



My Life Before

A Story of War and Refuge

By James Kuol Makuac



Life Before

When I was a little boy, before I was forced to flee my village,
our life was busy with everyday chores.

My father and mother cultivated a big garden to support our family.
They grew crops of sorghum, millet, sesame and ground nuts to feed us and sell at the market.
I enjoyed going to the garden and eating the bananas.



Fishing Along the Nile

My uncle and I would go by boat and fish along the Nile River.

We would take the boat to Mayen Lake.

We would catch Tilapia fish. My uncle would make fish stew.

He would make a fire on the deck of the boat and simmer the stew.

We would eat there and take the rest of the catch back home
to the others for their dinner.

The fish would be filleted and dried for use in certain dishes.



Night Herding

Everyone in the village owned cows.
They were kept in cattle camps, except for a few
that were kept near the huts where we lived.
They were used for their milk.
When there was a drought and the crops would not grow
we used the milk for nourishment.



Dinka Woman

The Dinka women have different colors of corsets to wear depending on their ages.

The young woman in my painting is 18 years old and wears a pink corset.

The older woman will wear yellow.

The anklets are traditional adornments and used to beautify.

The stick she is carrying is for dancing.



The Beginning of War

When I was five years old the Sudanese government sent the militias to South Sudan.

They came to our village to burn the homes, kill all the men and rape the woman.

They abducted the young girls to take them to slave camps.

By the time the militia came to our village our parents had nowhere to hide us and no choice.

They sent the young boys into the jungle to escape the massacre.



Night Journey

We traveled at night because the sun was not out and the
planes dropping bombs could not see us.

The bad problem was that we could not see very well and
the boys would step on snakes and get bitten.

The wild animals prowled at night looking for food,
but that fear was not as bad as the fear of the militia.

We tried to hold one another's hands so we would not get lost.



Journey Through Rain

During our journey we walked through the pouring rain,
burning, relentless heat and freezing cold.

We did not have shelter from the elements. Sometimes we took refuge in the trees.

We would sleep in the mud until our bodies were rested enough to walk more.

If we came to a stream we would have to cross it.

Some people drowned. We had no choice.



Our First Refugee Camp

After three months of walking across Sudan we arrived in Ethiopia. It took so long for us to walk because we were little children and did not know where to go. When we arrived we had nothing.

We had not eaten for three months and wore barely any clothes.

Many boys died from starvation and disease.



Forced Into Exile Again

We lived in Ethiopia for four years in a refugee camp. It was not a happy place. It was very harsh with people dying every day of illness and disease. There were no tents or huts for shelter and food was scarce. We slept in trees. The United Nations came and brought us food to eat. The cooking oil they gave us was contaminated and made many people fatally ill.

One morning we heard that the war was coming to Ethiopia.

When it reached our camp the killing started.

It was time to go again.



Hostilities at Gilo River

After fleeing the camp in Ethiopia we came to the Gilo River.

It is on the border between Sudan and Ethiopia.

The enemy followed and caught up with us on the banks of the river.

We had a choice: either be captured and tortured by the soldiers, or cross the river and drown. We had to cross the river.

Drowning was a much better choice.



Massacre at Gilo River Crossing

The river was filled with crocodiles and snakes.

The bullets were flying.

There were so many dead bodies of children in the river;
we crawled over them to reach the other side.



Red Cross Rescue at Pochalla

We arrived in Pochalla, a small village in East Sudan.

Again, there was no food to eat.

We went to the jungle to find tamarind fruit in the trees and ate that for three months. We cooked the leaves from unknown trees which turned out to be poisonous and many more boys died. We were told to clear an airstrip for a plane to land bringing us food. In the end the plane couldn't land so they dropped packages of food and medicine from the air.



The Desert

The enemy captured Pochalla. They were shooting and captured us. We left again and headed toward the desert to Kenya. We walked for three months in the desert.

Our feet were blistered from the hot sand.

The sun was shining relentlessly.

My heart was made strong because I had to walk on blistered feet.

We had no choice.

In the desert the days are hot and the nights are cold.

Five boys shared one blanket in the freezing cold.

The lions and wolves hunted us at night.



Crossing Kosingora Desert

Many months were spent crossing the desert.
The Red Cross called for a convoy to take the boys to Magos.
We could not all fit in the convoy.
There were 23,000 boys down from 36,000 when we left Ethiopia.
The convoy could only take the smallest and sickest boys.
We had to run as fast as we could to get on the trucks.
We piled on top of each other.



Attack in Magos

We were delivered by the Red Cross to the village of Magos.
We were sleeping on the ground in the night when local people who were recruited by the government came to kill us.
Blood was everywhere.

Boys sleeping next to me were shot and killed.
I escaped when I accidentally tripped over a blanket; a lucky accident that saved my life.



Coming to Kapoeta

The survivors of the attack in Magos walked to Kapoeta in east Southern Sudan. We arrived at night, slept on the ground and in the morning we heard the sound of the jet fighters.

They dropped bombs everywhere.

Some of the buildings had glass windows that shattered in the bomb blast.

Glass flew everywhere cutting the children.

The bombs exploded sending shrapnel all over our bodies.



Narus

The Red Cross told us to walk 77 kilometers to Narus on the border of Sudan and Kenya.

We were very scared the enemy would find us because we walked through
enemy controlled territory.

We walked all night in the rain and cold.



Evacuation from Narus

We lived at Narus for about three months until the enemy took control of Kapoeta.

We knew they were gaining ground and would arrive at Narus very soon.

The United Nations told us to evacuate to Lokichoggio in Kenya.

Again, we walked all night.



From Lokichoggio to Kakuma

We spent several months here living in tents provided by the Red Cross.
While we lived there we could not journey further into Kenya without special papers.

