The Jambo Diary of Miguel A. Irla

25 years of the death of the Marist Brothers of Bugobe, 1996-2021 Bother Jack González, 18 October 2021



When on November 8th 1996, Brother Pedro Arrondo, and some Divine Master sisters, arrived at the barracks of the Our Lady of Peace mission, near the Nyamirangwe refugee camp, Bugobe (Zaire), where the brothers Miguel Ángel, Julio, Fernando and Servando lived and had been murdered by banyamulenge militiamen (1), they found everything destroyed and scattered on the ground. A broken Christ, that presided over their little chapel, some books and personal belongings will be recovered; among these was the **Jambo Diary**

The Jambo Diary or Agenda Kotecha (2)

A *Diary of the Kotecha Society* that Brother Miguel Á. used as an agenda on outings

and trips, containing basically shopping lists, notes from meetings, and financial data of projects, ends up in the hands of a Belgian brother from the Nyangezi community. The *Jambo Diary* is a typical *Agenda Diary*, this one from 1966 has black laminated pastes and with two entries per page in French and in English. The *Kotecha Agenda* shows still traces of a reddish mud, probably from the floor of Miguel Angel's room, where it was found after his murder on October 31, 1966.

After seeking advice in Madrid from *Jesús Jaúregui*, Director of Cáritas for Africa, and by phone by *Brother Jeffrey Crowe*, Marist Councillor in Rome and responsible for that region in Africa, I travelled to Rwanda in April 1997, for, as Director of SED and in conversation with the Brothers working in the *Great Lakes* region, finance on the spot some humanitarian micro projects, assess the situation of the projects run by SED, and take note of urgent needs and requests.

A compulsory stopover in Brussels, only Sabena Airlines was at the time allowed flights to Kigali, offered me the opportunity to search for information about the funds of *SED* and of various Marist groups, largely deposited at the *Banque Belgique Ltd*.; the Brothers, and especially Miguel Ángel as administrator, used to finance the programs and micro-projects of the Nyamirangwe Refugee Camp through various accounts; great part of educational equipment, food and many other materials and products being purchased in the warehouses of the multinational *Societé Kotecha* in Bukavu.

Accompanied by *Brother Roger Wenders*, bursar of the Marist Province of Belgium, we tried to trace the "location" of these funds after the murder of the four

Brothers; but in the central office of the B. B. Ltd. in Brussels, neither with prayers nor invoking the memory of blood of that money, we managed to break the *sacred (!) banking secret*.

Once in Rwanda, received by the Provincial Superior *Brother Spiridion*, I visited the Marist projects and schools, and some Government ones, and we distributed SED funds to help recover, as a priority, schools half destroyed in the recent civil war, and support humanitarian work at *Save*, managed by the *Marist Missionary Sisters* and the Brothers. Later on, with Brother *T. Kalisa*, we crossed the border into *Zaire* (present-day *DRC*) to do the same in *Goma* area. The lack of security due to attacks by guerrilla groups, and also the closure of many businesses and shops, made the trip to the Kotecha department store in Bukabu inadvisable. Upon my return to SED headquarters in Madrid, we continued contact with the brothers in Rwanda and Congo, supporting several projects and micro projects presented by our Marist counterpart in both countries.

Back in Spain, what was my surprise, when on a visit to *Los Molinos*, a Marist Residence in the Sierra of Madrid, I was given a small package containing this *Jambo Diary*; among its pages a letter from Brother Roger W. dated September 26, informing me of the sending, through Brother Provincial of Madrid, of an *Agenda used by Brother Miguel Ángel*, and, also, his unsuccessful contacts, by telephone, with *Mr. Kotecha* himself in London (the General Manager of the multinational), to press for information and the recovery of funds deposited by SED and other Marist entities in any of the accounts of the Kotecha Company. (3)



The Jambo Diary: an annex to the personal diary of Miguel Á. Isla

Neither the book "Amaron hasta el final" by the journalist priest Manuel de Unciti, nor the personalist hagiography on Miguel Ángel Isla "Morir para vivir" by José Sarrión, both authors were offered access to the Jambo Diary, refer to its pages; perhaps considering this information of little value.

