



**MEMORIES ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE and
CHUNDIKULI GIRLS' COLLEGE JAFFNA, SRI LANKA.**

by

Lorna Vandendriesen

Long ago, when I was a pupil at Chundikuli, the school was situated on land the boundaries of which were the Main Street, Old Park Road and St. John's College. A cadjan fence separated the two schools. The old story of holes in the fence opposite the SJC cricket grounds are true as I was, along with others, guilty of making them. We watched the matches and were also, I am ashamed to confess, guilty of what is now called 'sledging', shouting "Miss it" when a fielder on the opposing side was attempting a catch. Complaints about the state of the fence never resulted in anything as far as I remember.

The Chundikuli grounds were lovely. Two huge Mahogany trees gave shade and their large roots made pleasant seats. One seat in the centre of the grounds was known as 'The Log'. It was the stump of a Mahogany tree that had been cemented over. Sitting on the log in the evenings we watched as Miss Page (the Principal) and Miss Hannah Niles drove away in a carriage drawn by horses. They were visiting parents of pupils, Miss Niles being interpreter where necessary. I remember Miss Niles as being meticulous, particularly about her personal appearance. We were convinced she must have measured the width of each pleat of her sari at both waist and shoulder, they were so precise

Sunday afternoon church services were attended by boarders from both schools. The little church on the SIC grounds was famous for its slate roof. The service was very popular. The girls sat on one side of the aisle, the boys on the other and many Masters and their wives at the back. The SJC Prefects read the lesson and took up the collection. This afforded the opportunity for the passing of notes. After the service, about 5PM, the Chundikuli girls and teachers took a walk to the lagoon and sat in groups on the esplanade enjoying the breeze. The boys and some Masters followed the girls but communication between the two groups was never allowed.

As we lived in Old Park Road my sisters and I were sometimes allowed to go across the road to study in the school hall together with the boarders. One evening a group of SJC boys crept into the verandah

and hid behind the half-wall of the hall. They wore hideous masks that glowed with luminous paint. Whilst we were studying quietly, they suddenly jumped up on the wall yelling like demons and scared us out of our wits. We fled screaming towards Miss Page's house, overturning some desks. Miss Hensman came out and stopped us; of course the boys had long gone. She gave us a good scolding for our foolish behaviour. I doubt if the boys were ever caught.

We had no Science Laboratory at Chundikuli so the senior girls who wanted to do some Science at least, went to St. John's College, together with a teacher of course. This happened once a week. The boys in the Senior Math class noted that one afternoon a week their Master set them work and left them saying "Carry on". Very soon they knew where he went. My brother Fred wrote a very good poem about this, not naming the Master. My brother Harry read the poem at the end-of-term boarders' concert. Masters and the senior boys were enjoying a good laugh, which grew even greater when the Master concerned left the hall in a rage. My brother Fred was transferred to Trinity College, Kandy, the next term.

Rumours began to spread, and soon proved to be true, that St. John's wanted the Girls' College grounds. They actually wanted to send us to the far away village of Nallur where there was a large area of land available free. This idea was strongly opposed by parents, friends and teachers of the girls' school. Protest meetings were held and fiery speeches made - the chief speaker being Miss Grace Hensman, whose efforts met with success. The girls did not go to Nallur but money was raised to purchase an area of land just across the Main Road, where Chundikuli now stands, still very close to St. John's College.

I conclude this with a tribute to three Chundikuli teachers who really set the high standards and ran the school regardless of who was the Principal. Gracious Miss Grace Hensman, gentle Miss Kanaham Muttiah and beautiful Miss Yogam. They were wonderful teachers. I know. I was their pupil.



Part II - Memories – St John's College 1929 – 1944

by

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I joined SJC in January 1929 but had to wait till May to become a registered teacher at the age of eighteen – I continued to teach until 1944 with a two year break at Government training college Colombo in 1932 and 33. The boys I taught were aged about eight and came for the most part from what were then known as the vernacular schools and I had to teach them English. I had no trouble with them as they were eager to learn.. When I realised that one of my boys had to water by hand about 25 tobacco plants before he walked almost a mile to school, my regard for 'my boys' was great.

Looking back over the years I recall that the back wall of my classroom was also the wall of the cemetery and nobody thought that strange. There was much laughter in the staff room I was told when Mr P I Mathai took his Form V into the cemetery when he introduced them to Greys Elegy in a Country church yard. The staff numbered about 30 and I only went into that staff room for Staff meetings. I had a staff room all to myself for the first two years. When I returned from Government Training College Miss Athisayam Sathianathan who later became Mrs D C Arulanantham joined the staff and years later Miss Raneer Handy later Mrs Eliezer did the same.

They were a fine body of men on the staff of SJC. I remember the Principal Rev H Peto and the masters S J Gunasekaram, V C Canagaratnam, J T & D C Arulanantham , the three Mathais' T M, P T & P I and Mr K Nesiah to name but a few.

Among distinguished visitors who came to the college the greatest was Mahathma Gandhi. His visit had a profound effect on Mr K Nesiah who decided to go into National Dress. Much to the amusement of the rest of the staff he made a heap of his western clothes and made a bon fire in the college grounds.; ever after he wore National Dress. Mr Nesiah was a much loved and respected teacher, he had an impish sense of humour and Staff meetings were greatly enlivened by his presence.

One incident that happened in my early years at SJC I found hard to forget. The school was to have inoculation against typhoid and the usual letter went out to parents requesting permission for

their son to be inoculated. One of my pupils' parent refused permission. The next term my pupil did not come to school; his father came into my class with a large photograph of his son. He told me and the class that his boy had died of typhoid during the holidays. With tears in his eyes he told the boys to always listen to what their teachers told them. The sight of that grief stricken old man, was with me for a long time. During all my forty years of teaching I have never lost a pupil.

One of my strong memories of SJC was making hundreds of sandwiches. Those were the days before sliced bread. We made sandwiches for all college functions – we, were the wives of the masters and the lady teachers. The wives formed themselves into a club, which the masters called "The Penjathi club" and the lady teachers were honorary members. I regret I have no recollection of what the club did beyond making sandwiches and providing the refreshments for numerous college functions.

During the last two years of my time at SJC I taught Geography to the Senior class having specialised in that subject at Government Training College. The Chundikuli Girls' College was in urgent need of a Geography teacher and it was decided to amalgamate the two classes. So for one year I took my class of ten senior boys across the road to the girls' school.

In those war days we had air-raid drill. When the siren went we had to be down under our desks, grip a pencil between our teeth and put cotton wool in our ears. Well the siren once went when the Geography lesson was in progress much to the delight of the class – not however to me. The police officers who patrolled the school that day to see that the rule was obeyed happened to be friends of mine and they never let me forget the sight.

What happy memories I have of my years at SJC – Inter house sports meets, Cricket & football matches, Plays, Prize giving's, Master's weddings I attended them all. I remained friends with Athisayam Arulanantham until she died. Raneel Eliezer and I enjoy long chats on the phone. My 'Old Boys' have turned up and greeted me on trains and planes and have also visited me. St John's College Jaffna was a great college. It gives me great joy to hear that she goes from strength to strength.

PS: I appreciated greatly the celebration the Old Boys had for me on the occasion of my ninetieth birthday.