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Toiling to Bring Rwanda Genocide Suspects to Justice

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By bringing civil lawsuits against Hutus suspected of involvement in the genocide, Alain and Dafroza Gauthier have challenged France's longstanding protection of Rwandan fugitives. Catalina Martin-Chico for The New York Times

[The Saturday Profile](#)

By MAÏA de la BAUME

REIMS, France — ABOVE his desk in a peaceful and tidy townhouse with pots of geraniums hanging from the windowsills and walls covered with photos of his children, Alain Gauthier keeps 24 files labeled with the names of some of the men and women accused in one of the most appalling crimes of the 20th century.

Mr. Gauthier and his wife, Dafroza, have been collecting information for 13 years on each of the 24 Rwandan men and women they suspect of having participated in their country's 1994 genocide. The suspects are members of the Hutu ethnic group who now lead comfortable lives in France and deny any involvement in the slaughter of more than 800,000 people — most of them Tutsi — in just 100 days.

“Here, the fugitives live in denial,” said Mrs. Gauthier, 59, a chemical engineer and a Tutsi from Rwanda. “They’ve always denied, they have created another story, they have completely erased that part of their lives. They were obliged to do so, otherwise you end up in a mental institution. You can’t live with a crime like that.”

“What drives us is that the killers be judged, for history, for the victims,” Mrs. Gauthier said. “It is our turn, us as alive people, as survivors to claim for justice because if we don’t do it, nobody will, and nobody will make amends for what happened.”

But most important, by bringing civil lawsuits against Hutus suspected of being fugitives, the couple has challenged French authorities and the news media over the country’s longstanding protection of Rwandan fugitives.

France, which has long been accused of providing weapons and military training to the Hutus before the genocide, has never convicted anyone accused of complicity in the Rwandan genocide. But after restoring diplomatic relations with Rwanda in 2009 — [they were broken](#) in 2006 when a French judge accused a group of Rwandans of having plotted in 1994 to shoot down the plane of Rwanda’s president at the time, touching off the genocide — Paris appointed five judges to investigate the matter of the Rwandan fugitives and opened a police section specializing in crimes of genocide. Next month, the judges are scheduled to bring their first criminal case against a Rwandan fugitive accused of genocide.

For the Gauthiers, these are crimes that cannot be erased. They say that only by bringing the accused to justice can they help the victims and their families to forgive and move on. In France, they are frequently likened to Serge and Beate Klarsfeld, the couple who pursued Nazi criminals in the 1950s.

Mrs. Gauthier, a graceful woman from Butare, one of the largest cities in Rwanda, lost her mother and about 80 relatives in the genocide. Mr. Gauthier, 65, is a retired high school principal who lived in Rwanda as a young man, teaching French at a local junior high school, which is how they met.

FOR the Gauthiers, the news that French authorities were prepared to bring their first genocide case was vindication for 13 years of labor. They had found the defendant, Pascal Simbikangwa, five years ago, at his home in the slums of Kaweni, a city on the island of Mayotte, a French territory in the Indian Ocean.

“They were alone, they fought, and their work is colossal,” said Maria Malagardis, a journalist for the newspaper *Libération*, who wrote a book, “On the Track of the Rwandan Killers,” about the couple.

The Gauthiers consider themselves amateur investigators, in that neither studied criminal law and both have spent their working lives in unrelated fields.

Born in 1954, Mrs. Gauthier grew up in Kigali, the Rwandan capital, where she met her husband. From 1973 to 1977, she was forced to live as a political refugee in Belgium, where she studied chemistry. In 1974, she went to visit Mr. Gauthier in southern France, where he had moved after his years in Rwanda, and they married in 1977.

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Some years later, the couple settled in Reims and had three children, Violaine, Emmanuel and Sarah. They were never to live in Rwanda again, although they would go there about once a month for their investigations.

In most respects, they were living a typical middle-class life until that day in April 1994, when the calls started coming. “We were glued to the telephone all day,” Mrs. Gauthier recalled. “People would tell us, ‘At X’s home, they’re all dead. They’ve been killed this

morning.’ It didn’t mean anything anymore. I can’t express it with words. We were lost, we wondered whether it was true. Once we were there, we realized the magnitude of things when people we knew weren’t there anymore, and even their houses had disappeared.”

Mrs. Gauthier learned that her mother had been shot by a Hutu general who later fled to Cameroon, where he died a free man, she said. She promised herself that even if she had failed to find her mother’s killer, she would seek justice for the thousands of Tutsi victims who were killed because they were “scapegoats, undesirable people.”

In 2001, she traveled with her husband to Brussels for [the trial of](#) four Rwandans convicted of committing war crimes during the mass killings in 1994. There, the couple met the head of an association that searched for Rwandan fugitives in Belgium. “He told us, ‘Why don’t you do this in France? There are hundreds of them there,’ ” Mr. Gauthier said. “And so we did.”

That year, the Gauthiers set up an association, the Collective of Civil Plaintiffs for Rwanda, to have legal standing to file civil cases against fugitives. The French police detained three of the 24 fugitives in the country at the time, and about a dozen of them were put under formal investigation.

Only one was convicted by the United Nations’ International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which was established in 1994 by the Security Council to prosecute people accused of genocide. Today, Mr. Gauthier says he believes that more than 100 Rwandan fugitives live in France. “But as long as we don’t have names, it’s hard to know,” he said.

HE and his wife have worked feverishly since then, interrogating prosecutors, prisoners and victims of the genocide in Rwanda. They have gathered information online and through archival research and interviews with former prefects, magistrates and doctors — people with the wealth and connections to flee their homeland. The couple established that many of the fugitives, some of whom were wanted by Rwanda, Interpol and the tribunal, had become respected French citizens.

In 2004, the couple unmasked Dominique Ntawukuriryayo, a former prefect who had settled in Carcassonne, in southern France, after the genocide. Mr. Ntawukuriryayo worked in a church there and founded Future Geniuses, a nongovernmental organization to help children in Rwanda.

Mr. Ntawukuriryayo, who played a major role in the killing of as many as 25,000 Tutsi refugees in April 1994, was eventually extradited to Tanzania, where the tribunal was sitting and where [he was convicted on genocide charges](#) in 2010 and sentenced to 25 years in prison.

The couple also tracked down Sosthène Munyemana, a respected gynecologist who lives in the southwest of France and has never been convicted. In Rwanda, he is sometimes called the “butcher of Tumba” (Tumba is a district south of Butare) and is accused by local authorities and Interpol of murder and being involved in his country’s extermination plan against the Tutsis.

Mr. Gauthier, who listened carefully to his wife’s dark recollections, has devoted much of his time and energy to the hunt for criminals, often sleeping only a few hours a night. In the last 13 years, he has never missed a court hearing involving a fugitive.

On a recent day in Paris, Mr. Gauthier sat at a cafe outside the tribunal where he had attended a hearing for one suspect, [Claude Muhayimana](#), a former driver who is charged with participating in several massacres in 1994.

When Mr. Muhayimana, dressed in a white tracksuit, came to sit with his family a few steps from Mr. Gauthier’s table and glanced at him with an air of disdain, Mr. Gauthier looked away, almost untroubled.

“I know those looks,” he said. “I’m used to them now.”