Miguel Ángel, so methodical in his *Personal Diary (4)*, a work of literary quality and profound human and spiritual richness, used the *Jambo Diary* with a lot of disorder and leaving many blank pages; perhaps because he took it for what really serves: a

notebook, an agenda, with no objective other than the needs of the moment. In fact the first annotation appears only on *April 4 1996* (we can assume that he would have received or acquired the Agenda a few days before in the Kotecha stores in Bukabu); it is a long list of purchases to be made; the last entry is surely the one written on October 30th, with a large blank interval between *August 16 and September 28* when Miguel Á. travelled to Ivory Coast, Kenya and Spain.

Of the approximate 80 entries, days with some notes, the vast majority, about 30, have to do with shopping lists; references to Kotecha and to a meeting 13 each; 11 with

notes of amounts of money and projects; specific mention of SED, Cáritas and other counterparts more than 12; the rest on other topics. My count is approximate, sometimes finding different references to the same topic in the same entry or day.

I personally value the *Jambo Diary* as a simple, but *useful annex* to his personal *Diary*; Miguel Á. used the Jambo Diary occasionally, more regularly when he was out shopping in Bukavu, but also to take notes before and after meetings. But over the shopping lists and economic data, sometimes a word or phrase in some entries allows us to discover in a flash, some aspects of the life and complex personality of Miguel Ángel.

A synoptic reading of both documents reveal at least 20 references with some *common information*, be it in names, topics, date and reasons for a meeting ..., although sometimes noted on different dates. Five significant entries in the Jambo Diary are the one on October 4th, the other between the 28th and 30th, the day before a group of militia men, most likely banyamulengue, stormed the house and then murdered the four brothers. (5)

The October 4th notes are about an important meeting, morning and afternoon, at the *Alfajiri School*, in Bukabu, with the Director of Cáritas *Álvaro*, and the rest of the logistics coordinators of the different refugee camps in the area. We know this through his *personal Diary* that occupies a column ("Without limits" page 232). However, it is the most extensive entry of the whole Jambo Diary: the text occupies nine days of space on the agenda; from its content (in French) we could deduce that Miguel Á. was in charge of the motivation, and probably the animation of the meeting, lasting from morning 9 o'clock till 15.30 hrs afternoon. (6)

His notes begin with an invitation to the participants and follows by a large agenda of topics related to the educational management in the refugee camps:

"Introduction. Ignatian Education. Invitation to actively transform the world, the young people. Ist- For an awareness of the context in which we work..., - the notes continue like this until the - 5th Evaluating our action to know if we open ourselves to the utopia of the new.)"

The entry goes on and on and concludes with plans for sporting events of soccer and basketball, calendar dates for theatre and cinema sessions and a *Talk* on *AIDS...;* plans that reach May 11th, *1997!*

The Jambo Diary entries on October 28th and 29th 1996 refer to emergency meetings amidst the noise of bombings and gunfire from the militia, probably *banyamulenge* fighting with the Zairean forces around Bukavu area. Its content, the situation of desolation and death and what to do in the *Nyamirangwe* refugee camp and by the Marist community; a third entry, undated, is almost certainly from the 30th. Looking back, given the emergency and insecurity circumstances, I don't find strange that for the first time in the Jambo Diary almost the *entire text is written in Spanish!* (7)

A parallel analysis of these annotations from the *Jambo Diary* with the last three days of his *personal Diary* shows not only agreement in general ideas but even in some words and phrases. *Miguel Á. used here, and it seems to me that in at least in 17 other circumstances, the Jambo Diary as a reference for his personal Diary!*

As a sample, I find very interesting to compare both *Diaries* the day before his death. In the last entry of the *Jambo Diary*, appears only a note in French that seems out of place:

"100...1,5 Sel] 16 hs. 12 kg sucre"]

But in his *personal Diary*, on that same day 30 and already at night, writing by the light of a flashlight, the meaning of that last entry in the *Jambo Diary* and the fate of the products are clarified:

"We go back to the Church and have a meeting ... A human tide flees from Bagira and Bukavu towards Walungu ... Servando, Julio, Ramón and Leonardo leave for the Camp with medicines, salt and sugar to treat bloody diarrhoeas ...".

