

Tribute to Damas Gisimba, a rock of stability and love

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Jonathan Salt, a teacher of Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics at Jack Hunt School, Peterborough in the UK while screening a documentary on Damas Gisimba. Courtesy

On the morning of June 13, I returned to Kigali. Once more, I was back in one of the most beautiful and welcoming countries in the world. This visit had not been planned. I had no time to enjoy the moment of return — the funeral of Damas Gisimba was beginning in just a couple of hours.

I met Damas initially on my first visit to Kigali back in July 2011 when I was invited to address a conference of Rwandan teachers on Holocaust and Genocide education. In Europe, where I was a teacher, I specialised in Holocaust Education and running residential

educational programmes at Auschwitz Museum in Poland where over 1.1 million people were murdered by the Nazi regime during World War Two.

The process was planned and executed on industrial levels. In the death camps in German-occupied Poland, a system of poisoned gas was used to eliminate millions, mainly the Jews of occupied Europe. I had always been struck by how the Holocaust had released something profoundly evil and vicious in so many normal people and as I researched the story in more depth, I became fascinated by those who had faced dilemmas, impossible decisions, choiceless choices, ordinary people who had done whatever they could to do the right thing and live out their humanity in a good way.

One such person was Janusz Korczak, an internationally renowned Jewish educator, and paediatrician who had run a Jewish orphanage in Warsaw. In 1940 he and some 200 children were moved into the notorious Jewish Ghetto. In that place of disease and starvation, he continued to care for his children, enduring terrible hardship as he struggled to feed them and give them a sense of the value



Rwanda's High Commissioner to the United Kingdom Johnston Busingye poses for a photo with students. Courtesy

of human existence.

In July 1942 the Nazis began to liquidate the Ghetto, transporting several thousand Jews daily to the death camp of Treblinka deep in the Polish countryside. 98% were disposed of within three hours of arrival. On August 5, they took 4,000 children, including Korczak and his orphanage. They were never seen again. His legacy was remarkable and thanks to him we now have the UNICEF International Convention of the Rights of the Child, signed up to by most countries around the world.

By chance, a month before I travelled to Kigali in 2011, I came across an article in a British newspaper about Damas Gisimba. I was intrigued by the story of how he had saved over 400 children and I made arrangements to visit him as soon as I arrived. For me, that encounter with Damas was to be life-changing.

I'm not sure what I expected, maybe some

huge personality, a towering physical presence, someone who could stand up to the Interahamwe and get away with it. He was nothing like that.

As he took us around the orphanage, recounting the horrific events of 1994, I realised that he was simply someone who was clever, shrewd, and very ordinary, someone who was incredibly brave and above all, a man who loved the children in his care; they adored him. That was obvious to anyone who ever visited the orphanage. The children were his priority.

In 2013, Damas gave me permission to research and write the story. The following year, he visited the UK for Holocaust Memorial Day. It was the 20th Anniversary of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi and Damas was given a tumultuous welcome by the people of the University City of Cambridge. He was also honoured with an event in the House of Lords. Wherever he went, his humanity and generosity of spirit were recognised and celebrated, especially by children on several visits to British schools.

Later that year, I returned to Kigali to start the research. It was difficult because the month before, the BBC had broadcast a scandalous documentary questioning the whole narrative of the Genocide. I was ashamed to come here as a British citizen and meet with survivors to ask them about their personal lives in the aftermath of that documentary.

Over several visits to Rwanda, I conducted many interviews with Damas as well as with many whose lives he had saved. I tried to construct a picture for myself of this group of terrified people huddled in the small brick

buildings on the hillside in Nyakabanda waiting for the inevitable.

At the centre of this group of mainly children with some adults, was a rock of stability and love: Damas Gisimba with his solid belief in God's love and his constant mantra to the children: *"You are not Tutsi children. You are not Hutu children. You are children of God, who created you in his image, as equal."* This community, with only the protection of a small privet hedge, was delicately maintained and nurtured by this man. The orphanage buildings, a fragile boat with its precious cargo surrounded by the dark stormy seas of the Genocide, with its fearless captain, Damas, at the helm.



Students follow Jonathan Salt's presentation while screening a documentary on Damas Gisimba

It would have been easy for Damas to hand

the Tutsi children over to the Interahamwe to be killed but that would have been an anathema to him. That would have contradicted everything he believed in. His bravery, his fearlessness was immense, his selflessness, even greater.

Piecing together this story of the orphanage is not easy. There are so many different facets and anomalies, but throughout, like a gold thread, shines the charisma and personality of Damas, underpinned the love he has for his wife and the love they both have for the children.

We have a saying in the UK: behind every strong man you find a strong woman. Damas' wife, Beatrice, spent the Genocide secluded with two other women in a room looking after the infants, brought in from the street, along with her own son, Patrick. Her quiet, unassuming role in the story cannot be underestimated. She too possesses an inner intangible strength that supported Damas throughout this difficult period.

Damas continues to remain a shining light for Rwanda but also for the rest of the world. He is a real hero and as such, demonstrates to all people how to live as a human being.

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