It took time for the government to grant us permission.
The Red Cross trucks drove us to the refugee camp further south into Kenya.
I finally arrived at Kakuma and it became my home for nine years.



Life in Kakuma

Life in Kakuma was tough.

The camp was populated by different nationalities from all over Africa.
There were Sudanese, Ethiopian, Somalian, Burundian, Rawandian and Congolese.

Most people spoke Kiswahili so we could communicate.

At the time there were over 80,000 refugees living in the camp. We had to be registered and given a token card to get food and clothes.

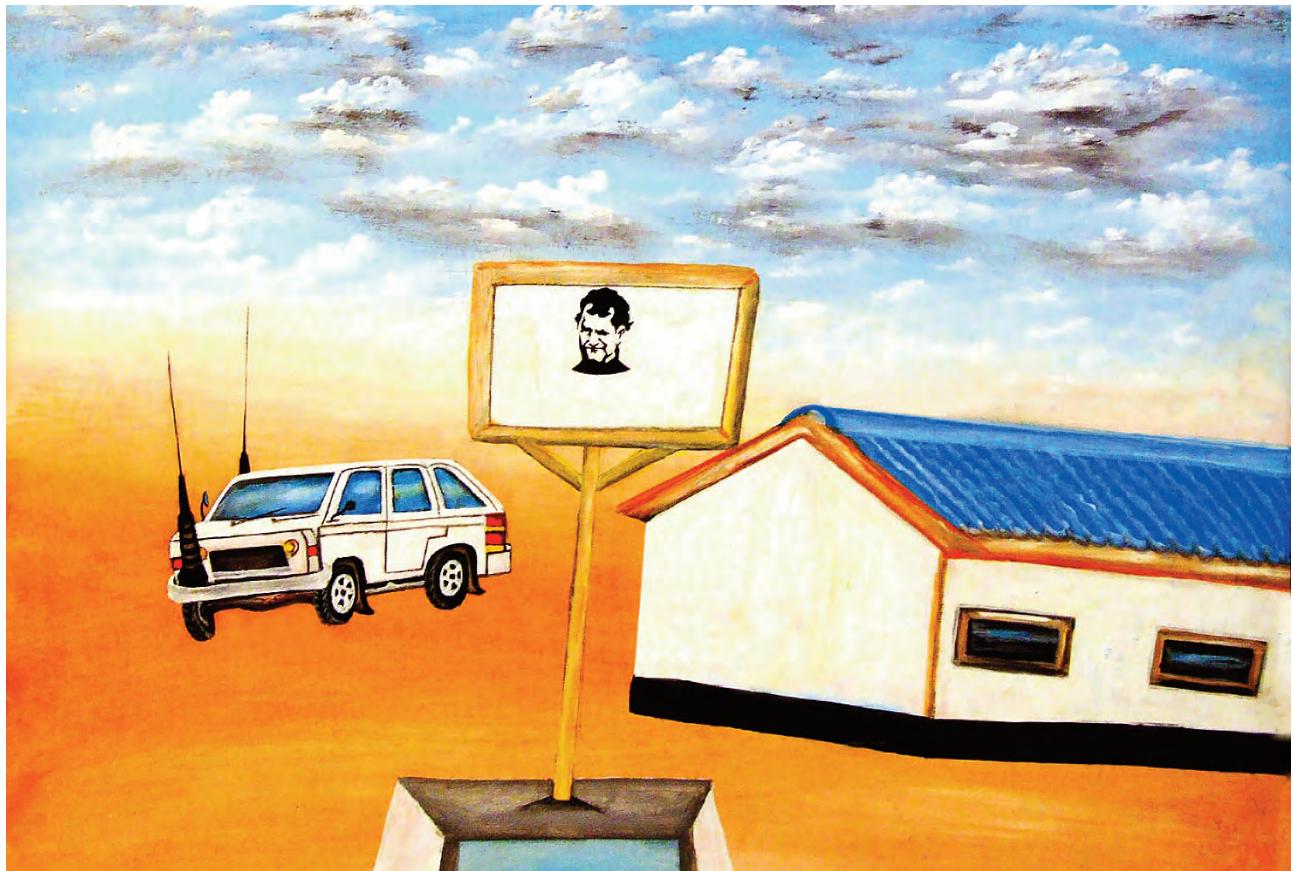
Every year people had to be counted. We lined up early in the morning to be counted.

If you were not counted you would not be qualified for food rations.



Kakuma Clinic

There were so many people at the camp that it was difficult to get immediate medical treatment. Many people suffered from Malaria, Typhoid and Anemia. There was not enough medicine, food or water for everyone.



Don Bosco Technical School

Eventually, a technical school was set up in the camp. I learned cabinet making and tailoring there and earned a certificate for each. I applied for a job after my studies and was employed by the Lutheran World Federation making uniforms for the refugee population in the camp.



Leaving Kakuma

There came a day I was selected to emigrate to America.
Journalists came to interview us and we told them our story.

They saw my drawings that showed our suffering.
They organized a humanitarian mission with the United Nations
to bring some of the boys to the United States.

The boys were screened and selected by tests and interviews to see if they were
qualified for war refugee status.

The day I got my letter from the United Nations I was scared to open it, but I did.
The news was good. Under Act 207, I was approved to move to America.



Over the Moon

Soon, I was flying over the Mediterranean Sea on my way to America.
When we took off from the runway I was scared.
I looked out the window and we were in a cloud.
Then I saw a jet stream from the plane. It was beautiful.



My Hometown

I live in Nashville, Tennessee now.

I practice my painting and work to support myself and my family in Africa.

I have many close friends who encourage my career as an artist.

This story of my life as a Lost Boy of Sudan is a story shared by many Sudanese children.

It is a story for all children affected by war.

We all suffer and some survive.