PORTRAITS OF SURVIVAL

VOLUME 2: THE GENOCIDE AGAINST THE TUTSI IN RWANDA

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Foreword

Genocide is a diverse and complex crime; it can unfold over many years and across many countries (such as with the Holocaust), or over a few short months within one country (such as with the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda). Although every genocide is different, it is always crucial that the horrors of genocide are spoken about and heard.

For survivors, like myself, testimony is particularly important: we use testimony to release our anger; to process our experiences and trauma; to honour the memory of our murdered loved ones; to secure a measure of justice, and to begin the long road towards peace and reconciliation.

Testimony is not only important for survivors, but also for those who engage with these accounts. The stories of survivors humanise the impact of genocide in a way that historical facts and statistics cannot achieve, making storytelling a critical tool for education. Testimony can help to develop empathy, critical thinking and even personal responsibility. Additionally, it can act as a catalyst to confront the prejudices within our own communities – and even within ourselves. This can ultimately build up resilience against the potential for future division and mass atrocities, as well as strengthen social cohesion within our communities and an appreciation for 'others'.

Thank you for creating this book and enabling a much wider audience to be exposed to and learn from Rwandan survivors and their stories.

Freddy Mutanguha
Executive Director, Aegis Trust

The Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda

The 1994 genocide in Rwanda was a deliberate, intentional and systematic mass-killing, which targeted the Tutsi population. In less than three months, one million men, women and children were killed, perhaps as much as three quarters of the Tutsi population of Rwanda.

While Rwandans were being massacred, only a three-and-a-half-hour flight away, South Africans were voting in their country's first democratic election on 27 April 1994. Two countries, while geographically close, can too often choose very divergent paths.

How did the genocide happen?

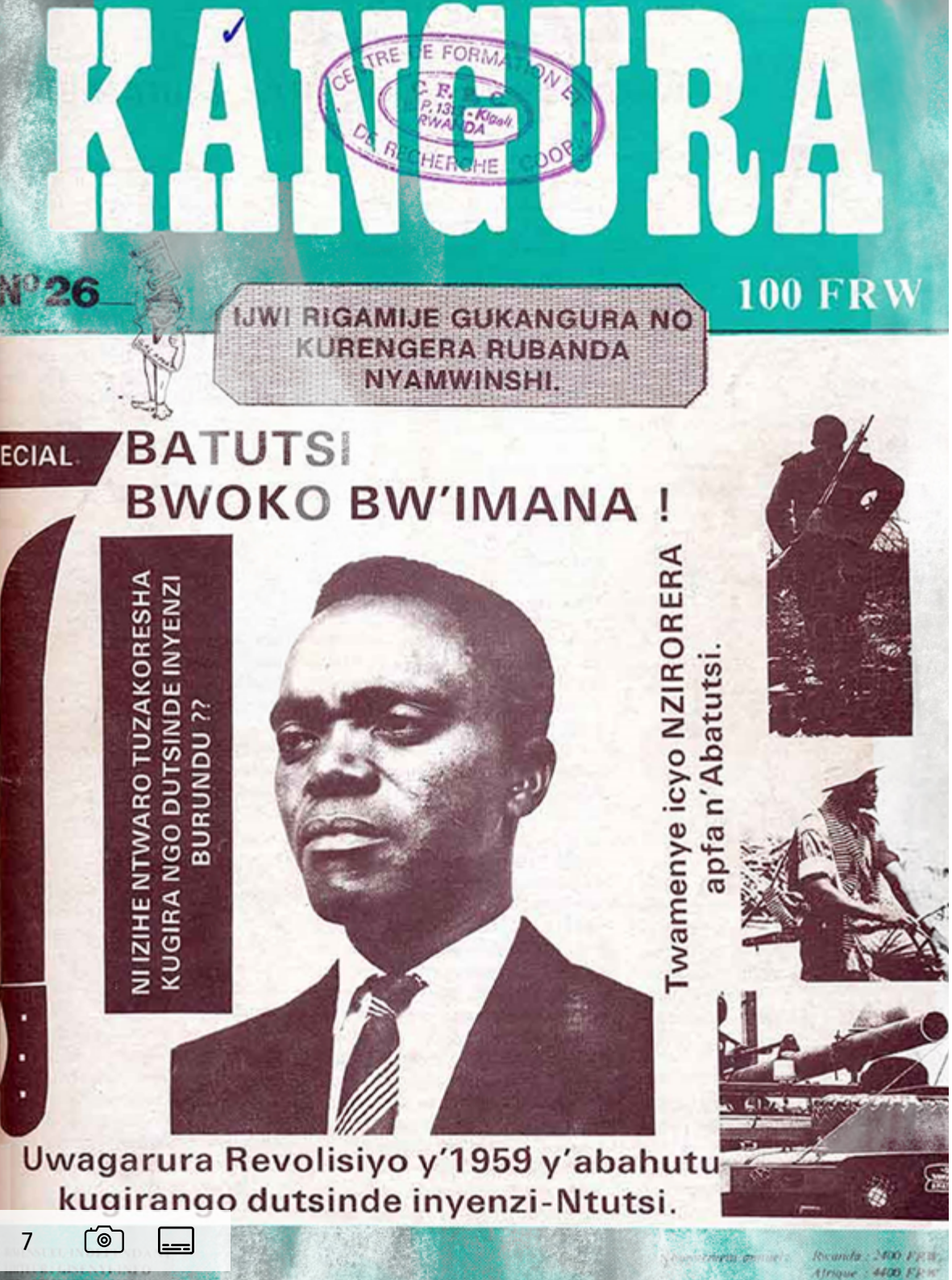
Historically, Rwanda's population was structured along social clans, which were then rigidly stratified by the colonial powers into three groups: Hutu (85%), Tutsi (14%) and Twa (1%). They spoke the same language (Kinyarwanda), lived on the same hills, went to the same Catholic churches and interacted socially and economically. However, the relationship between Hutu, Tutsi and Twa was complicated.

