

INNOCENT NDAMYINA GISANURA

We chose to fight back

Before the genocide

My name is Innocent and I was born in the Gitezi district of Kibuye, on the outskirts of the town. My family consisted of Mum and Dad and eight children, and I was the fourth born. The genocide began when I was 14 years old and in high school at the *Groupe Scolaire Nyamasheke* in Cyangugu. My entire family was killed, including Mum and Dad; I'm now the only one left.

The genocide didn't exactly start in 1994 – we could see signs of it earlier at my primary and high schools. At the time, there were car bombings, students were beaten up; there was a bad atmosphere and it seemed as if something was being planned. But 1994 was the grand finale, when I witnessed horrific, animalistic behaviour far worse than I could ever have imagined.

The genocide

It began when the President's aeroplane crashed and, on the orders of murderous soldiers and others who had planned the genocide, permission was given to kill Tutsis. The next day, they started attacking homes and killing people. In our area some people were killed. They came to remove us from our homes, burning them and taking our animals.

When the attacks started, my family decided to leave home and we went to my old primary school in Kirambo. There was a Presbyterian church and a hospital, and I remember that about 10,000 people took shelter there. But we were attacked by a group of soldiers, gendarmes, prison guards and people from the local authorities. They came in official cars to take us to the stadium in Kibuye, where they planned to kill us. But along with my father and some other men, I didn't follow their orders. Instead we escaped to the mountains of Bisesero and Kirongi where we could fight back.

Resistance

Bisesero and Kirongi are two high mountains facing each other. There are some forests but they are not dense, so we could see any attack coming and either defend ourselves or escape, depending on the number of attackers. From the mountains, we watched the killing of the people taken to the stadium. That night some people managed to escape and join us in the mountains. My mother was taken to the stadium, but later escaped to Bisesero with a few other survivors. I had six sisters and three of them were killed in the stadium.

In Bisesero we managed to defend ourselves day after day and we were starting to hope to make it through another week. But that's not how it happened – power lay in the hands of soldiers planning the extermination of the Tutsis. We resisted against the militia, the police and prison guards, and so in the end they sent a force of presidential guards from Kigali who eventually defeated us. We had been in Bisesero for a week when they came, a week when we hadn't rested at all; we were constantly fighting. It didn't stop us fighting back because we had no other choice. We continued fighting day after day. The fierce attacks began around 17 April and included presidential guards, gendarmes, and commandos from the Mukamira and Bigogwe camps, and others from Cyangugu. We had only one choice – to fight with will and commitment with our limited strength, to die fighting or give up. We chose to fight back.

Life in Bisesero was hard; they were overwhelmingly bad times and it's hard to explain. From the first day I arrived, I saw people dying bad deaths for no reason. It's made a mark on my life. Even though I was lucky to survive, it's still a problem because I cannot forget it. Those scenes frequently replay in my head like a film, even though it was reality. It's all kept somewhere in my head. It was hard, but we were really motivated to resist, hoping that some of us might survive. We continued fighting. They no longer used ordinary guns, but heavy ammunition, grenade launchers, rockets, anti-tanks, and so on. We had no other solution – we used stones and arrows for the elders and those who could shoot them. I was too young to have used such traditional weapons, so it was stones, beating with sticks, making noise as a group to help push them back maybe a metre. That killing continued day after day for almost the entire month of April. I can't forget the terrible day when they killed my older brother.

On 14 April they killed lots of men, including my father and others of his age group. These strong men had given us guidance, they had urged us

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to make a stand and fight back. We obeyed them day after day. But the goal of the *Interahamwe* [Hutu militia] and presidential guards was to eliminate all these strong men. My older brother was killed in their first attack and that's how I also lost my father and my uncle.

We were fighting against a recognised military force, and one of our strategies for defence was to move in a big group – separating would have made it easy for them to kill us. Their plan was to force us out of the mountains so they could kill us easily. Our goal was to stay there so we could defend ourselves and survive the longest possible time. So we stayed in a group and moved as a mass. Even though I was young, I'd go with the other men and fight. We used to run among the attackers so they couldn't shoot. We'd mix with them, hit them with rocks and tackle them with their guns. Then they would be ordered to move back to re-organise. They would sometimes bring their speakerphones and tell us that we should go to the stadium, that they wouldn't kill us. But those were lies; there was no way we would give up our positions, so at times we'd start the fight because we didn't want to move an inch backwards from where we were. We'd mix with them and fight.

