

Jean Baptiste Kayigamba describes how he survived genocide in Rwanda.

Haunted mornings, sleepless nights

As a Tutsi and a genocide survivor, my account here is not neutral, but a deeply personal one. It is a narrative of how I survived an attempt to annihilate all Tutsi in Rwanda and of the events I witnessed first-hand in the lead-up to, and during, the genocide. It is also a narrative of how I have since tried, day by day, to come to terms with the devastating personal legacies of these experiences.

Nearly all of my relatives, including my parents, two sisters and five brothers, were killed in 1994, perishing at the hands of the genocidal government, its army, its militias and Hutu mobs. Only two of my sisters, one niece and I survived. Like all Tutsi, my whole life has been a chain of suffering because of violent discrimination and extreme fear for my life and those of my loved ones.

It is not easy for me to recount what happened in Rwanda in 1994. Whenever I ponder the genocide, I revisit the agonizing death of my family and friends, and the physical and emotional trauma I also suffered. It sickens me to think that they knew one day they would be killed, but they never attempted to flee the country to find safety elsewhere. I also relive the terrible days of the genocide, when all Tutsi in the capital Kigali were counting the hours until they would be killed. As Hutu militias prowled the streets looking for Tutsi, we experienced haunted mornings and our fears continued throughout the days and sleepless nights.

I was born in Gikongoro province in 1963, the year after Rwanda gained independence from Belgium. This area is known even today as a hotbed of Hutu extremism. As a child, I grew up hearing from my parents harrowing stories of the sadism and cruelty that characterized the massacres of that time. My father once told me that the rocks on the banks of the Rukarara River remained crimson for years because the blood of thousands of Tutsi had flowed so freely there.

The bloodletting begins

On the morning of 7 April 1994 a group of armed presidential guards stormed the compound of the Jeunesse Ouvrière Catholique (JOC), where I lived. Several friends and I dashed through a nearby fence and sought refuge in the compound of the Centre for Learning of African Languages (CELA), run by the priests of the Catholic White Fathers.

Later that afternoon our camp swelled to 400 frightened Tutsi refugees and a few Hutu, including women and children. More continued to arrive that

evening and during the following days. The fresh arrivals told harrowing stories of entire families being butchered. The White Fathers briefed us every day, telling us the names of those who had been killed. We realized that, as the situation stood, it was unlikely we would survive. The Fathers were soon evacuated by French and Belgian soldiers and left us with the keys to the camp.

We started to organize, focusing on the need to maintain hygiene. We sent most of the women and children to Saint Paul, a nearby religious centre in the Sainte Famille Parish. To ensure that we had enough food to hold out for a long period we contacted the Red Cross, who sent us a dozen sacks of beans.

Our camp was raided two weeks later, around 10.00am on 22 April. We were attacked by a combination of soldiers, members of the *gendarmerie*, the local population and the Interahamwe militias – some armed with guns and grenades, others with traditional weapons such as *pangas*, machetes and spears. Colonel Tharicisse Renzaho, Mayor of Kigali City, and Major General Laurent Munyakazi, Head of Muhima Police Station, led the attackers. Further back in the group was Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, Vicar of Sainte Famille and nicknamed *Umujene* ('the young one'). He used to move around in a flak jacket, armed with a pistol and grenades. He was notorious for protecting women and girls who had satisfied his raging libido. During the attack he stood where he could see us and asked the killers not to harm women and children. Despite Munyeshyaka's role in the genocide, he now lives free and peacefully in France.

During the attack, the killers rounded up around 30 men accused of being accomplices of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). It was obvious that the killers had a list of names – luckily enough, I was not on it. Being a Tutsi, a journalist and a graduate of the local university made me a prime target. Before the young men were taken away we were told that they would be interrogated before being released. About an hour later we heard staccato gunshots nearby – only two survived.

In the afternoon, I and a couple of other Tutsi decided to go back to JOC, traumatized and still wondering whether the militia would come back to look for us. As night began to fall a few of the Hutu young men grew suspicious – some even called for our expulsion. We were given an evening meal, but I could hardly eat anything. We were shaking uncontrollably and talking incoherently.

The following morning a friend (who would later become my wife) sent someone to look for me. After

the attack on CELA she had moved to the parish of Sainte Famille. She convinced me that I should leave the hostel and join her there. That morning a friend and I left the hostel and began walking in the ditch along the main road. Trucks of Interahamwe militia drove past. One reversed, in a bid to get us. We gathered the last energy we had and ran quickly towards the church. Had they caught us we could have not survived. The next afternoon my friend and I heard that we had escaped death for a second time: that morning militia arrived at the hostel where we had been hiding and killed all of the people sheltering there.