In 1885, when European colonial powers divided Africa amongst themselves at the Berlin Conference, Rwanda fell under German control. After the German defeat in World War I, Belgium took control and governed Rwanda and neighbouring Burundi, favouring the Tutsi, who were given privileged positions, power and wealth. Belgian colonial authorities required all Rwandans to carry identity cards that classified people by their 'ethnicity'.

Colonial rule ended in 1959 and political parties were formed to contest Rwanda's first elections. The victorious Hutu killed thousands of Tutsi, who faced ongoing discrimination and violence and thousands of Tutsi fled to nearby countries.

In 1973, the army chief of staff, General Juvénal Habyarimana, seized power and his regime continued to discriminate against the Tutsi. Meanwhile, Tutsi exiles in Uganda formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), a group advocating for the return of refugees to their home country, by any means possible.

In the late 1980s, Rwanda experienced severe economic hardship when the global price of coffee collapsed. In addition, there was a heavy drought causing hunger in the country. People blamed the government, who in turn blamed the Tutsi.



In 1990, the RPF marched into Rwanda, which ignited a four-year civil war. Government-sponsored propaganda urged the Hutu to prepare for 'self-defence'. Organised by extremist Hutu parties, youth militias spread terror across the country and thousands of Tutsi were killed in massacres. The most infamous of these militia groups was the *Interahamwe* ('Those who attack together').

In August 1993, President Habyarimana and the RPF signed a peace accord (the Arusha Agreement) that allowed for the return of Tutsi refugees and the establishment of a Hutu-Tutsi coalition government. The United Nations deployed 2 500 troops to Kigali, led by Lieutenant-General Roméo Dallaire to oversee implementation of the Arusha Agreement. President Habyarimana, facing fierce opposition from within his own party, stalled the finalisation of this agreement.

While flying back from Arusha on 6 April 1994, Habyarimana's plane was shot down over Kigali by assailants who remain unknown to this day. This was used as a pretext to start the extremists' genocidal plan. Tutsi were targeted across Rwanda, regardless of their age, gender, class or position. Before long, the violence had spread throughout the country. Many Tutsi tried to flee to neighbouring countries but did not make it past the roadblocks where they were killed on the spot.

The genocide was characterised by extraordinary cruelty. Victims were often tortured before they were killed. Women were raped. Children were mutilated. In some areas, more than 95% of the Tutsi population was murdered.

Seeking safety, Tutsi congregated in churches and schools which later became sites of mass murder. They tried to resist, but their sticks, stones and rocks were no match for the genocidaires' guns, grenades and machetes.

During the genocide, an estimated 200 000 Hutu carried out the murder. Thousands more committed crimes such as looting, rape, torture and destruction of property.

The genocide was orchestrated by an authoritarian state that had total control of governmental and civil institutions. Many Rwandan soldiers, who were supposed to protect all civilians, participated in the killings. They operated alongside the *Interahamwe.* Many ordinary men who faced intense pressure to participate, became perpetrators.

Perpetrators acted out of envy, for material or opportunistic reasons. Others were motivated by fear. Some knew their victims personally — they were their neighbours, family members, friends and fellow churchgoers. Perpetrators had been indoctrinated by racist ideology and propaganda, which, over the years, had demonised the Tutsi.

Despite widespread participation of ordinary civilians in the genocide, not all Hutu were perpetrators. Many were bystanders, while some were rescuers. Hutu who tried to help Tutsi survive in any way, were seen as traitors by the genocidaires and could be killed alongside their families. Despite this threat, some individuals provided shelter, supplied food and safeguarded passage to neighbouring countries for those at risk.

Most rescuers started off as bystanders and had to make difficult moral choices when confronted with the killings. Some saved a single life, while others saved many. There were even those who saved some while also betraying or killing others.

The actions of these rescuers portray humanity's capacity for courage even at a time of extreme peril. Unfortunately, their acts of conscience were the exception rather than the rule.

Where was the international community?

The international community refused to formally recognise that a genocide was underway in Rwanda. The killings were labelled as 'internal conflict', 'civil' or 'tribal' war, because acknowledging them as genocidal would have required the international community, legally, to take action as signatories of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

On 10 June 1994, after most of the killings were over, the United States finally termed the atrocities a genocide. When US President Bill Clinton travelled to Rwanda in 1998, he apologised for ***"not immediately calling the crimes by their rightful name: genocide"*** and has since called his inaction his greatest regret. In a statement made in 1999, Secretary-General Kofi Annan acknowledged the systematic failure of the UN and expressed his deep remorse on behalf of the organisation: ***"But I realised after the genocide that there was more that I could and should have done to sound the alarm and rally support."***

What happened after the genocide?

