



## 39 ❖ Feeding the refugees of South Kasai

The missionary was working high up in the peak of the Mukedi mission chapel, seeking to repair a gaping hole that had been burned through it by the Jeunesse rebels a few years earlier. He stood on a rickety scaffolding fashioned out of smooth poles cut and carried to the station from the valley below. Suddenly losing his footing, the missionary bounced his way down through the flimsy structure and landed on the cement floor below. Getting up, he flexed his arms, then one leg and the other. Determining that there were no broken bones, he promptly clambered his way back up to the top to resume his work. When he had set himself to a task, Archie Graber<sup>1</sup> was not easily stopped.

Archie was back in the country for the seventh time. He had returned in late 1960 to head a desperately needed feeding and rehabilitation program among Baluba refugees in the South Kasai.<sup>2</sup> Fleeing the post-independence tribal conflicts, thousands of Baluba people had converged on their ancestral homeland.

Sensing the enormity of the impending disaster, Mennonite Central Committee's Orié Miller made a trip to Leopoldville, sat

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photo—Archie Graber, with daughter Nancy and wife Irma

1 See "Let's see if Archie is available" (chapter 13).

2 The province of South Kasai, center of a brief secessionist movement after independence, no longer exists. It comprised sections of what is now Kasai Occidental (West Kasai) and Kasai Oriental (East Kasai).

with Protestant mission leaders, and brought into being the Congo Protestant Relief Agency (CPRA). If country missions would provide people, MCC would provide some desperately needed supplies. There was quick agreement, but who had the background, command of language, and organizational skills to step into that maelstrom of confusion and suffering? Once again someone wondered, "Can we get Archie Graber?"

Archie left his wife Irma and their small daughter Nancy at home in the States (they had been home on furlough) and sought a way to get back to the Congo. The Leopoldville airport was closed. Booking a flight to Luanda, the capital of Angola, he hitched a ride to Congo aboard a United Nations plane loaded with dried fish. He arrived at the Protestant Guest House smelling strongly of the cargo with which he had traveled.

In Mbuji Mayi, the capital of South Kasai, he was surrounded not only by starving people but also by conflict. Units of the Congo Armed Forces of the central government engaged in pitched battles with military units of the breakaway Katanga Province on their southern border. One day a protracted firefight took place in the city just outside his dwelling. Archie spent most of an afternoon flat on his stomach under a large table. A few days later he made his way along roads lined with bloated, fly-covered bodies.

He scrounged, wheedled, and repaired a few beat-up trucks from the local government to transport the MCC supplies being flown in. By that time UN personnel had also arrived and soon were leaning heavily on the missionary in town who knew both the refugee population and their language. By far the most frustrating aspect of his work was the need to defend his relief efforts before a local government official. Jealous of what this newly arrived Protestant relief agency was suddenly accomplishing among them, the official proceeded to lay arbitrary regulations on Graber while his fellow Baluba tribesmen were coming daily in their rags, pleading for food.

Despite the crush of day-to-day problems, Archie remained focused on the long-range goal of reinvigorating a refugee population. Making arrangements with a Mennonite source in the States, he arranged for hundreds of baby chicks to be airlifted to Mbuji Mayi for distribution among the scattered refugees. He brought in iron hoe heads and scattered them along the roadside; the refugees could fashion their own handles. As he passed through villages he threw

out bundles of manioc stems and packets of seed corn for planting new crops. While distributing UN tents he also passed out bush knives, so people could begin to chop poles and thatch and build their own shelters. And Archie never lost sight of the supreme need of the refugees, a word from the Lord. On one occasion he chartered a plane in Leopoldville and loaded it to capacity with four tons of Tshiluba Bibles, which he distributed along with food and clothing.

Even as he was busy in the Mbuji Mayi area, he became aware of an immense camp of Baluba refugees in Elizabethville (now Lubumbashi), the capital of Katanga Province to their south. Living in miserable conditions and existing on UN rations, they were surrounded by a hostile population. Archie traveled there for a visit and walked unannounced into the camp, despite the alarmed protest of UN personnel. His contacts within the camp were a few Baluba Christians he had met on Sunday morning in a Methodist church. Camp inhabitants were astonished by this white man who not only spoke their language but also talked about people and places some of them had known in their youth. Winning both their confidence and cooperation, Archie was eventually able to organize an orderly evacuation via rail to their South Kasai homeland, something that UN personnel had not been able to do with armed guards.

The day came when tent camps had disappeared and people were living in houses of their own construction. No longer dependent on truckloads of MCC meat, they were eating produce out of their own fields and meat from their own chickens and goats. In an equipped woodworking shop Baluba workmen provided basic furniture for the area. Clusters of Mennonite believers had been established in countless villages across the area. Archie's work was done.

As word spread that Muambi Lutonga (the "young preacher," who was now aging) was preparing to leave them, a delegation of area chiefs came to his dwelling carrying an enormous elephant tusk etched with five bands of intricate Baluba designs. They handed it to Archie, saying it was a small token of their appreciation. "You are our savior!" they said, and insisted that if he had not come and entered into the danger and suffering of their refugee days, they all would have died.

Archie retired in Archbold, Ohio, where he was immediately recruited for another project. Erie Sauder, founder of the Sauder woodworking complex, was in the process of creating a history museum

on the north end of town. He needed someone who could direct a building crew. He didn't yet have blueprints. Archie replied: "I don't need blueprints. Just show me a picture or some sketches, and I will take it from there!" Thus began a partnership that was to endure across most of a decade as the museum complex took shape.

Archie passed away in 1997. Many missionaries have served under CIM/AIMM across the years. Archie Graber is one who became a legend in his own time.

Jim Bertsche