I spent almost two months in Bisesero. I got there on 8 April and left on 23 May. But by the end there were only a few of us and we had a shortage of food and water. Fighting hungry against armed men is a problem. We were weak. Official figures say that 85,000 people were killed there, but I think there were more. I think there were around 160,000 or 175,000. Very many people were killed – in my family all my siblings, my father, uncles. I come from a big family – 188 people descended from my grandfather – but by the time the French arrived, they had all been killed except me and my uncle.

I was injured in the fighting – I was hacked on the head and also have a shot wound. That happened in the last days when the French came to create the *Zone Turquoise*. They came with their helicopters saying they had come to save us, that it was over and no more people were going to be killed. We could also see that the killings had ended. We came out of the forests and bushes where we were hiding, out into the open towards them. But they had trucks full of *Interahamwe* and they had made us believe they were full of food and clothes. It wasn't true.

When we came out of hiding, they immediately attacked us and that was when my uncle got killed. That day, I managed to escape even though I had been shot. We were surrounded by *Interahamwe* and they sent them in to finish us off. They killed nearly everybody, but they didn't get me.

When I got shot, I was leading a group of about 300-500 kids aged between 12 and 16 whose job was to alert people when there was an attack coming. We'd go to the mountains near ETO [*Ecole Technique Officielle*] Kibuye and scream, bang drums, jerry-cans and any other noisy object we could find. That way we let the people in Kirongi know, and those in Bisesero would come and give them a hand. And when Bisesero was attacked, we'd go and give them reinforcements.

On 19 April, when I got shot, my brother was also killed at the same time. There was an attack of presidential guards with their fast jeeps and they shot me as I was running to our positions. The people I was with rescued me by dragging me into our positions. They shot me in the leg near my foot, but I managed to escape. I ran with my uncle, but they shot him and when I stayed with him, he ordered me to run on. He told me that his time had come and I had a better chance of surviving to the next day and maybe the day after. I obeyed him and left, even though I didn't want to leave him to die alone. But he made me leave.

I escaped and returned to my neighbourhood in the valley of the Kirongi mountain. I managed to spend a week there, hiding from 23-28 April in a cave without food or water. I was desperately thirsty. I could no longer even speak or swallow saliva – I didn't have any. It felt as if my throat was about to close. Although I was in a place controlled by the French, militias and presidential guards, I thought I might as well take the risk of going to drink water because otherwise I would die of thirst. But I had no way of moving safely and when I went to a waterhole where cows drank, an attack group found me. I wasn't scared because it was my second month of witnessing killings. I asked them to let me finish drinking water first, and they did. Then they walked me with my bullet wound to the hole where they threw people after they had killed them.

I asked them why they were doing this. I knew already but just wanted to hear them say it. In my area, they had a registration book which was used to record all those killed. My family made up most of the population of the area and I was the only one missing in their book. They showed me the book and said they had been looking for me; now they had found me, they wanted to kill me. I asked if they would answer one question. They agreed, and I asked them why they wanted to kill me. They told me it was because I was a Tutsi, a 'cockroach', that Rwanda was not our country and so we must be exterminated. By killing me, they added, they were doing me a favour because my entire family and all the Tutsis had been killed, so living

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for me would be useless. I asked them why they were going to kill me when I had never wronged them, when in fact I had lived in harmony with them and their children. They told me to ask God because He was the one who created Tutsis and had abandoned them. I heard that and figured I couldn't add anything.

Even though they were angry, I asked them for one more thing. I didn't care because I knew they were going to kill me anyway. I had seen death and was no longer scared. I asked them to let me pray and they agreed. While I was praying, they started complaining that my prayer was too long. I begged them to let me finish and they did. I continued. They started complaining again, saying that my prayer was taking too long and they needed to go somewhere else to find people to kill. They let me pray for the third time, but this time they didn't let me finish. They hit me on the head with a club. I fell down unconscious and don't know when they hacked me. But I have four machete scars on my head, as well as the bullet wound in my leg.

