

# OLD AFRICA

STORIES *from* EAST AFRICA'S PAST

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# TIGANIA MISSION AND HOSPITAL

by Jerry Haigh with contributions from Andrew Botta

**1913** Italian Consolata Missionaries from the Mathari Mission in Nyeri, led by Brother Benedetto Falda, set off in convoy to Meru in 1913 - at that time called Mutindwa Fort. (To this day Meru is also known as Mutindwa jwa Kangangi, abbreviated to Mutindwa – a place to linger.) A steam engine with a water wagon attached headed the convoy. Behind came four-wheeled carts each drawn by four pairs of oxen. After a three-month journey to cover what is today roughly 170 kilometres of tarmac driving through Embu, they reached the Uringo forest where they established a sawmill. They crossed half a dozen deep river gorges, a tedious job. Today's journey by car would take about three hours.

They set up the new mission in the area known as Tigania, northeast of Mount Kenya, nestled below the Nyambeni Hills, 26 kilometres northeast of Meru town.

The first temporary structures, built by Fathers Toselli, Olivero, and Cagliero, were ready by 5 August 1913. By 1915 two houses, one for the fathers and one for the sisters had been prefabricated at the sawmill and transported to the mission. They later merged the houses into one building.

Altogether the three men and their workers fashioned 18 houses with 60 doors, 52 windows, 36 beds, and tables and chairs. They faced many problems and the interesting story is well narrated in the book by Gabriele



*The original Father's house built in 1915 and later merged with another building at the mission still stands. Father Andrew Botta is next to the house in the light blue shirt in this recent photo.*



*The first sign guiding people to the mission was nailed to a nearby tree. No road or track is visible in this undated photo.*

Soldati, **The Pioneer, the African Adventure of Benedict Falda**, St. Paul Publications, 1991.

Some time after World War II the mission decided to create a health centre and dispensary.

With the health centre established they realised the patients needed food and they found a simple solution. They asked relatives to provide *ochoro*, fermented millet flour (ground by hand on a stone) mixed with sugar. The *ochoro* was left overnight and then family members of the patient brought it in gourds (*gekuru*). The 'lid' stopper became the drinking vessel for the patient.

The Tigania health centre was located almost exactly half way, on foot, between the Maua Methodist hospital that opened in 1930, and Meru District Hospital in Meru town.

In 1955 Father Andrew Botta arrived in Kenya and after a year with the Mujwa Mission in Meru District he moved to Tigania where he spent the next 16 years.

Soon Andrew found himself looking after orphan wild animals. He kept a little baboon that he named Suzy. At three years of age Suzy became unmanagable. One Sunday during Mass Suzy came into the church, climbing and jumping on the trusses of the roof. The children applauded with enthusiasm. The Sisters were scandalised.

Andrew donated Suzy to the Animal Orphanage in Nairobi. Andrew's animal orphans included baby leopards, found after local farmers killed their mothers to protect livestock. On one occasion Andrew gave two baby leopards to the

orphanage where he met Joy Adamson who was nursing her dying cheetah Pippa.

Andrew remembered, "Another monkey similar to Suzy had a tragic end when in my company we were attacked by a swarm of bees. She ran away from me up to a tree, while I ran down the road. She was literally covered by the bees until she dropped to the ground dead. Unfortunately the safety of a tree must be implanted in their instinct."

Andrew was also instrumental in starting up the Tigania Housing Cooperative Society, initially with 10 members — all teachers — with the aim of building proper houses using local stones and cement. They built the houses one at a time, using the repayment of the first to build the second and so on. In 1964 Andrew contacted the founder of the Lay Volunteers International Association (LVIA) Fr. Aldo Benvevelli of Cuneo in Italy asking to get some technical help. The first volunteer was accountant Rosanna Cayre.

Eventually the society grew to about 3000 members and became a SACCO – a saving and credit society. A Peace Corps volunteer, Gilbert Asher, helped to draft by-laws and another volunteer from Sweden helped to set up proper accounting.

Andrew joined the Meru Sports Club (where I first met him in 1967) in the late 1960s and in

1966, returning from a holiday in Mombasa, he brought back the full-sized snooker table the club had ordered in the rear of his Peugeot pick-up.