The genocide ended in mid-July 1994, once the RPF liberated the country. After 100 days of genocide, Rwanda was a devastated country. Its basic infrastructure was destroyed, millions of people were displaced, and most surviving Tutsi had lost their entire families. Many women suffered the consequences of rape and sexual violence. Over 75 000 children were orphaned and had to fend for themselves.

Countless survivors developed long-term psychological problems. However, many showed great resilience and managed to rebuild their lives. Some became actively involved in forming survivor support groups and in the creation and preservation of memorial sites across the country.

One of the biggest challenges that the country faced was to bring the perpetrators to justice. At the end of 1994, the United Nations set up the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha, Tanzania which brought to trial the top-level organisers of the genocide.

Between 2002 and 2012, the vast majority of the perpetrators appeared before communal courts called *Gacaca* (soft grass), a system of traditional community justice, which provided survivors the opportunity to face the accused and to publicly testify. According to the Rwandan National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (CNLG), close to two million cases were tried by the *Gacaca* courts. Those found guilty were sentenced to jail, others were released back to their communities.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How to use this book

This book showcases and honours the lives of survivors of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda who later settled in South Africa. We hope this collection of short vignettes will be valuable as an educational resource for learners and educators. These stories highlight not only the diversity of experiences of genocide, but also many important lessons and insights into the consequences of discrimination, prejudice and othering, as well as the power of activism and speaking up.

 Click on this icon to view the original, untreated image.

Throughout this book, we have made use of a special visual treatment, which intends to bring new life to images rooted in a complex and painful history. Photographs characterised by this kind of history, have the potential to feel far-removed from life today; as if they have been frozen in time. This treatment brings them into a contemporary space.

We can think of the brushstrokes as a physical representation of the contemporary connecting with the historical. In this sense, the paint interacts with the original image in a way that honours its beginnings but also facilitates the image's re-imagining and reconstruction for the present. Overall, the treatment hopes to transform stories of the past into relevant and hopeful lessons for the future.

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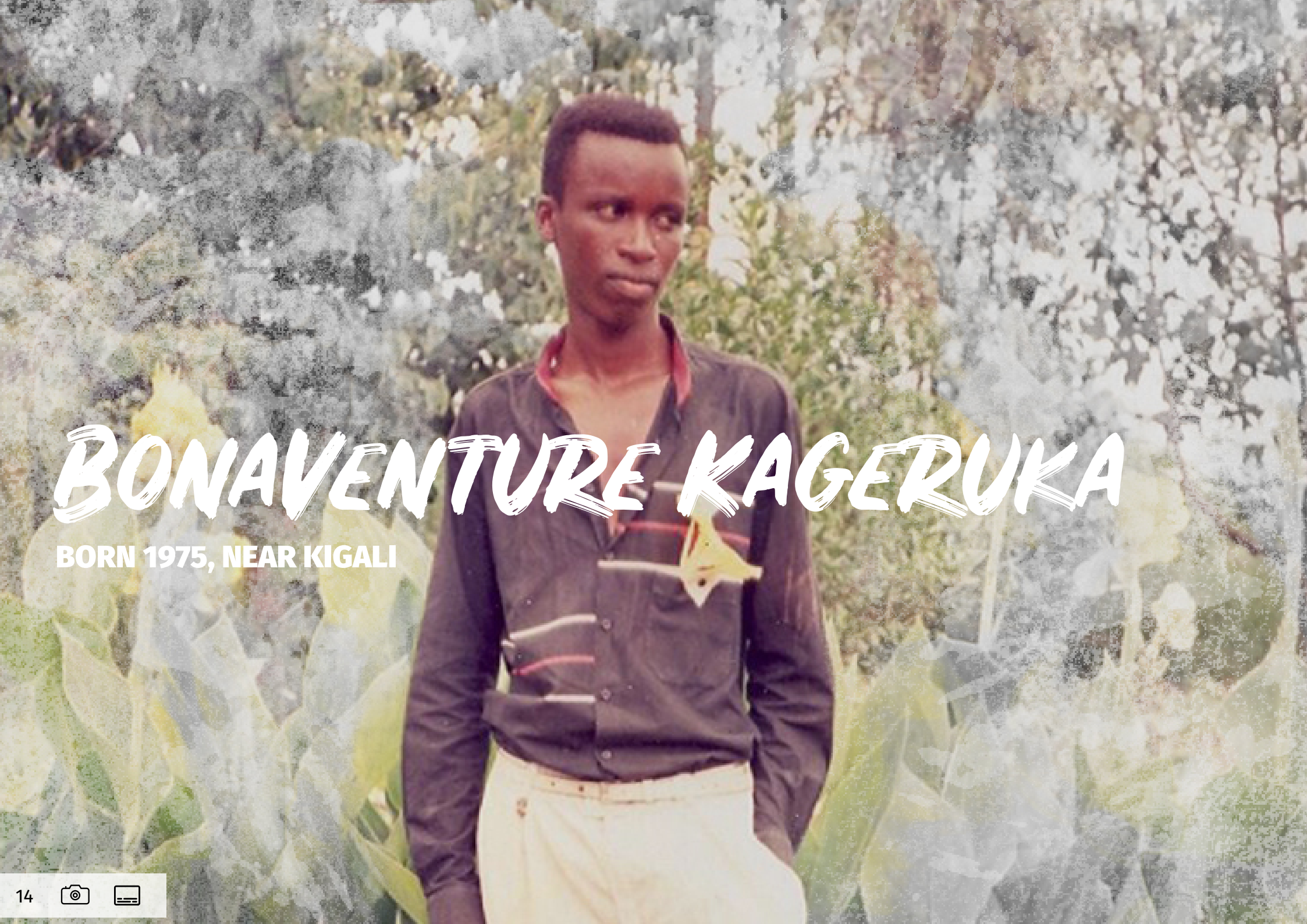