From 28 April-2 May I lay there unconscious. I woke up after a dream about being killed and found myself in a hole. I crawled out with some difficulty. I thought about what to do next and decided to go to Kibuye town. I would go to the hospital and they would either kill me or treat me. That's what I did. I was really looking for a place for a nicer death. From where I was to Kibuye, it took me two days, walking and hiding. I got there on 4 May. One thing I remember is that I heard on the *Interahamwe's* radio that the RPF [Rwandan Patriotic Front] had captured Kabgayi and managed to rescue people who had fled there.

I reached the roadblock at the roundabout in Kibuye and people came to look. There were soldiers and one wanted to shoot me, saying that I was a 'cockroach'. I told him that I came from Bisesero and was not a cockroach. He replied by asking what the difference was between the RPF 'cockroach' and the Bisesero *inyenzi*. I kept quiet. When he was going to shoot me, his partner told him to leave me alone because I was dying anyway from my wounds. He said that killing me would bring him bad luck.

By then I didn't care. I just had one goal – to get to the hospital where I'd be healed or killed. When I got there, a crowd came to watch me and they started to beat me. They asked me why I had come there and I said, "To be healed or killed, one of the two." One woman stood out and shielded me. She told them they had killed enough people and if anyone killed me, they would be looking for trouble from her. She took me inside the hospital

and treated me. But people aren't all the same. When this nurse had stitched me up, her colleague came and undid the stitches. It happened again and again, and eventually she asked her what she was doing. Her colleague eventually agreed she could treat me as long as she didn't use stitches; she could give me tablets and everything else, but not stitches. Perhaps the colleague thought that would impede my recovery.

The nurse obeyed and told me that she would do her best without stitches. She gave me antibiotics, washed me, fed me and even gave me clothes because what I was wearing was very dirty. I'd been wearing those clothes since 8 April when we ran away. She also hired *Interahamwe* to protect me. She paid them not to kill me. She assured me that she was going to do her best and if I died, it would be because she couldn't do any more.

I spent the entire month of June in the hospital. I left on 2 July and went to the *Zone Turquoise*, to the French military camp situated in the girls' high school. Even then, I couldn't go there by myself; I would have been killed on the way, so the nurse gave me those *Interahamwe* to protect me. They walked me up to the gate of the French military base and then left. I only managed to spend that month in hospital because of the nurse who treated me, fed me, clothed me and even paid for my protection. When the *Interahamwe* went out to kill elsewhere, they used to leave a notice saying that if they found me dead when they came back, it would be best if my killer was dead as well before they got there. Those were the terms on which I survived, while other people at the hospital were being killed on a daily basis, especially the many girls who had survived at the stadium and were kept to be raped. The militias would kill whichever of the girls they got tired of raping. When I got to the hospital, there were a few left but they were also gradually killed.

The nurse who saved me is still alive today. Her name is Gitabita Nyirantaba; she's between 45-50 years old and has a husband and four kids. She lives in Kibuye and still works at the hospital. Whenever I go to Kibuye for holidays, I stay at her place. Sometimes I just go and visit her. I feel overwhelmed by all she did for me. I have nothing to give her in return. She didn't even know me when she saved me. She just saw people gathering around me and torturing me and made a decision on her own to rescue me. I think that was God's will. So I put that lady in a category of humane people with a true human heart.

I got to the French zone and they received me. I remember the first thing they asked was whether I was Hutu or Tutsi. They asked me in French

I responded even though my French was not good. They asked me a question but they could already see I was Hutu. They let me in and I lived there with my family.

After the genocide

On 17 July, the French took 50 of us to Goma. We were divided into two groups, one that went to Nyirantaba and the other to Goma. The group to Goma consisted of 20 people. My recovery needed to be followed up. I was in Goma for a while but I think it was because the French wanted to see the territory and they might have been supposed to free us.

While I was with the French, I found out that I was being kept as a wife by one of the French soldiers. I was going around retrieving people, so I told them about her. They spoke to the *Interahamwe* and they said she was his wife and didn't need to be there. They let her to live with us and that's how she stayed. When the French left Kibuye, the *Interahamwe* killed whoever was left.

