end of the story was that the Education Secretary agreed to my recommendations but told me not to repeat the move. At the end of that school year the soldiers allowed three teachers (all brothers) to cross the *Lopolí* and go to *Basankusu* to fetch the year's salary for all the teachers. The three brothers came back in a VW station-wagon, which they had bought with the salaries which they had received at *Basankusu*. A whole van! There was great joy and everybody felt a sense of pride. It was a 'first'. Now 'one

of them' possessed a car and no longer just the white man, the chief, the mayor and the new director of the oil plantation in *Yokána*! The latter had taken over the *Yokána* oil palm plantation (about 20 miles from *Símbá*) when the European owner left just before independence. The first two months the new manager came every Sunday to church in a big saloon car. Two months later he came in a pick-up because the saloon car had broken down. A month later he arrived in a big truck which was meant to transport palm nuts. The whole thing was nuts and one may guess how long the truck lasted. It was a sad contrast to the colonial days when one could order things in the local shop, from a pin to a sowing machine, and when it took at most two weeks to arrive. A year after the independence, however, there wasn't anything to be had in the shops. The shelves were empty. The shopkeeper was, as people say, only selling air. It was tough; it was tough for everybody.

The third incident I remember – though not necessarily in this order - was the following. One night around ten I was called to a place in the bush, about an hour's drive from the mission, to a woman who was having a hard time giving birth. The husband wanted her to be operated upon by the doctor in *Yɔ́sekí* Hospital. *Yɔ́sekí* was about 30 kilometres from *Símbá* but one had to cross the *Lopolí* River. Only... the soldiers had forbidden us and everybody to cross the river and the 'pullers' were forbidden to take anybody across by ferry under threat of severe punishment. I decided to take the woman to *Yɔ́sekí* all the same. I could not let her die when the solution was in reality so near. When I approached the river at around midnight with the woman, her husband and two other women, I stopped in the village where the 'pullers' lived, very near the river. In no time the whole village surrounded the car with all kind of uhs and ahs seeing the condition of the woman.



But the 'pullers' did not budge; they were scared to death of the consequences. I think that then - for the first and only time – I (ab)used my power given to me as a priest. Playing on their fear of God and the devil and all kind of spirits, I excommunicated them in fact, threatened to no longer baptise their babies nor allow them to take communion and not to give them a Christian burial. And the kind of spirits that would take possession of their village and their children was nobody's business! And

as I was saying my prayers hoping it would work, they were shocked. It took more than half an hour of hot discussions and high tempers, but the fear and the uncertainty of a priest's power with God or devil won the day. They agreed to pull me across that night, but would not leave the ferry on the other side, but bring it back to their own side and pretend it never happened, hoping that the soldiers would never know. I crossed and the woman was operated upon that night by the doctor in *Yɔ́sekí* and by 3am a healthy baby was born, mother and child doing well. I took a nap in the doctor's house and by sunrise I took the car to return to the *Lopolí* and *Símbá*. On my arrival at the *Lopolí*, a truck full of soldiers was standing on the other side. I asked the 'pullers' to come and get me, but first make sure the commanding officer agreed. They came. As I landed on the other side, all the soldiers pointed their guns at me. In my best French I asked who the officer was. He was pointed out to me. I passed through a line of soldiers, went up to the man and said: 'Congratulations, sir, your sister has given birth to a healthy baby; mother and child are doing well.' He looked at me as if asking what on earth are you talking about? With a sour face he said: 'I have no sister on that side.' And I said: 'Well, sir, she is as dark skinned as you are and that certainly doesn't make her my

sister and also the baby is dark skinned. She is one of yours and I saved her life by taking her to the hospital. Would you not have done the same if you had a car and the woman was your wife?’

I looked him all the time straight in the eye. It lasted for about a minute. Just as well that he could not feel or hear my heartbeat. All of a sudden he turned round, motioned the soldiers to the truck and drove off without uttering a word. Since then I could take people to and from the hospital. A year or so later it turned out that this action would save my life too when I had to flee for a new (very cruel) set of rebels.

