***A***

***Missionary***

***Remembers……..***

Sr. Bernadine Byrne, from County Roscommon tells her story…..

There were only two in my family, both girls. My elder sisters entered an Ursuline convent where we both were at school. I said nothing of my decision to be a missionary until I finished school, and then I told my parents. They were devastated. But being such wonderful, loving and self-sacrificing persons, they never tried to dissuade me. This decision of mine was no sudden one: the Lord had been calling me for years. Some might say it was just adolescent love, but be that as it may, I had finished my novitiate in Cork, had a Teacher’s Diploma from a college in London and was on my way to Africa in November, 1938. Many thought this rather hard heated on my part, but I suffered agony for months, before I could bring myself to leave home, and the first morning in the convent found me holding on to sleep, “never” wishing to wake up. But I did. My vocation had survived!

There were four of us Sisters, two for Ghana and two for Nigeria, on a regular passenger boat from Liverpool we had a delightful twelve day trip. On our arrival in Ghana we got a great welcome from priests and sisters, and I add here, a more impressive one later from a swarm of mosquitoes, when darkness fell. The Africans were most welcoming, being accustomed to sisters coming and going for more than fifty years. Everyone pressed the two Nigerians to visit some of our convents about fifty miles away. They accepted the invitation and were warned not to be late for the boat was due to leave in three hours’ time. When they did arrive back half an hour late, the boat was already well outside the breakwater, and on its way. The Harbour Master, seeing the sister’s plight sent a message to the Captain who immediately dropped anchor and had a rope ladder thrown over the side- I wonder if the Shipping Line Coy would have agreed. A small canoe brought the sisters alongside, and the great pity was that there were no video cameras at the time to capture the two sisters scrambling for the dangling ladder and making their way up the side of the boat, with heel length habits and flying veils, while two stalwart sailors waited by the rail above to life them on to the deck. A few weeks later a cable arrived from our H.Q. in Cork: “No further visiting while ashore”. Sad to say, on its return journey to Liverpool this boat was sunk, with no survivors. Our dear Captain! World War II had begun.

From the very beginning in this beautiful tropical island, I felt at home, happy and in modern jargon-fulfilled. Daylight lasts from 6a.m. to around 6p.m. I noticed on the first evening of my arrival that, at sunset, in the acres of “bush” surrounding our convent, a loud simultaneous buzzing of insects began, as though at the down beat of a baton, and continued through the night. I remember what a great pleasure it was at recreation hour to sit on the verandah in the cool of the night, the palm trees in the compound aglow with fireflies, the Atlantic waves breaking on the beach about six hundred yards away, the beat of African drums in the distance, and above us, the moon and a multitude of stars hanging bright and low in the heavens. The sisters sat around doing light chores, marking exercises, preparing lessons, perhaps a piece of needlework, or de-ticking of the dog that had become infested from rolling in the grass.

My first appointment was to a Women’s Training College for teachers, the first of its kind in the Colony. We needed it to provide teachers for our schools. The day began at 6 a.m. with Holy Mass for sisters and students. This was followed by breakfast, housework, classes until 1:30 p.m., lunch and siesta. In the afternoon there were various activities. This was the time the sisters with groups of students went visiting various villages, the leprosarium or the prison.

We all got malaria fever at one time or another and what an experience that was! Then came the treatment-sweating, the only cure. Having being left under a ton of blankets for a couple of hours the victim had her temperature taken. If it was not down the process was repeated until it worked.

I spent forty-six years teaching in various parts of Ghana and for some time helped in the training of indigenous religious sisters. Our African sisters of Our Lady of Apostles have taken over all out institutions and continue our pastoral work, enjoying autonomy in newly formed Provinces of the Congregation.

In the early days of mission life, sisters went home to Ireland on holidays every six or seven years. In December 1944 a sister and I sailed in convoy from West Africa on a troop ship. Around two o’clock one morning a steward passed along the corridors shouting “Preparez vous Preparez Vous!” We knew that meant that all should go to the life boat stations. A torpedo boat was in the vicinity and we were dropping depth charges.

We docked finally in Liverpool and found the ruins camouflaged under a heavy fall of snow. The following day we sailed for Dublin arriving at midnight. The Customs seemed to be deserted and everyone was in trouble trying to get away as there was snow there and transport was also very scarce. Two Salvation Army ladies were there to help and they managed to get a hotel which would take Sister and me. The following morning the city was snow bound so we decided to look for the railway station to Cork ourselves. We thought we had reached it when we saw a wide entrance and a man standing there. “Please is this the station for Cork?” we asked. “Begob no” he said, “but begorras Sisters ye are now in the right place-This is- Guiness Brewery!”.

Many of the friends I made in Ghana still keep in touch, send photographs, phone or write always saying ‘nice’ things such as “The Sisters made me what I am”, or “ You gave me enough love for a lifetime”, or “You taught me to love God” (can’t ever remember doing that!) We looked after two little girls whose mother had died. They are now grown women; one is a physiotherapist working in Canada, and the other a teacher in Detroit. They come to see me regularly and spoil me with kindness. I look forward to their visits- they remind me of happy days and we can talk about Ghana. Now that “*my days are in the sere and the yellow leaf*” I need a boost now and then.