BONAVENTURE KAGERUKA

BORN 1975, NEAR KIGALI

“Rwanda turned into hell in a fraction of a second! A friend was no longer a friend …”

Bonaventure Kageruka was born near Kigali, Rwanda, to a close-knit, observant Catholic family. His father, Innocent, and his mother, Esperance, had six children. He explained that his family never celebrated Christmas as his paternal grandparents had been killed in a massacre coming home from church on Christmas day.

At school Bonaventure recalled his teacher once asking all the Tutsi children to stand up and identify themselves. As the only Tutsi in his class, he was subsequently bullied by his classmates. He remembered on one occasion getting a bloody nose from a fight at school. After this incident, Bonaventure and a few of his Tutsi friends from outside of class formed a group to defend themselves. He even started carrying a knife everywhere he went.

Bonaventure was fortunate to later attend a private high school that had been set up by some wealthy Tutsi families. This was the first time he felt safe and happy at school. During the civil war of the early 1990s, Bonaventure was picked up by the gendarmerie on suspicion of loading grenades with his friends; he was only 16 years old at the time. He was questioned, beaten and held in the police station over the weekend. Luckily his headmaster was informed about his detention and came to collect him from the station. Bonaventure managed to matriculate from high school without further incidents, and in 1993 went to study law at the National University of Rwanda in Butare. He lived with friends in a small flat and enjoyed his student life.

In 1994, Bonaventure travelled back home for his sister's wedding. He remembered that his mother was relieved that he lived far away from Kigali as she feared that ***"something bad is going to happen".*** Little did he know that this would be the last time he would see his parents.

On the night of 7 April 1994, the day after President Habyarimana's plane was shot down, Bonaventure celebrated with his friends back in Butare. They had believed that a new president would bring peace to the country. Their joy, however, was short-lived. ***"Rwanda turned into hell in a fraction of a second! A friend was no longer a friend and the time we had been dreading for many years intruded."***

One of Bonaventure's friends had spare keys to the house of their Canadian lecturer. They all hid in his home for 10 days until they ran out of food and had to risk going outside, where they were greeted with the carnage on the streets of Butare. It became clear that they had to escape.

Bonaventure struggled to think of who could assist him. He first tried unsuccessfully to get help from a family friend, a Catholic priest, who he hoped could offer him some protection. Most likely fear led the priest to turn him away. Soon after, Bonaventure luckily managed to get a ride in a van travelling towards Burundi. Although they drove on back roads to avoid the infamous roadblocks, they were nevertheless stopped at the border by the Hutu militia. Bonaventure was briefly apprehended but he decided to take a risk and ran towards the border, escaping his captors. He miraculously managed to make it to Burundi safely. Many others who attempted the same feat did not survive.

After the genocide, Bonaventure returned to Rwanda to search for any surviving family members. He discovered that his mother and four of his siblings had been killed. Although his father had initially survived the genocide by masquerading as a priest, he died shortly after. Only one of Bonaventure's sisters, Plautille, survived.

Bonaventure spent a few years in Rwanda after the genocide and even joined the newly formed police force. He then decided to move to Johannesburg where he could start a new life and pursue his studies. While in South Africa, Bonaventure met and married a fellow survivor of the genocide, Christine. They have two daughters, Chloe and Anais. Bonaventure later resumed his university studies and worked towards completing a degree in politics, philosophy and economics. At the same time, he worked at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, where he shared his story with learners and adult audiences.

Bonaventure admitted that at first, he tried to hide his past and felt immense guilt for surviving the genocide. ***"I wanted to keep it a secret, not tell people that I survived because it was like a disability ... I felt ashamed that I survived."*** However, with time he realised that ***"coming forward is closing your past ... it helps".***

ANGELIQUE S.

BORN 1971, KIGALI

“I saw people leaving their families behind because they were killed or they simply were not able to carry them.”

Angelique S. was born in Kigali, Rwanda and recalled a happy childhood. Her father, a Hutu, was a deputy minister in government while her mother, a Tutsi, was a teacher. She had three siblings: Aiglon, Sophie and Octave. After completing university, she became a teacher of physics and mathematics, and was eventually appointed as deputy principal.