But first I must still tell the story of the terrific driving skills of the Tuut as we called him, the Tuut being Father Bill Tuerlings. When it happened, he was stationed at *Lingom*, I believe, but it could have been *Djolu* or *Yambóyó* too. Anyway, the problem at the time was that all the missions were running out of petrol and diesel to keep the cars and the generators going. So with the *Lopolí* being open at the time it was decided that Tuut would come to *Simbá*. From there we had to drive to an oil palm plantation at about 180 km. I forget the name of the place. But at the time, in colonial days, it had petrol and diesel for sale. We wanted a full truck-load. I went along with the Tuut. We loaded 13 or so empty barrels at the back of the truck and off we went. At *Yahúma*, a hundred kilometres from *Simbá*, the administration headquarters granted us permission to continue our journey to the plantation, where we were lucky enough to get what we wanted. So the next day, loaded with diesel and petrol, we happily went on our way back to *Simbá*. But somewhere along the road we had trouble with the brakes. Every time Tuut did brake (and that was necessary with the frequent potholes) he needed to stop and to drain some brake fluid from the back wheels. I don't know the mechanics of it. But that's how it was. So from then on the game was not to use the brakes. That became a real problem when we got to the top of a fairly steep hill, at the bottom of which there was a river and a ferry to take us across. Moreover, the road contained lots of bends! But Tuut went for it. At the top of the hill he put the lorry - with its 13 barrels of diesel and petrol at the back- in first gear and kept it there as long as he could. I thought the motor would explode. When it was impossible to keep it in first gear any longer because of the speed and the weight of our cargo, Tuut put it in second and then in third and then in fourth. He knew of course he could always use the brakes, if there was no other way out, but he tried not to and he didn't. My heart was in my mouth. But as the hill became less and less steep, he went back to gear three slowing the truck and so to gear two and one. He stopped actually the truck about 20 or 30 yards in front of the ferry... without having touched the brakes! I take my hat off to Tuut. We got safely back to *Simbá*. We had enough fuel for the cars of the missions to keep ourselves mobile. Moreover, the stock of fuel gave us a feeling of security in case we had to move.

One day I was told to go on a trip that was none of my liking. It took place when soldiers were around. They were forever inspecting the 'border' (which was the *Lopolí* River) against possible intruders from the Equator Province. They usually made a stopover at the mission to make sure of God knows what. We never knew how their visit would end. One day, when Jan Hartering and Brother Gabriël had already left *Simbá* and were on vacation in Europe, the officer on the truck agreed to take a woman on board who wanted to go to *Yahúma* where the soldiers had their barracks. It was a trip of one hundred kilometres. Two soldiers, however, objected to taking the woman. A hot discussion ensued between them and the officer. In the end the truck left without the two soldiers. The next thing that happened was that the two soldiers forced us (Jacob or me) at gunpoint to take them to *Yahúma* in the small pick-up which Jan Hartering had left me when he went on vacation. It being my car, I drove the men. On the way they forced me to stop in a village. They got out and forced the villagers to supply them with eggs, chickens and even a goat. I recognised many of them as being our Christians. Back in the car they told me to stop again in the next village. Just before reaching the next village, I stopped the car and told them in my best French that these people were my

parishioners. Stopping the car in their village, they would regard me as the co-robber of their chickens etc. This would put me in an impossible situation as I was their priest. Having found out in the meantime that they did not know how to drive a car, I handed my keys to them there and then and said: 'Here are the keys, take the car to *Yahúma* and bring it back in a couple of days. I am no longer going to help you to steal things from my Christians. Either you stop stealing and I take you to *Yahúma* or you drive the car yourselves.' Surprisingly they easily agreed without further ado and I took them to *Yahúma* and returned without any further trouble.

And so the days passed with us sometimes having trouble crossing the river and occasionally having no trouble at all depending on what sorts of soldiers were in charge. We could not inform our own relatives or friends at home about our situation. The mail came rarely through or not at all. Anyway, we could never write as we would have liked to, afraid they might censure the post and take it as criticism which would cause us further problems. When I had been back in Holland for about a fortnight, my 3-month-old letter from *Símbá* arrived at my parents' home. The letter said all was well and we were doing fine.