During Andrew's tenure the health centre served many people from surrounding areas. Volunteer nurses like Teresina and other helpers came from Italy. Among them were Terry Dutto and Germano Pagliasso, a technician from the Italian Railways.

In 1968 Dr Joanne van de Riet arrived in Kenya after a year's surgery and medicine residency at the Kitwe General Hospital in Zambia's copper mine district. They had stopped to visit Nairobi National Park on her way back to Holland where she planned to finish up the paediatric studies she had embarked on in Rotterdam after graduating from the Vellor Christian Medical College in India.

She liked what she saw in Kenya and, being a tad short of money, she went to the office of the Ministry of Health to ask if they needed a doctor anywhere. The minister asked if she had any experience with obstetrics and gynaecology. When she told him of the other things that she had specialised in, but not OBGYN, he replied, "You'll soon learn."

The next morning Joanne found herself headed for Meru jammed between two large men in the middle of the front seat of a short-wheel based Land Rover.



*Teresina, a volunteer nurse, and one of her little patients.*



*Father Andrew Botta and Suzy the baboon.*



*Dr Joanne van de Riet in 1969.*

She was at once assigned to the women's and children's wards. She did indeed soon learn about gynaecology. There were eight midwives, among them Lily Mwenda and Evangeline Karuru. If any of them called for help, it was not for a routine delivery.

In Meru Joanne and I met. I served in Meru as the District Veterinary Officer. We married on 25 January 1969 at a ceremony conducted by Mr Gitau, the District Officer. At the ceremony Joanne had to swear she was not already married to anyone else. I did not have to take the same oath! An unexpected surprise during the wedding was the appearance of boy offering to sell either the *Daily Nation* or the *East African Standard*. He departed in haste.

After our honeymoon in South Africa and family visits to Europe, we returned to Meru in March 1969.

Soon after we returned to Meru we met Andrew at the club. As I played a game of snooker she and Andrew chatted while he enjoyed a Tusker. He said, "I wish I could find a volunteer doctor to help at the mission." Jo had become disillusioned with some of the things at the government hospital. For instance, once she found the night nurse for the children's ward drunk and asleep in a cupboard.

We quickly agreed that Jo should become the first physician at Tigania. We told Andrew she would need a car to go to and from home to work each day.

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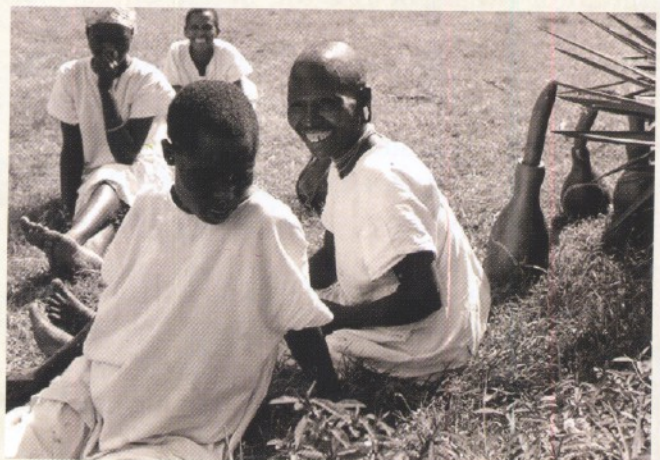
That was soon solved. She started with an ancient and definitely decrepit pale-blue Renault 4, also known as a Roho. Its suspension was more-or-less shot and the front wheels leaned in at an alarming five degrees off the vertical. To this day we remember the push-me-pull-you gear stick jutting out of the middle of the dashboard.

The Roho was soon replaced by a reliable tan-coloured VW beetle. As she drove between Meru and Tigania, passing through the small village of Kianjai, she was soon recognised and greeted by one and all. During the heavy April or November and December rains when the VW got mired, she never had to wait long before many people appeared and pushed her on her way.

Among the many memories Jo has of her days at Tigania a few stand out. She needed an incubator for premature babies. She explained what she needed to volunteer Terry Dutto. He quickly cobbled together some spare pieces of window glass. He even built it big enough for two infants if needed. To deal with the problem of the lack of a heat source he inserted a 40-watt bulb.

Often Jo found a trussed chicken behind her seat, given as a thank you gift by a grateful patient.