On the night of 6 April 1994, when President Habyarimana’s plane was shot down, Angelique recalled hearing the sound of bombs, grenades and shooting in the streets of Kigali. She was forced to stay indoors with her family, ***“with or without food, we had no choice”.***

The Hutu paramilitary organisation, the Interahamwe, ordered all the young Hutu males to join them in killing the Tutsi population. Although this violence affected everyone, Angelique's Tutsi mother was particularly at risk. Angelique's family hid inside their house for a month, unable to leave even to obtain more food and water. Then they heard an announcement on the radio advising them to leave their homes in the city and flee to the neighbouring provinces. They left as part of a huge crowd of people, including many children and older people. There were also Interahamwe infiltrating the crowd, so it was difficult to know who to trust. She remembered the chaos vividly: ***"[There were] no rules or leaders, therefore everyone defended themselves. I saw people leaving their families behind because they were killed or they simply were not able to carry them."***

Angelique's sister, Sophie, was killed on the perilous journey. Due to the confusion and disorder of the crowds, they were not even able to find or bury Sophie's body. Angelique and her family continued to flee until they reached Zaire (Democratic Republic of the Congo). ***"Entering Zaire was easy with no borders or soldiers to tell us to go back. Rwandan people died like insects. Everywhere was unhygienic, with many illnesses such as diarrhoea, cholera and malaria."***

The United Nations established several refugee camps in Zaire, which became known as Mugunga camps. Refugees were given blue, green and white plastic sheets to build their own shelters and received some support from NGOs and humanitarian organisations. However, members of the *Interahamwe* still managed to infiltrate the refugee camps and Angelique's family decided that they would be safer living in the forests of Zaire.

Afraid to go back to Rwanda, Angelique and her family stayed in the forest even after the genocide ended. In 1996, while living in the forest, Angelique married and soon after bore her first child. They lived in extremely difficult conditions, with very little food and had to walk through and hide in huge swathes of forest every day. At one time, while searching for food with her baby, Angelique became separated from her husband and the rest of her family. She recalled hearing gunshots and did not stop running until she reached the Ugandan border. Meanwhile, her husband and brother travelled to the southern part of the forest, and her parents hid further north.

Angelique did not know the whereabouts of the rest of her family. She eventually chose to begin travelling towards South Africa, with the hope of being able to support her child. Miraculously she was reunited with her husband in Zambia, and together they continued the journey to South Africa where they settled in 2003.

Angelique reflected on how unpredictable life could be: ***"We say we want to do something, but sometimes there is another way that god turns around your life."*** She could never have foreseen having to flee her home and travelling to South Africa without even owning a passport.

Through her travels, Angelique became multilingual and learnt to speak seven languages: Kinyarwanda, Swahili, Lingala, French, English, Shona and Kinyanjui. Her first job in South Africa was as a car guard at a shopping mall. After completing a nursing course, she managed to find a job as a caregiver at an old age home, saving money to further her education. The United Nations Human Rights Commission for Refugees also assisted her with tuition fees to study at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). In 2017, Angelique received her permanent residence in South Africa and her parents also joined her in Cape Town. As of 2021, her son was completing his master's degree at CPUT and her daughter intended to study psychology after matriculating from high school.

Although very painful, Angelique chooses to share her story with university students, school learners and church groups. She feels it is crucial for everyone to hear about and to learn lessons from what happened in Rwanda. Despite what she went through she affirms that she ***"never lost hope because I knew that through the grace of god, he held my future."***

SYLVESTRE SENDACYEYE

BORN 1981, RUGARAMA

“I can smell burning flesh, I can hear crying children. I can feel the fire.”

Sylvestre Sendacyeye was born to a Tutsi family in Rugarama, a village in the Gikongoro province of Rwanda. His father, Emanuel, was a farmer and a respected village elder, and his mother, Katharina, was a housewife. Sylvestre enjoyed a happy childhood with his sister and six brothers. His days were filled with activities; going to school, helping his father look after the cows and proudly caring for his own little coffee ‘plantation’. He remembered his village fondly: ***“When I tell my children about it, I don’t want to think of the destruction and the smell of blood, I just want to think of the beauty, of the fresh air, the rain, the mist, the sound of the river flowing, the cows. I want to remember what it was like then, not what it was like during the genocide.”***

Sylvestre was a good student but recalled that his teachers would single out the Tutsi children in class. ***“At school the Hutu kids would bully the Tutsi kids, they would laugh at them and call them names and the teachers, who were mostly Hutu themselves, did nothing, they would just stand aside and watch this happen.”***

On 7 April 1994, the day after President Habyarimana was killed, Sylvestre’s mother felt it was too dangerous for the children to attend school. His father met with the other Tutsi village elders and together they agreed that they should all find safety at a church in the nearby village of Kaduha. At the time, two of Sylvestre’s brothers were away from home. The rest of the family left at night for Kaduha, walking slowly with the other Tutsi villagers. They had to leave Sylvestre’s grandmother behind, along with other elders from the village. They would never see her again.