And sometimes all was well. I remember I got a couple of trunks full of second-hand clothes which were very welcome as there was little to be had in the shops anymore and what was for sale, the ordinary people could not afford to buy. Jacob and I discussed what to do with the clothes. Selling them would not help the poor people for whom the clothes were meant in the first place. Dashing them out to people would bring trouble and lead to jealousy because not all the clothes were equally nice and who was to decide what to give to whom? We found a solution. The plot around the house was overgrown with elephant grass and though we had it cut regularly, cutting it down was not a real solution, because every time the grass was back in no time. So we came up with the idea to ask people to clean the compound by digging up the elephant grass to get rid of it once and for all. We would reward them by means of the second-hand clothes. So we agreed that the price of the clothes was to be measured by the number of yards of grass that had to be dug up. The nicer the blouse, trouser or skirt the more yards had to be cleared. All the clothes were suspended on the veranda and on each of them was put the price in yards. Everybody flocked to our veranda and before I even could explain the meaning of the numbers on the clothes, people came - money at the ready - to buy the clothes for 2, 6 or 10 francs according to the number they saw on the clothes.

They were not too pleased when we explained the procedure. They replied: 'Listen! We are sick and not strong enough' and a whole lot of other excuses. Finally I got a chance to explain that, if one could not physically do the job oneself, one could hire somebody to do it and in that way obtain the clothes. In the end they agreed that it was fair enough. After a couple of weeks the bush in front of the presbytery had disappeared. Everybody was happy, including the sick and some poor old widows, for whom I had kept clothes apart without letting people know! Of course within a day everybody knew! But they did not mind. After all, they themselves proposed to me for whom I should keep some clothes. This is one of the good memories I have.

One day I started the movement of the Legion of Mary with a few faithful Christians. Every week we held our meeting and prayers. They were very sincere and they touched me with their faith and hope. The weekly meetings were still going, when 22 years later (in 1986) I visited *Basánkusu*, the *Bongandó* including *Símbá* again. The ticket for this trip was given to me by a rich Cameroonian parishioner, who came to congratulate me on my 25th anniversary as a priest, and discovered that I had worked in Congo. 'Has he ever gone back?' was his question to those around him at the reception. On hearing that this was not the case, he took a serviette from the table and wrote: 'Father John, this is good for a ticket and a trip to Congo. Come and see me. Paul.' And Paul Bamileke was as good as his word.

Let us go back to *Simbá* as it was in the sixties. After Jan and Gabriël had left for Holland, Jacob Bos took over as parish priest. He was as nice a man as one could get. He was gentle and generous, but on the whole pretty nervous and not good at handling the frequent tense situations. But he stuck it and we survived the comings and goings of all kinds of soldiers, though we continued to experience the anxiety of what each new day might bring. The headmaster, Mr Simon *Ilonga*, was a great help to us as a middleman between us and the soldiers when local things turned tense or when the situation in the whole country seemed to get out of hand.

Another precious help was François, a seminarian (who later left) and a gifted musician. He composed a sung Mass in *Longandó*, the local language. I am a bit confused about the fact that Vatican II took place as from 1962 and how we in *Simbá* were singing the Mass in *Longandó* before I left in 1964. Were we ahead of our times? But whatever the case, I left *Simbá* somewhere in September '64 but till today I know the melody and the words of the Gloria: It began with '*Lokúmo enéká Njakomba ená loóla*'! As I say it has me a little confused. We still had benediction, that's for sure. When one day the soldiers accused me in front of Jan Hartering that I was a Belgian parachutist, Jan told them to go to church where I was leading Benediction. That settled it.

In 1964, I forget the month when Jacob Bos left for Holland and, boy, did he need the holiday! The daily experience of an anxious and uncertain situation had taken its toll. Jan Zegwaart was appointed parish priest in his place. Jan was the school manager at *Yalisere*, where



Jan Zegwaart and Bandombe Tarcisi (1952).

Piet van Run was the parish priest. Jan Zegwaart was not too pleased about the appointment. He sent me the message that he was certainly not coming to *Simbá* for the time being and asked me to leave *Simbá* as well, since things were getting too hot. And it was, because again nobody was allowed to cross the *Lopolí*. It was at that time that the incident with the pregnant woman occurred. So I received the advice to leave, but decided in consultation with the headmaster not to. After having stayed on my own for a couple of months, Simon *Ilonga* came one night to tell me the news that the situation was deteriorating, because, he said, a group of rebels was on the way. They were out to loot and kill especially the whites, and to plunder their houses and possessions.