I was about two months in DRC. I didn't know that all the *Interahamwe* would come and live in the camp where we were. They tried to kill us. The Red Cross and other organisations worked together and helped us to go to Goma; we crossed the border into Goma where the Red Cross had a station. They had arranged a place for us in a home in Goma from January 1995. It was hard to go to Goma but the Red Cross managed it.

In Ruhengeri, I lived in the orphanage. I started a new life because orphanage life was very hard. I had luck, some distant relatives in Gisenyi who helped me with them. I started a family life and I had children.

I returned to Kibuye for the first time in 1995. I don't live there now but don't live there. First of all, I don't have a house – all our houses were destroyed.

and I responded even though my French was not that good. I answered their question but they could already see I was a Tutsi because of the wounds. They let me in and I lived there with many other people.

After the genocide

On 17 July, the French took 50 of us to Congo [DRC]. We were separated into two groups, one that went to Nyarushishi, Cyangugu and the other to Goma. The group to Goma consisted mostly of injured or ill people whose recovery needed to be followed up. I don't know exactly why they moved us, but I think it was because the French zone shared borders with RPF territory and they might have been scared that the RPF would attack us and free us.

While I was with the French, I found out that one of my sisters was alive and was being kept as a wife by an *Interahamwe*. The French were going around retrieving people, so I told them about her and they went to find her. They spoke to the *Interahamwe* and they came back and told me that she was his wife and didn't need to be rescued. They refused to bring her to live with us and that's how she was killed in October 1994. When the French left Kibuye, the *Interahamwe* fled as the RPF was taking over. The *Interahamwe* killed whoever was left, including my sister.

I was about two months in DRC, then we came home to Rwanda. We didn't know that all the *Interahamwe* from Kigali and all over the country would come and live in the camp where the French took us, near Mugunga. They tried to kill us. The Red Cross and some other human rights organisations worked together and brought us home, all 50 of us. They took us to Goma; we crossed the border and eventually came to Ruhengeri where the Red Cross had a station. That was our destination because they had arranged a place for us in a home for genocide orphans. We lived there from January 1995. It was hard to get back home and I don't know how the Red Cross managed it.