Three highlights about Brother Miguel A. Isla from the Jambo Diary

Just as this black plastic agenda Kotecha, the *Jambo Diary*, had been left in the trash, was later relegated to oblivion, despite my offering of these materials to various writers on the mission and death of Miguel Á. and the other Marist Brothers in Bugobe.

I believe that some aspects deserve to be recovered and made known among those of us who celebrate the memory of the four Brothers on this 25th anniversary; either because they are unpublished or because they throw light on their community commitment in the *Nyamirangwe Camp for refugees*, and, in particular, on the personality of Miguel Ángel Isla.

1. Miguel Ångel, the four Brothers, responsible for the logistics of education and catechesis for nearly 6,000 children and young people, were fully involved from the beginning in caring for and improving the conditions for a human life - the works of mercy - of the refugees of the Nyamirangwe Camp; their dedication to humanitarian aid and micro projects, hand in hand with the church local community of the Camp, were central to his day-to-day life. (8)

Due to his long experience in Africa and the dynamism of his character, *Miguel Ángel was the one leading the implementation and management of the aid and projects*, most of them dealing with health and food emergency; among the most important: two mills for corn and sorghum, operating almost twelve hours a day; daily food distribution to 300 children between the ages of 2 and 6; aid program for ENA (unaccompanied children), and for *handicapped people*; help with clothing, medicine and food to a group of the most needy "for whom 8 sacks of rice, 2 of sorghum, 1 of milk, and 1 of sugar are allocated weekly ..."; to all this it must be added the organization of cultural and sports activities for children and young people in the Camp, and the acquisition of products and materials for all the programs above.

A simple *Jambo Diary* entry for a July 7, gives some idea of what this could mean: *"Kotecha*

40 bags of flour 60 bags of rice 20 bags of sugar 2500 notebooks of 48 p; 2500 of 96 p; 100 of 200" And next to it an entry with the cost and payment of "5. 3703 - 1 = 46,000" (9) All this needed funding, money that came mostly from: *the General House of the Marist Brothers in Rome and the Marist Province of Bética, from SED, (the Spanish NGO linked to Marists), and from Cáritas Spain.* A list of available funds and donors, appearing in the Jambo Diary on July 15-18, and intentionally coloured by *Brother Roger Wenders*, sheds some insights into the complexity of Miguel Á. work:

 "Coeur en Alerte
 8 019 \$
 BURGOS
 772 \$

 SED
 19 572 \$
 SED
 7 748 \$ / molino y kashusa 5 825 \$

 BÉTICA
 27 845 \$
 Agustín
 985 \$"

Miguel Á. was carefully writing down the purchases was doing, at least weekly, mostly at the warehouses of the *Societé Kotecha in Bukavu*, but also the receipts of funds and their destination. From his *Diary* we know that Kotecha's truck came to the Campo warehouse to deliver large quantities of food or school supplies.



2. Miguel Ángel was a Marist missionary, but also a representative of Cáritas, the international aid agency of the Catholic Church; he strived to be recognised and appeared as such in the Camp and among the variety of Agencies dealing the refugee crisis. He also maintained a special relationship with SED, the Spanish Marist NGO.

It is good remembering here that the *Nyamirangwe Refugee Camp*, created by *UNHCR* in 1994, had been entrusted to *Caritas International*, which in turn from the beginnings, delegated the educational and pastoral management activities of the Camp to a group of Jesuits and a community of Rwandese Marist brothers. An urgent call from *Brother Benito A*., the Marist Superior General, motivated some Spanish brothers to volunteer to take over; brother Servando was the first in June 1995 and Miguel Á. two months later, while brothers Fernando and Julio had only joined the Community a few months before they gave their lives.

If from the beginning the work of the brothers had been under the auspices of *Caritas*, with the deteriorating humanitarian situation and the progressive abandonment of other international organizations of the refugees Camps, this association became vital for their work and security. The *personal Diary June 26^{th, '96*, shows the importance that Miguel Á. gave to this connection and formal recognition by Cáritas:}

"We have an appointment with Anselmo, director of Cáritas, to sign the protocol of agreement on the education of young refugees from Nyamirangwe ... a long gestation of more than twelve months!"

