

60 years ago in East Africa, Part 4

D. Pedro Casciaro and Fr. Gabiola arrived in Nairobi, by plane, on 24th October 1958; Ed Hernandez , Kevin O'Byrne and a some other members of Opus Dei were already there.

12/10/2018

By the end of that same year, they had already set up the first centre of Opus Dei in Africa, and as St. Josemaria has always taught his children, the best room in the house was reserved as the Chapel with a

tabernacle. The items for the Oratory that had been bought in Madrid arrived in Mombasa in November 1958. Soon the Oratory was set up at the end of the corridor of the upper floor, as it was the safest place of the house.

The reredos of that first Oratory was an image of our Lady, nicely framed in gilded carved wood, bought in a Sikh's shop in town.

Fr O'Meara

The Catholic Bishops had delegated many of their dealings with the Colonial Government to Father Frank O'Meara, Holy Ghost Father, in his capacity of General Secretary of Education for Catholic Missions.

His task included finding out the wishes of the Hierarchy on educational matters and then negotiate with the corresponding Department in the Ministry of

Education on the lines laid down by them. This meant that all negotiations had to go through Fr. O'Meara which was not satisfactory as the new comers brought many new ideas Fr. O'Meara was not prepared for.

Fr. O'Meara saw Strathmore plans in the light of his many years of experience in East Africa and understood them as long term targets; but they were very short term targets.

In 1958, most people believed that independence would take at least fifty years to come. Things had never moved very fast in the colonies. Matters, which for us seemed to be urgent targets, were for Fr. O'Meara and many others, ideals or, at best, guidelines for a life-long project. Fr. O'Meara never saw any problems with the project we were putting forward because he always thought

that many of its characteristics were impossible.

First Trip to Uganda December 1958

Ed Hernandez and Fr. Gabiola took a Volkswagen and drove North West across the Rift Valley into Nakuru and Eldoret, and arrived in Jinja, at the Northern coast of Lake Victoria.

“It was a useful visit, because it gave us a sense of the sort of thing we had to be prepared to build if we wanted to prepare students for Makerere” says Fr. Gabiola in his memoirs.

According to Fr. Gabiola, Uganda had an older African tradition; some of the tribes there had developed into societies of more complex structures than the tribes in Kenya; missionary work had also been in Uganda some fifty years or more before Kenya. In addition, we had in mind meeting friends of our friends in Nairobi.

We reached Kampala, the capital of Uganda, with curiosity. The Baganda, who occupy all the land west of Lake Victoria around Kampala, have always been held as the aristocratic people in East Africa. As it happens in a few other areas of the Continent, this tribe possesses a monarchical structure.

There are in the capital a number of hills, supposedly to be seven, which, together with other reasons, make Catholics think of the Capital of Uganda as the Rome of Africa. On top of hills three Cathedrals, two Catholic and one Anglican, and one Mosque are built.

A plot of land in Nairobi

First it was decided the new College had to be near the City, among other things because we intended to have non-resident students as well.

Secondly the plot of land had to be in a non-restricted area (i.e., open to all races) and that limited tremendously the options.

Very soon it was clear that the only possible land was the one of the archdiocese along St. Austin's Road (today James Gichuru Road). It was part of the huge extension of land which the Catholic mission had been allocated very early in the history of Nairobi. Much of it had been sold for development, and pieces of several sizes had been dedicated to Catholic institutions, such as *St Mary's School* for boys, *Loreto Convent Msongari*, for girls and, of course, the Archbishop's House itself.

Before identifying this land of the Archdiocese, they had tried to get a 20 acre plot belonging also to the Archdiocese near Gitanga Road. The European neighbours rejected the application in a very unpleasant

meeting at the City Council (January 1960) because they didn't want a School (for Africans) in their vicinity. In practice, Nairobi was a racially segregated town.

Then they talked again with Archbishop McCarthy and he made available, at market price, up to 40 acres near his house, next to St Mary's School (the house of the Archbishop was in St. Mary's compound).

It just so happened that around that time, Fr Joseph had an accident, and rolled the car over near the bridge of James Gichuru (then St. Austin's Road), very close to the place where the Archbishop had offered 40 acres of land, next to his own house. He spent a few hours there and realized the piece of land was very good.

But the Archbishop offered the land at market price (£30,000 a huge amount of money at that time) as the

Archdiocese needed that money badly.

The negotiations were closed by March 1960.

The new plot of land was set between St. Austin Road, Strathcona Road and Riverside, with the Nairobi River to the north of the property.

On visiting the plot, Don Pedro Casciaro, an architect, immediately suggested a possible distribution of the area, with the main buildings in the higher part of the plot, just as the local architect, Ed Hernandez, had thought before.

It was at this time that the name of Strathmore started being used, taken from the road on the south side of the property.

Winds of Change

Early in February 1960, Harold Macmillan had given the historical “Winds of change” address in Cape Town; the world started heralding the end of the British Colonies.

Also in 1960 the Belgian Congo experienced some very tragic developments with the Katanga War; most Europeans fled the country. And that happened just one month after the first women of the Work had arrived in Kenya in August 1960.

Strathmore Construction

Soon Ed and Kevin rented some office space and set up an architect's office to build the new College. They set June 1960 as the deadline to go to tenders, as the College was supposed to be ready for February 1961.

The contract for the construction of the first phase was signed on 16th July 1960, and the works started next day.

There was some discussion regarding the name of the new College (African name?); little by little the name Strathmore was chosen.

pdf | document generated
automatically from [https://
dev.opusdei.org/en-ke/article/60-years-
ago-in-east-africa-part-4/](https://dev.opusdei.org/en-ke/article/60-years-ago-in-east-africa-part-4/) (08/06/2025)