Sylvestre and his family reached the church in the early hours of the morning. They found hundreds of Tutsi already gathered there, guarded by the Hutu militia. The villagers from Rugarama were housed in schoolrooms as the church itself was already full. Conditions were dire as there was no food or water. Sylvestre even remembered stealing a banana to share with his family. One of the international aid agencies had brought rice for them, but the militia refused to distribute it. Despite this cruelty, Sylvestre shared a moment of kindness and courage he experienced: ***"There was a German nun at the church, Milgitha [Kosser], not many of them stayed, but she did; she wanted to help us. She gave us rice."***

On 20 April, the captured Tutsi were told to dig trenches for latrines and although they were suspicious about the real purpose of this task, they complied. The next day, Sylvestre awoke to the sounds of grenade explosions and saw that the militia was burning down the church. Emanuel joined the other Tutsi men in trying to form a barrier between the church and the school so as to defend themselves from the Hutu militia. However, Emanuel was killed in the fighting. Katharina grabbed her children and ran to hide in the vestry of the church, but the militia broke down the church door and attacked everyone inside. Sylvestre was hit over the head with an *ubuhari,* a large stick with nails on the side. He lost consciousness and fell to the ground, where his attackers left him for dead with the rest of his family who had been murdered.

"The 21st of April will go down in history as a day of blood and tears and cries and hatred. I cannot say more, how can I describe such a day? I can smell burning flesh, I can hear crying children. I can feel the fire."

Sylvestre regained consciousness in the evening and tried to escape. However, he wasn't able to get very far due to the roadblocks set up by the militia around the church. He was found hiding in a field but managed to persuade his captor that he was actually a Hutu. His captor took him to a nearby hospital, where his head wounds were treated. He spent several months in the hospital due to the severity of his injuries, and after the genocide he was moved by the Red Cross to an orphanage in neighbouring Burundi.

In 1995, Sylvestre returned to Rwanda. Miraculously he discovered that his two brothers, Alex and Alphonse, had also survived the genocide. Sylvestre and Alphonse went to live in Kigali with their cousin Augustine, a soldier of the RPF. Augustine insisted that Sylvestre finish his schooling.

In the late 1990s, Sylvestre started suffering from epileptic seizures and was sent to South Africa for medical treatment. During one of his visits back home to Rwanda, he met his Ugandan-born wife, Nora, who already had a five-year-old son. Sylvestre was so happy to have a family again. They married and had three more children. ***"I lost my family in the genocide; they were killed. Now a new family has been born, my family. This is my family now."***

Although Sylvestre continues to suffer from seizures, he finds joy and fulfilment in his family. ***"Family is something so important; it gives my life meaning. I believe that a person is created through his family; a person is able to draw strength from them. They make you smile and laugh and give you a reason to keep living. Most of all they make a person forgive. A person cannot be a person alone, he is formed and he is made safe by his family."***

EMMANUEL MWEZI

BORN 1985, NYAGATARE

“I don’t have anything against the Hutu: I’m alive because of them. I survived because of a Hutu man.”

Emmanuel Mwezi was born in Nyagatare in the Rukomo district of northeastern Rwanda. He was one of 14 children, with nine brothers and four sisters. His father, Zacharia, worked for a construction company building houses, hospitals and schools, and his mother, Consolata, looked after the family and helped on their farm. Zacharia and Consolata had met and married in Uganda, where they had lived as refugees. In 1977 they decided to return to their homeland, Rwanda.

Emmanuel recalled a happy childhood playing with his siblings. He fondly remembered their father bringing home gifts at the end of the month, which he awarded to those who had done well at school. The children studied hard and also helped with household chores such as fetching water and collecting food from nearby farms.

When the civil war started in October 1990, Zacharia was apprehended by Hutu soldiers who accused him of being a member of the RPF. As Consolata was away at the time, Emmanuel’s 14-year-old brother, Mike, was left in charge of the family. When Mike went to visit Zacharia at the district headquarters, Zacharia warned him not to come back to see him and asked him to take care of his siblings. The children would never see their father again. Later they would find out that their father had been burnt alive in the military barracks. The mayor, a friend of the family, had been involved in his murder.

Soon after Zacharia was detained, Hutu militia came and ransacked the family home. Emmanuel, his older sister and younger brother fled to Kigali while his other family members hid in a nearby Catholic church. Consolata eventually heard about what had happened to her husband, but on returning to an empty home she too ended up fleeing to the church to hide.

Emmanuel's family moved to Murambi, north of Kigali, where they tried to start a new life. After the loss of Zacharia their financial situation was tenuous, but they were fortunate to receive assistance from extended family members.

On the morning of 7 April 1994, Emmanuel and a friend were collecting wood near the lake, when they noticed the arrival of small fishing boats filled with desperate people, some with no clothes, all crying and screaming. These people were fleeing the genocide that had begun in their villages.

Consolata realised that she needed to take immediate action to protect her family from the Hutu militia. She decided to trust a Hutu friend who had offered to hide her and the four children who were living at home at that time. They took all their possessions with them; nothing was left behind and nobody knew where they'd gone. The room where they were hidden was tiny and they couldn't go outside for fear of being discovered. Two weeks later they had to move in the middle of the night to their friend's mother's house as their hiding place had been discovered. The very next day the militia arrived to kill them only to find that they had already fled.