All this they having with no illusion that this association could act as a life safeconduct, amid the daily violence and death threats in which they lived.

On the other hand, the knowledge of the work of the NGO SED (Solidarity, Education, Development) in Africa, since it was launched by the CME, (Spanish Marist Conference) in 1992, fostered a special bond with the mission and the projects of the brothers in the Camp, due in large part to my friendship and collaboration with Miguel Á. since my visit to Ivory Coast in 1993.

The Jambo Diary shows eight explicit entries of Cáritas and six of SED, plus another eleven to micro projects financed by these and other organizations; which attests to their ongoing relationship and particular partnership, in addition to the Marists in Spain and Rome; regular contacts with SED and Cáritas were kept until the last days of October 1996, even given the communication problem.

The *Jambo Diary* refers to several trips to Nyamirangwe by *Brother Jeffrey Crowe*, one by the director of Cáritas Spain *J. Jáuregui*, and several faxes and funds sent by *Jack director of SED*. In two identical entries on October 18th and 19th, out of context, appears *"Benito's visit"*; only by reading his *personal Diary* of the 17th we now know the disappointment Miguel Á suffered when it was cancelled. *Brother Benito*, phoned twice, the 22nd and 23rd, explaining why the visit could not be carried out, given the extreme insecurity and war situation in the area.

From the frequent entries indicating trips to Bukavu, it is relevant to underline that the mention of *Cáritas centre* is repetitive. Nor it's surprising that during Miguel Á. vacation in Spain, he visited the *headquarters of SED and Cáritas* in Madrid to report on the general situation of the refugees and jointly revise the projects financed by both institutions in the Nyamirangwe Camp.

This work of sharing the bread at the same time as the word of God had been assumed by the brothers as a clear sign of their identity and missionary commitment. But it is, undoubtedly, the experience and professionalism of Miguel Á. in international and local cooperation for development for more than 20 years in the Ivory Coast, and his incredible capacity for management and transparency, which can be seen in the annotations of this *Jambo Diary*.

3. Miguel Ángel, the four brothers, shared their uncertainty, risk and fear of death with the refugees till the last moment, with Christian hope and dedication.

The Jambo Diary entry of October 4th points to plans that go up to May 11th 1997, raising several questions about the prospect of his personal future and that of his Brothers. As early as February 1996, the Zairean government had banned all socio-educational activities in the refugee camps; the brothers continued with their commitments in a "semi-clandestine" way.

Since the beginning of October, many *NGDOs* and development agencies had begun to evacuate their personnel after the *UNHCR* promoted the repatriation of the refugees to Rwanda, given, from the international point of view, the questionable legal situation of some of these camps. *MSF*, *Medécins sans Frontièrs*, made public the reasons for abandoning their work in the refugee camps in a statement, much debated in Europe by international organizations for Emergency Aid.

Miguel Á., was very aware of the situation; during his visit to *SED* in Madrid in September, confidentially admitted forced payments to the Zairian military, at times as *"underhand taxes!"* in order to be able to continue in "semi-clandestinely" with the educational programs in the Camp. He also confided his fear of the daily danger faced by many refugees, and the Brothers with them, due to the infiltration of the camps and the recruitment of refugees by ex-FARC militias. *(10)*

Were the four Brothers aware, already months before, of the extreme risk of death they were facing? Yes, it looks like; Miguel Á. in his *Diary April 27th* reflects on the tragedy, violence and death in his environment, and of his own situation of helplessness with expressions of trust in God, even if He is a *silent God: "... the future is not ours, it is God's, but we know nothing, because God is silent."*

The first week of October, with the arrival of news of the murder of priests, nurses and hundreds of refugees in *Uvira* Camp and the exodus of refugees from more than 12 camps, reads on his *Diario* like *the chronicle of an announced death*. On October 23rd, when *Evaste*, who helps at the brothers' house, tearfully asks Miguel Á. if he is leaving too, he answers *"I will be the last."*

Many other testimonies appear in his *Diario*, especially in prayers, of this awareness of facing death, and placing life in the hands of God; a pearl *on October 29th* less than 48 hours before his death: "*Goodbye, I remain in your hands, Flaco*". (11) The next day, in his daily chronicle, he tells that the Archbishop of Bukavu has been assassinated and the streets are littered with corpses.

