

Recollections 1930- 1944

By
Lorna Van den Driesen

There were no fears in my mind when not yet eighteen years of age I went to teach at SJC, after all it was like a second home to me as I was a Chundikuli girl! When in Form 11 I had done Science in SJC Laboratory, I had been to all our Prize Giving's held in the SJC Hall and had also watched many a cricket match through holes in the famous Fence; besides, my eight brothers were Johnians.

During my early years of teaching, two teachers who befriended me were Miss Irene Leembruggen and Mr Jell. Miss Leembruggen was near the end of her teaching career and she did all she could to help me find my feet. She was a kind and gracious lady and a good teacher. Mr Jell was a genial old gentleman who did the same for me. I remember that almost every morning before school some young masters would come and chat with him. Once one of them asked his advice on marriage and he said, 'If you get married you will regret it, if you don't get married you will regret it, you must choose". Mr Jell was a philosopher, a kind and good teacher, the boys and the staff liked him and so did I.

Most of the boys I taught came from the Tamil School nearby where they had been for three years. I was expected to teach them English in the 1st and 2nd year and send them to Form 1. There was no difficulty about discipline as they were intelligent and hard working and if the years have not made me view them through rose coloured spectacles quite delightful. I learnt something from them when I found out that one of them walked three miles to school and had watered fifty tobacco plants by hand before he left. Such was the love of learning of the Jaffna people.

After two years of teaching I went to Government Training College, Colombo and returned to SJC as a 1st Class Trained Teacher to do much the same work. Miss Edith Kelk and I formed a Wolf Cub Pack and I have fond memories of the weekly meetings and picnics to places like Keerimalai, Mandatheevu and KKS. We were always accompanied by two masters in keeping with Jaffna customs and values. still have several snap shots of those happy events.

Staff Meetings were lively affairs and were preceded by afternoon tea. I was happy when the tuck-shop stopped giving us clumsy sandwiches and instead gave us delicious vaddais and bananas. The masters were very ready to state their views and many lively debates took place. They were on the whole a splendid body of men devoted to the boys and the school. I came to have a great respect for them men like S J Gunasekeram, S K Nesiah, V C Canagaratnam, and the Principal, Rev H Peto to name just four.

I remember once when I was teaching in a classroom alongside the cemetery I heard Mr P I Mathai taking an English class in the cemetery. He was declaiming Gray's Elegy in a country churchyard. That afternoon he was ragged unmercifully in the staff room. St John's was fortunate in the calibre of the men on her staff. There existed in my time an association of the staff to assist anyone who wished to go on study leave. We all contributed to this and it gave its members one year's full paid leave when they had completed ten years service. It was tacit agreement that the person so assisted would return to teach in SJC. When I left, they gave me the same assistance although it was well-known that I would not return to SJC.

The wives of the masters were quite involved in the life of the college and in my time had formed a club which the masters in fund called 'The Penjathi Club'. Athisayam Sathianathan later Mrs D C

Arulanantham, on her return from the Colombo University had joined the staff and we both were honorary members. Besides monthly meetings, we organised afternoon teas for visitors at Sports Meets and Cricket matches etc. We made hundreds of sandwiches and since sliced bread was unknown then, that was quite a task. I write this to show what a tight knit community the College was.

Athisayam, my life long friend, was followed by other lady teachers among whom was Ranees Handy now Mrs Eliezer. She created history by taking part in a Chekov play with some of the masters, surely a brave action and a first in Jaffna.

I remember an amusing incident at one of the plays - in the scene from 'As You Like It' when the Duke's wrestler takes on Orlando. Well on the opening night the boy who played the Duke's wrestler refused to be beaten and brought down one of the side curtains during the bout to the amusement of the audience, the huge delight of the boys and the anger of the masters. On being taken to task by them he said he could not be disgraced by being beaten by that 'small fellow' in front of all his friends and relations!!

In my last two years at SJC, I taught Matriculation geography in both schools. The girls' school had no geography teacher, so I took my class of about ten or twelve boys over to the girls' school. It was war time and there were times of air-raid drill. Do any of you remember having to be down on the floor under a table with a stick or pencil between your teeth and cotton wool in your ears? Well that happened sometimes during the geography class and the students quite enjoyed these interruptions. I had little idea how much my popularity rose in both schools during those years!

My departure from SJC was tinged with great sadness, Mr Peto, that great Principal lost his life in the heroic act of saving mine in a drowning accident. So I left and went to Isabella Throbbert College, Lucknow University.

Looking back after these many years, I realise how blessed were my 'Jaffna years' in Chundikuli and St John's College.