One day a woman brought her young daughter to the clinic and told how the *muganga* (then known as a witch doctor, more recently a traditional healer) at Laare had said she must take the very sick little girl to Tigania. Jo quickly determined the girl was suffering from bacterial meningitis, an often fatal condition that must be treated with antibiotics as soon as possible. A week later the patient was fit to go home, none the worse for her brush with death



*Ochoro ready for consumption by patients at the hospital.*



**Top:** Stacks of gourds (*gekuru*) filled with *ochoro* for the patients. **Below:** District Commissioner Gitau marries Jerry Haigh and Joanne van de Riet on 25 January 1969 (*Robbie Burns Day*).

or at least life-long brain damage. Teresina later found out the *muganga* had been paid his fee - a goat. After all, he had referred the child to the hospital.

Another remarkable event followed Andrew's approach to six forward-thinking businessmen. He persuaded them to bring their sons to the doctor for surgical circumcision. The young men were due to go through this vital rite of passage into manhood. They arranged that all of them would undergo the initiation rituals before the actual surgery at the hospital.

Instead of using some sort of non-sterile blade, the simple operation was carried out with local anaesthetic and with sterilized equipment by a qualified doctor. Not just a doctor, but a white doctor. Not just a qualified white doctor, but a woman!

Later Jo learned how crucial circumcision is for boys to become men in many African societies. A man in his twenties came to her in desperation because he knew he'd never marry until it had been done.

The sister in charge of the pharmacy was tiny, feisty, Sister Nunzia. One day a government

health inspector arrived to check on the status of the hospital and the pharmacy. He queried the fact that patients were charged a nominal fee for vaccination against 'the cough that lasts for six months' — Whooping cough.

Sister Nunzia rose on her toes to her maximum of one and a half metres. She glared at the bureaucrat with laser eyes and told him she always ordered the vaccine direct from the supplier and always had it in stock. She further told him that patients who had walked many miles with their infants would go to the government hospital in town only to find that there was none available. That ended the discussion. What she probably did not tell him was the way in which the vaccine got to the clinic. It involved a Nairobi-based Mt Kenya rugby player transporting it in a thermos flask, delivering it to me for passing on to Jo, and final delivery to Sister Nunzia.

Perhaps the most important event of the transition from health centre to fully-fledged hospital was the construction and equipping of a laboratory and the acquisition of several essential things like an autoclave, centrifuge and laryngoscope. None of these were possible with the limited budget of the mission.

During her time at the District Hospital Jo had referred some patients to Nairobi for surgery. There she had met Mr Andrew Hicks (The title of Mister is applied to doctors who proceed to qualify as surgeons in the UK. The honour dates back to the days of the barber surgeons of the middle ages) and found out that he was president of the Nairobi Lions Club. She approached him and before long he had arranged for the necessary funds. On 7 April 1970 the *East African Standard* ran the headline: "Talks on £60,000 hospital scheme at Meru."

A sum of 5,000 shillings was enough to kick off the initial needs. The balance continued the process and upgraded the hospital to a one hundred bed unit.

On Sunday 14 June 1970 several dignitaries attended a ceremony at the mission. After Andrew's introduction acknowledging the generosity of the donation and giving effusive praise to Jo, the Meru District Commissioner and the MP for the Nyambene spoke. The speeches closed with Mr Hicks making a few remarks and handing over the generous cheque.

While the equipment made an important

difference to the service offered to patients, the key was the laboratory. It was the important step to allow blood and other samples to be evaluated on the spot. Patients no longer had to travel to Meru for them.

We left Meru in late November 1970. Jo was followed at the mission by Dr Julia Palao Berastain from Peru. She stayed until 1972 and later wrote a book (in Spanish) about her time in Africa. After she left, Father Aldo of the LVIA

arranged for a series of doctors to serve up to 1991. At that point the original Consolata Mission and the hospital were handed over to the St John of God religious order. They are still under the umbrella of the Diocese of Meru.

When we returned on one of many subsequent trips to Kenya, we visited the Tigania Hospital. A large new building stood behind the old wards. There were two full-time doctors and 22 nurses on staff.



*A 2018 photograph showing the sign to the Tigania Hospital.*