Not long after, Consolata realised that their new hiding place had also been exposed and, although tired of running, the family split up and hid in different areas near the lake. Emmanuel and his brother hid amongst the reeds in the cold and rain avoiding the many hippos there, and were lucky to survive the killings happening around them. After two nights they heard bombing nearby and decided to return to their home where they found their mother and sister hiding. Consolata told them that she wasn't prepared to run anymore and was willing to meet her fate. Throughout the day the bombing continued: ***"I was scared to death. So, we sat there, sat there, sat there, bombs, bombs, boom, boom."***

One night in early July, as the RPF advanced and the Hutu militia fled, Tutsi survivors came out of their hiding places and grouped together to defend themselves. Emmanuel followed a group of people, hoping for safety in numbers. The group entered a small village and hearing gunshots Emmanuel and a friend started running through a banana plantation towards a church. His friend fell into a deep hole and Emmanuel ran back to the village to get help, but it became too dangerous to return for his friend. Throughout the night he heard gunshots and was petrified that they were coming from where his mother and siblings were hiding. The next morning, he discovered that the RPF had liberated the area and that everyone was safe. He returned to his friend who was badly injured but had thankfully survived. Emmanuel lost many family members in the genocide including his pregnant sister, Alice, and her family.

After the genocide, Emmanuel and his surviving family members lived in a refugee camp in Kayonza district. They later returned to their village and Emmanuel went back to school. In 1998 they moved to the farm where he was born. The house was ruined, but they repaired it and learnt to live side by side with the very neighbours who were involved in his father's murder.

Emmanuel graduated from high school and was given the opportunity to go to Europe and study further. In 2008 he continued his studies in Johannesburg and graduated in computer science from Monash University. Today, Emmanuel is married with a daughter and is living in Kigali. ***"If we forget, that will be the end of survivors ... it's up to survivors to keep this memory alive, because that's who we are and there's no way we can run away from that."***

"I don't have anything against the Hutu: I'm alive because of them. I survived because of a Hutu man." This is how Emmanuel reflected on his experiences as a young boy during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda.

CHRISTINE NIWEMFURA

BORN 1985, GITARAMA

“In my heart I would wonder why my father had chosen to be Tutsi.”

Christine Niwemfura was born in Gitarama, in the southern province of Kamonyi, Rwanda. She was the eldest of eight children and lived with her father, a farmer, and her mother, who looked after the house and family. She had a large extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles and many cousins. Every Sunday, she recalled that her mother would take all the children for services at the Catholic church. It was a place of safety where both Tutsi and Hutu were able to pray side by side.

When Christine was around eight years old, she recalled her teacher asking if she was a Hutu or a Tutsi. As Christine didn’t know the answer, she had to check with her parents. Christine was one of only two Tutsi children in her class and subsequently faced humiliation and discrimination at school. ***“They would count us at school and tell us that the Tutsi must stand up … one time my Tutsi classmate fell ill, and she could not attend the class, so I had to stand up alone as a Tutsi. I would feel ashamed of being a Tutsi … and in my heart I would wonder why my father had chosen to be Tutsi, because when I was standing, everyone was booing me and I would feel that to be a Tutsi is a sin.”*** At that age, Christine could not understand that being a Tutsi was not a choice.

When the genocide began in April 1994, Christine's parents initially asked their Hutu friends to hide their children and look after them. However, after a few days, her parents went to fetch the children so that they could all stay together. Christine recalled that soon after, the *Interahamwe* arrived at their home and forced her family to drink vials of poison; the militia members claimed that they did not want to waste their bullets on them. Christine and her family drank the poison, but miraculously nothing happened. When the militia realised this, they began to attack the family with machetes. Christine's pregnant mother was fatally wounded but managed to protect Christine with her body. Christine's younger brother was able to escape during the attack and hide in the tall grass outside the house. Tragically, the rest of the family was murdered.

Once the militia left, Christine and her brother desperately ran towards their uncle's house. They discovered, however, that he and his family had already been killed. Christine and her brother had no option but to return to the house of their Hutu family friends, where they had originally been hiding. Sadly, Christine and her brother were betrayed, and the militia discovered their hiding place. They killed her brother and only spared Christine because she ***"was a girl".*** After this, Christine hid in the bushes and on occasion would return to the Hutu family for refuge. ***"The family hid me again and again and even though in the last days they chased me away because they were afraid for their own lives, they hid me for many days, and I am grateful for that."***

Christine moved from place to place until the end of the genocide. She was then taken to an orphanage in Kigali by a group of RPF soldiers and stayed there until a surviving distant family member found her and invited her to live with them. She felt emotionally numb for a very long time. ***"During the genocide, I didn't cry. I used to see people die: my mother and my father and family, but I didn't cry at that time ... I started to cry after the genocide when I began to think about what happened."***

Christine was the only survivor of her entire family. After the genocide, she went back to school and graduated from high school in Rwanda. She later moved to South Africa where she completed a university degree in business administration. She met her husband, Bonaventure, also a survivor of the genocide, and they started a family in Johannesburg. ***"I will tell my children everything that happened to me during the genocide because when they will grow up they will ask me questions: Where is your mother, where is your father, you don't have parents? Where are your parents?"*** Although the marriage was not successful, Christine has two young daughters of whom she is very proud. She has decided to tell them her painful story when they grow up, so that they will know their heritage.