I would not stand a chance with them, Simon said, and he could no longer be a restraining influence on them as had been the case before. His information was that in a day or two the rebels would reach *Simbá* mission. I should not wait any longer. He told me to depart quietly early the next morning without telling anybody that I was leaving and to take nothing with me as that would arouse suspicion, certainly with the guys who had to pull me across the river. 'Tell them that so and so has died at *Yáseki* Hospital and that you are going to fetch the corpse. Don't come back, but tell the Protestant missionary doctors to leave too, because the present rebels intend (for the first time ever) to cross the *Lopolí* and to go on a looting spree in

the Equator Province as well.' That night was a sad and lonely night. After Mass when all people had left the church and gone their way, I emptied the ciborium of consecrated hosts and locked the empty tabernacle.

Dressed in my white cassock I left for the *Lopoli* River. The 'pullers' were surprised to see me and to hear that so and so had died. 'How come, they had not heard the news?' 'Father sometimes hears more than you do', was my answer as they pulled me and the car across. I noticed, however, that they did have a good look at what was lying in the cabin and on the back of the pick-up. They saw nothing special. That made them believe my story. No doubt Simon saved my life as indeed two days later (so we heard later) the rebels arrived at *Simbá* and looted whatever they could find. There was one thing I felt very sad to lose. It was the chalice my relatives had given me for my ordination four years earlier. After the situation quieted down, neither the chalice nor the chasubles ever turned up. But with Vatican II on its way, I did not feel sorry about my theology books!

I passed by *Yaseki* Hospital and informed the expatriates the news. After some local consultation they decided to leave the hospital the next day. They intended to drive towards *Boéndé* to await developments. I drove on to *Yambóyo* since no missionary was stationed at *Djólú*. I informed Fr Bart Santbergen, Fr Jan Groenewegen and Br Piet Vos the bad news. Bartje or *Bataké* as he was called told me I needed a rest. Things had been too much for me for too long a time. He said that it was good I had left *Simbá* and that I should stay with them and get a good rest. I told them I was going to *Yalisere*, which had a back route just in case the rebels crossed the *Lopoli* and occupied *Djólú*, because, if the rebels would occupy *Djólú*, *Yambóyo* would be without an escape route to *Lingomɔ*, *Mompɔɔ* and *Basankusu*.



Typical kitchen of a polygamist. The kitchen has two rooms.

So in the afternoon I left for *Yalisere*, not knowing that neither I nor any other missionary would see Bart, Jan and Piet ever again. Sometimes it is a real blessing that we don't know everything that will befall us. I do remember, however, how hard it was visiting Jan's parents after I returned to Holland at a time when there was no news of them being alive or not. Poor parents to be in a situation like

this. All I could tell them was that I had left them well and in good spirits in *Yambóyo*. I am sure others have written down what became known about them afterwards. So sad, such an apparent waste of good men! I know they rest in peace. But sometimes I still wonder: why they and not me, who had been living far longer than they in the face of rebels and on the so-called frontline. There is no answer...yet!

At *Yalisere* I found Piet van Run and Jan Zegwaart. They were both happy to see me. I stayed there for about a week (or two?) and we even drove from *Yalisere* in the direction of *Yaseki* to find out what the situation was at *Simbá*, but we were stopped on the way by Christians and villagers, who seemed to know that the rebels had arrived at *Simbá* shortly after I had left, though at the time they had not crossed the *Lopoli* yet. Then one morning we got news that they had crossed and were at *Djólú*. For a couple of days already, we had been ready to leave at a moment's notice and we did, Jan, Piet and me, leaving behind Abbé Camille to take care of the mission. It was a tense drive, especially when somewhere along the road we saw a roadblock and guns that soldiers pointed at us from the bush where they lay hidden. We were travelling in our white cassocks and waving our white sleeved arms from the open windows

of the car and shouting: 'Múpe, Múpe.' We stopped and the soldiers came out of the bush with guns drawn. It appeared they belonged to the regular Congolese army. They let us pass to go to *Mompónó*. There, if I remember well, we did not find any missionary. But the catechist and cook showed up and gave us a good meal. I remember now that we were told that the day before Bishop van Kester and Abbé Joseph had been there planning to visit the *Bongandó* region. However, people had advised them to go back as it was not safe to go any further. I don't know whether we slept there or whether we went on. I think we went on to *Befale* or *Baríngá*.