From the church to 'Hotel Rwanda'

The premises of Sainte Famille were large: in addition to the church itself, there was a compound containing a school and several accommodation units. The complex became overcrowded with both Tutsi and Hutu refugees. Some of us slept on the altar and did not have enough to eat. Father Munyeshyaka, the Hutu vicar who had been present at the assault on CELA, was not interested in helping us. Instead he continually insulted the refugees and blamed the Tutsi for assassinating the father of the nation, President Juvenal Habyarimana, whose plane had been shot down over Kigali on 6 April, sparking the first killings.

The dominant feelings among the refugees were of fear and mutual distrust. The Tutsi were afraid that the Hutu

had sought refuge at the start of the killings. One of my nieces, who was five years old at the time, was the only member of my family to survive. She later told me that she had received a machete blow and had fallen to the ground. She hid under the corpses and crawled out to hide in the latrine of a nearby Hutu home.

No reconciliation without justice

I still bitterly regret that the world betrayed my people in our hour of need. I am surprised that some powerful countries spent days discussing the best terminology to give to the bloodletting in Rwanda at the UN – countries that had done nothing to stop the genocide. A gigantic coalition was raised to invade Iraq. What was needed to stop the killings in Rwanda was not a big force, just a few thousand.

Rwanda's major ethnic groups speak the same language, have the same religion and share many of the same customs and traditions. What is painful for me today is that our history has been truncated, trivialized and reduced by many commentators to a simple tale of ancient, visceral, tribal conflict.

This is yet another reason why survivors' testimonies are so crucial. We have too often been denied the right to narrate the true facts, which we know better than the best historians and political experts, many of whom could not even locate Rwanda on the map. Is it really possible to blame the genocide on inherent ethnic

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refugees were spying on them. We could see some strange faces visiting, apparently to gather information. We took every possible precaution to conceal our identities. I changed my name from Jean Baptiste to Thacisse.

Meanwhile, one of my sisters who had reached the refuge of the famous Hotel des Mille Collines in the centre of Kigali was informed that I was still alive and hiding at Sainte Famille. With the help of some *gendarmes* who were stationed at the hotel and whom she knew personally, she managed to get me out to the hotel. Mille Collines was a privileged place, for entrepreneurs and intellectuals. We were told that some of the fugitives had paid huge sums of money to influential men in the military or the leadership of the Hutu militias to escort them to this hotel.

We had TV in our rooms, so we could follow the news and see what was happening around the country. The hotel manager, Paul Rusesabagina – recently depicted in the film *Hotel Rwanda* – worked tirelessly to keep us alive. There were some unsung heroes, like Victor, who owned a bakery in the city centre and risked his life bringing Tutsi to the hotel. Our only drinking water came from the swimming pool. We stored it in the bathtubs of some of the rooms, most of which were being shared by three or four people.

Along with other Tutsi hiding in the Mille Collines, my sister and I were evacuated in the middle of May to an area under RPF control. If it hadn't been for Paul Rusesabagina and Romeo Dallaire, the head of the UN peacekeeping mission, we would never have survived.

The remainder of my family, however, was not so fortunate. They were massacred in late April in Musange, my home commune, in an office building where they

differences between groups of Rwandans, even though this sort of violence was never observed in Rwanda before colonialism?

What is disheartening is the continued targeting of genocide survivors in Rwanda. These murders go on, unreported. The plight of survivors is ongoing. Every day we must fight the deepest emotional and psychological battles imaginable. Sometimes it is difficult to go on living.

Today my fear is that another culture of impunity is being cultivated in post-genocide Rwanda in the guise of reconciliation. Survivors are encouraged to forgive and forget. They are asked to live with some of the neighbours they know participated in the genocide. As long as survivors assume that justice has not been done, prospects for healing the wounds remain bleak.

I cannot forget what happened, and it would be wrong to forget. It is necessary for survivors to tell what they experienced, so that the world understands the nature and magnitude of the violence that engulfed Rwanda throughout the entire second half of the 20th century. When others learn and acknowledge what we lived through, this helps restore some of the humanity that we lost during the days of violence. If the world is willing to listen, this may also help prevent similar tragedies from occurring in other countries.

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