What were his most intimate feelings?

"The loud and clear bombings continue. I hear on the phone that the Archbishop of Bukavu has been assassinated and that the streets are littered with corpses. I get goose bumps for a moment ... the tension is strong. We say goodbye until tomorrow, God willing. I lie down, my Lord of life, in your fatherly hands. Up to now."

About all this, what does the Jambo Diary say? I didn't expect to find anything given the type of content of an agenda; however, in the context of the extraordinary circumstances of the last four days of the Brothers' lives in the barracks and in the Nyamirangwe Camp, the last three entries of the Jambo Diary strike like a flash due to their rawness, realism and solidarity. Miguel Á., the Brothers, feared and expected the worst, but they did not seek death; they simply lived out their vital and vocational commitment to the poor and exiled refugees and walked with them to their death. I transcribe only a few sentences from the entry of the Jambo Diary of the 29th:

"Réunion le 29 /10/96 à 9h30

The Abbé Kabera speaks. Everyone has left, everything is destroyed and the problem is totally ours... All the foreigners have left, only the FM have stayed... Security first. Ignore the rumours that make us flee without destination. Even if shots are heard, it is best to stay in the place. You don't have to panic; you don't have to run away. First safety, after health, and to eat help each other... Don't give priority to the belly but to the ideal of living together. "(See 12)

Less than twenty-four hours later, the four Brothers were murdered and their bodies thrown into a narrow sinkhole, nearby the barrack which served as community's home, *the refuge*, *"el refugio"*, as Miguel Ángel liked to call it.

Notes:

1. Banyamulenge: according to a note from Miguel Á. Diary "Tutsis established for a long time in Zaire". In the context of the fighting between the Zairean army and the Banyamulenge attacking the refugee camps, they would be "supported by the Rwandan and Burundian armies, as the Zairean Government has just reported". ("Sin límites", pág. 245, Edelvives 2015).

There are several theories about the identity of the group who killed the Brothers; in the above context, and the telephone message of Brother Servando the previous day, I feel inclined to point out to a banyamulenge group.



2. The "other" Diary is the Jambo Diary, of a black plastic cover, which Miguel Á. used as a Agenda, to distinguish it from his personal Diary, with the tittle "Without limits. Diary of the martyr Brother Miguel Angel Isla, murdered in Bugobe", published by Edelvives 2015. In these lines I will speak and cite the latter as Diary or Personal Diary, while I will refer to the "other Diary" as the Jambo Diary or the Agenda.

3. Unpublished letter from Fr. Roger WENDERS telling me about the contents of the package, the Jambo Diary, and of his efforts to obtain information about SED funds in Kotecha: - "Cher Frère Jack Gonzalez, Je profite du retour à Rome du Frère Diogène MUSINE (Rwanda), pour vous faire parvenir cette enveloppe par l'intermédiaire de votre Frère Provincial de la Province de Madrid... « Après notre rencontre a la B.B.L. à Bruxelles, j'ai pu obtenir un entretien téléphonique avec Monsieur Kotecha lui-même, qui se trouvez à ce moment-là à Londres, pour lui expliquer le problème. Il m'a dit qu'il ferait des recherches. Depuis lors, plus rien, plus aucun contact». (Bruxelles, le 26 septembre 1997).

4. The personal Diary of Miguel Ángel Isla "Without limits" is an autobiographical work that impacts for its humanity, a testimony of solidarity and deep spirituality. The Jambo Diary is nothing more than an agenda for notes, a document that can be attached to the Diary; You can read the personal Diary without knowing the Jambo Diary, on the contrary you cannot read the latter without having read your personal diary first. Nor can both be read without a good map of the area and without contemplating the photos of the Camp, the exodus of refugees, the faces of happy children or with their eyes lost by hunger and terror. Miguel Ángel himself is the author of hundreds of these photos!