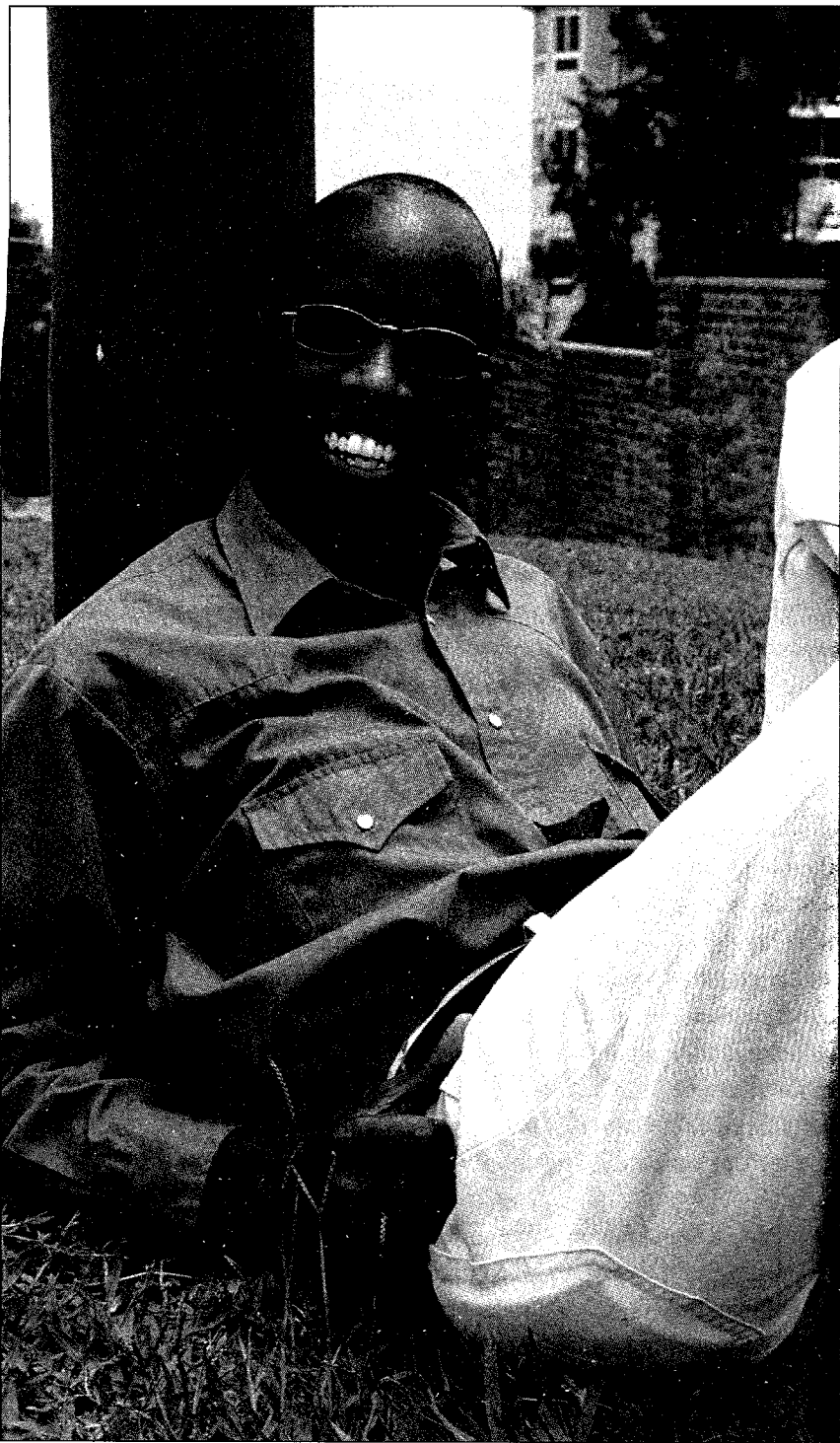
In Ruhengeri, I lived in the orphanage and studied. I felt obliged to start a new life because orphanage life didn't offer me much future. By luck, some distant relatives in Gisenyi found me and took me in to live with them. I started a family life and I was like their adopted child.

I returned to Kibuye for the first time in May 1995. I go as a visitor now but don't live there. First of all, there's no place for me to live. There's no house – all our houses were destroyed. During the holidays, I go either

to Gisenyi or to Kibuye and visit the remains of my home. I also visit the nurse who saved me and I go to see the mountains. When the holiday is over, I come back either to Gisenyi or to Kigali where I am boarding and studying at the Kigali Institute of Science, Technology and Management.

When I'm in Kibuye, I feel very sad; it's immeasurable. I cannot forget about Kibuye just because I had bad times there. It is my home. Wherever I go in this world, I will not forget that I was born in Kibuye. Most importantly, I cannot forget that I had a good life there in a tranquil family, being raised by my parents, living with my siblings, with all I needed – the affection of my parents, my siblings, my entire family... even of all Tutsis. We lived well and I can't forget Kibuye. I had a good life and a bad life there; I lost all those people, but it still remains my home. I can spend half an hour at the roundabout remembering when they wanted to shoot me. I can't forget the hospital where I lived for a month without any right to be there. Kibuye is a marked place inside of me. I have to visit it and if possible walk all the paths we walked during the genocide as we tried to save our own lives.





Innocent, 2004 © Karen Kessi-Williams

INNOCENT

We chose

Before the genocide

My name is Innocent and I was born on the outskirts of the town. My father had four children, and I was the fourth. I was 12 years old and in high school at the time. The entire family was killed, including my father.

The genocide didn't start until 1994, earlier at my primary and high school. Students were beaten up; there was something being planned. I witnessed horrific, animalistic acts that I never imagined.

The genocide

It began when the President was murdered by murderous soldiers and other soldiers who were given to kill Tutsis. They started killing people. In our area, soldiers took us from our homes, burning them down.

When the attacks started, I went to my old primary school and a hospital, and I remember seeing people. But we were attacked by a group of people from the local authorities. They took us to the stadium in Kibuye, where my father and some other men, I don't know, were taken to the mountains of Bisetero.