The next thing I remember of the journey is what happened at *Baríngá*. I believe, we spent the night there and in the morning as we were planning to drive towards *Basánkusu*, we received news that a convoy of soldiers was on the way to our *Baríngá* mission. Nobody knew where they were coming from or who they were: regular soldiers or rebels. They could be rebels coming from *Boéndé*. That really scared us, all the more so as there were also sisters in our company. I still remember how silent and tense we all sat in the sitting-room...waiting. It was *Simbá* all over again!

When we heard the noise of cars, Piet van Run and I went to meet them in our cassocks...heart in mouth. When the captain saw the cassocks, he greeted us warmly and told us he had been sent by the army headquarters at *Basánkusu* to go and find the missionaries who fled from *Bongandó* and to escort us to *Basánkusu*. No doubt the bishop had gone to see the army and given the soldiers information about us. And so they drove ahead of us to *Basánkusu*. Boy, what a relief for all of us. And once we got to *Basánkusu*, we were ready to go home to Holland for a good break.

One more thing happened before I left *Basánkusu*. The second day at *Basánkusu* the bishop let me know that the army had come to him to request my pick-up, wanting it for their work. I informed the bishop that, since I had kept the pick-up out of rebel hands, I did not intend to hand it over to the regular army that was supposed to take care of us and not rob us. The next day the soldiers were back and told the bishop they would take the bishop's car or my pick-up as they needed transport to defend the country. I then gave the keys to the bishop knowing there was no point in resisting any longer. Many years later I learned that the car lay crashed against a tree somewhere near *Waka*.

I was at the end of my tether. We flew to Léopoldville and then on to Brussels, where Father Zuijdervliet had arranged transport to take all of us to Roosendaal where there was the 'Mito', a fund-raising party, going on. After a good evening's drink we spent the night there. That evening I phoned home to tell my parents where I was. They could not believe their ears. Early in the morning I went out with Father Zuijdervliet and bought myself a suit, a gift from Mill Hill. My dad and a friend came to collect me next day by car. And since Joop Deen had to go to Amsterdam, he accompanied us.

In Amsterdam the following happened: as we drove into Amsterdam Joop and I happened to spot two men walking on the pavement, wearing army uniforms. Automatically we both bent down in order to hide. My dad's friend asked: 'What is up?' Sitting upright again, we said: 'Something fell down' and that was that...! When I asked Joop the other day whether he remembered the incident, Joop said he did not. Whatever...it showed how I felt. Once I reached home and met my mother, I totally collapsed and cried for hours on end. I just could not stop crying. All the grief, hurt, tension and anxiety came out finally, now that I was home safe.

It may sound strange now, but we never got any psychological help to sort out whatever happened to us both in our hearts and in our heads. We had to work it out by ourselves. The ones that were a great help with their sympathy and concern were our relatives and friends in

the parish and elsewhere. For instance, the butcher brought regularly a steak with no name on it except: 'Get well, Jan'. In fact, so many gifts were given that in no time I had back all the items I had lost in the Congo. It is this that must have cured my heartaches and have taken away the sense of loss and frustration that could easily have embittered my life. I am a lucky man.

After three months I became an assistant in my home parish, because the assistant priest was hard hit by a nervous breakdown. When the parish priest became too difficult for me to handle, I went to America to do some preaching and to collect funds for the missions. That was in the months of June/July 1965. Two months later I sat with Tuut in front of the Superior General's door as he was visiting Holland, waiting to get a new appointment. Tuut received an appointment for New Zealand. I was sent to Cameroon. I was to remain there for 30 years.

But my final connection with Congo came to an end after I had been working in Cameroon for three years or so. I was at Mamfe at the time. The councillor for Africa came visiting us and asked me whether I would be ready to return to Congo, since they wanted me back there. I answered that my parents would have to agree since I could not ask them to go again through a similar period of uncertainties as they had done a couple of years before. The response of my parents was 'We gave you to God a long time ago. Go to where you are being called by God.' That's how they saw it, people of great faith as they were. As it turned out, the Bishop of Buea objected strongly as I heard later, and that finished any further speculation. Strangely enough our Mill Hill headquarters never reported back to me. That ended my connection with Congo, though I will never forget *Simbá* and its people who introduced me to the missionary life and who saved my life. And I know: something of me never left *Simbá* and Congo..

Jan Molenaar.
Amsterdam
September 2010.