5. "Checking out the Personal Diary and the Jambo Diary". I include in this article only three or four "coincidences" found between both documents to support my explanation of the use of the Jambo Diary by Miguel Á.; a synoptic table can be elaborated with the rest.

6. Meeting in Alfajiri. Alfajiri means *aurora*, and it is a College run *by the Jesuits* in the city of *Bukavu*, on the shores of *Lake Kivu*. There took place this important meeting that takes up so much space in the *Jambo Diary*. It is not surprising that the invitation of Miguel Á. begins with a reflection on Ignatian spirituality; also among the participants was a friend of Miguel Á., the director of *JRS (the Jesuit Refugee Services)*, very active in all the Refugee Camps at the area.

7. Only entry written in Spanish of the Jambo Diary. Why in Spanish? Considering the place on the Agenda where it appears, the way it's written, its content and the situation of devastation and death in the Camp of Nyamirangwe I think that Miguel Á. wrote these last lines in Spanish for security reasons: the emergency meeting took place at the Camp when banyamulenge militias were already advancing from Bukavu; nervousness and fear are also a possible explanation. In fact, as it appears in my transcription above, *it even mixes a phrase and a French verb at one point*.

8. Number of children and youth in Nyamirangwe Camp. The 6,000 may be correct before going to the "clandestine situation" that Miguel A. talks about on April 24th. In a meeting of the Education Commission that same day he reports the decrease in that number down to 3,000 students between Maternal, Primary, Literacy and Secondary, who were, somehow, under the care and responsibility of the management of the Marist Brothers.

9. \$ **1** = **46,000**. \$ are US dollars; the 46,000 could well be *NZ*, New Zaires; a currency that was constantly devaluing. From various testimonies from *the Diario* we know that Miguel Á. transported from Bukavu the local money *in big bags*, for aid and payments to the Camp workers: *"We prepared the teachers' pay with three 50 kg bags of Zaire banknotes. We give each teacher 150,000 NZ (new local Zairean currency) in 500 notes."*

In any case, from the shopping list above, and from another entry in June, we know that a bag of rice (kg?) was at the time \$ 30, and a bag of sugar \$ 39. All aid by cheques and cash handouts from SED were made in this currency, as well as bank transfers to any of the three accounts managed by the brothers, on behalf of Kotecha, Caritas and, probably, the Xaverian Mission in Bukavu.

10. "MSF Speak out". The French "MSF: Médecins Sans Frontières" was probably the organization most critical with the management of UNHCR of the Refugee Camps; both, Servando and Miguel Á. also spoke about that, although with other nuances. There exists a study of the events and the forced repatriation of refugees from the Camps: "The Hunting and Killing of Rwandan Refugees in Zaire-Congo: 1996-1997", Médecins Sans Frontières, 2013.

A look at the map of the Great Lakes area and, in particular, the Refugee Camps is essential to understand the geopolitical fabric of the tragedy of the Hutu Refugee Camps, and of the four brothers who walked with them to death.

11. "Flaco", Skinny in English; the way Miguel Á. referred to and spoke with Jesus of Nazareth since his years with young people in Argentina. It is a pearl of his *personal Diario*, also because it is written less than 24 hours before his death: "Goodbye, I'm in your hands, Skinny", ("Sin límites" p. 251).

12. a. FM = *Frères Maristes* - Marist Brothers.

b. The original text should be read: "First safety, then health, and for food ("comer se") helping each other. Not to privilege the womb but the ideal of ("vivre") living together." It must be taken into account that these annotations were written in an emergency meeting, at the abandoned and looted refugee Camp, amid bombings and shots, in a state of maximum alertness, fear and nervousness, but at the same time with lucidity and courage, trying to survive and save at least some of the refugees.

For me the last three entries, this one from 29th in particular, confer an extraordinary value to the *Jambo Diary*. If the 28th begins with: "State of the Countryside: desolation", the 29th follows: "... all the whites have left, only the FM have remained.* Security, to <u>recover</u> the disappeared. The responsibility comes to us... Not privileging the womb but the ideal of living together"

It is the pearl of this document, like a testament on the way to Calvary, with fear but with total realism, trying to avoid death but walking towards it with integrity, united in the Marist community and with the refugees.