Twenty years after the genocide, Christine began to share her story with school, university and adult groups. ***"It's important to speak about my story because people need to know about the genocide so that it won't happen again."*** Christine was robbed of her childhood and believes that this should not happen to any child, anywhere in the world.

JOSEPHINE U.

BORN 1984, UNKNOWN PLACE OF BIRTH

“I want to be alone and just reflect upon my history. I will live alone until I die.”

At the age of ten, Josephine (Fifi) faced the horrors of the 1994 genocide all alone. When the genocide began, Fifi’s mother was unable to flee due to an injured leg. Her father carried her mother to stay with nuns, as he believed she would be safe and looked after.

Tragically, Fifi’s mother was betrayed to the *Interahamwe* by one of the nuns and her own godmother. When the *Interahamwe* first arrived, they cut off her mother’s legs. They returned the next day to cut off her breasts and on the third day, they killed her.

Meanwhile, Fifi and her father tried to flee the country by travelling through the Ruhango province en route to Burundi. They were separated on the journey and her father was captured and burnt to death. Fifi remained with a group of fellow refugees who continued to flee towards Burundi. One day, at a roadblock, she saw a few children she knew as family friends and went to play with them. The children’s father took her back home with them and protected her for the remainder of the genocide.

After the genocide, Fifi believed that she would always live alone, since she had lost the only people who would ever care for her, her parents. Her personal loss led her to work with and support orphaned children who, like her, had suffered without the love and guidance of their parents. In her testimony she reflected on how she wanted to ***"help them to overcome those obstacles I have overcome".*** Fifi graduated from law school in 2011 and has since been working as an advocate for children.

Despite this inspiring work, when asked about her future, Fifi answered with resignation: ***"[I am] like someone who is living in a fire. When you're in fire you don't know if you will find water. So I feel I am alone in this world."*** She has also found it incredibly challenging to reconcile with the immense trauma and cruelty she endured in her past. ***"Whenever I see them [Hutu] I remember everything ... They hurt me, they left me all alone ... I'm not part of them because nobody came to reconcile with me. When we cry, they make fun of us, saying, 'Haven't they finished crying yet?' I want to be alone and just reflect upon my history. I will live alone until I die."***

AGNES M.

UNKNOWN DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH

“Get out of my house, why did you choose to marry a Tutsi?!”

Agnes was born to a Hutu family. When the genocide began in 1994, Agnes was married to a Tutsi man. For this reason, and this reason alone, her home was burnt down, she was raped by militia forces and her husband and three of her six children were murdered. Following these traumatic events, Agnes tried to seek refuge with her aunt, who refused to hide her. Agnes recalled her shouting, ***“Get out of my house, why did you choose to marry a Tutsi?!”*** She would later find safety at the home of a cousin until the end of the genocide.

Through the *Gacaca* court, Agnes met Alexander, one of the perpetrators who had helped destroy her house and murder her family. Alexander participated in the justice process, giving details of what had happened and who else had been involved. He also asked Agnes for her forgiveness, which she gave him, explaining that it ***“was good for me because I experienced so many problems which left me … traumatised, and that’s why I must forgive. Because that gives me strength and that gives me life.”***

After the genocide, Agnes started working with other Hutu and Tutsi women to prepare food for various reconciliation workshops in the country. ***“I have to be strong so that I may forgive, so that I may continue living. The strength allows me to take care of orphans. Because now we are the women and the men of our families. We are parents of diverse Rwandan families.”***

XAVIER NGABO

BORN 1974, RUGESHI

“My head and heart were empty. There was nothing left … it was as though my life had ended.”

Xavier Ngabo was born in Rugeshi, in the Musanze district of northern Rwanda. He was the eldest child of Eduard and Beatrice and had three siblings. His four cousins lived with them and they were all rowdy and happy children. Eduard was originally a cattle farmer but sold most of his herd to become a dressmaker. Beatrice looked after the family and also bought and sold small items. There was always enough to eat but not much money for anything else.

It was only when Xavier started to go to school that he became aware of any differences between Hutu and Tutsi. He recalled that during class registration on the first day of school, the teachers separated the Hutu and Tutsi children. Xavier, however, didn’t know whether he was a Hutu or a Tutsi. The teachers, who were mostly Hutu, told him to ask his parents when he got home. Yet, when he posed this question to his father, Eduard was furious: ***“What kind of teaching is this – tell them you’re a Tutsi.”***

Anti-Tutsi propaganda was rife during this time and Xavier recalled that the Hutu and Tutsi children even played separately. Even though he was a bright child, as a Tutsi, he was not allowed to attend secondary school, and began working as a labourer on the family land instead. One day, Eduard announced that Xavier would be sent to school in Zaire (Democratic Republic of Congo), where his sister lived. At the age of 14, he made his way to Masisi, Zaire, paying bribes to officials throughout his journey. He loved his life there and excelled at school, returning to his home in Rwanda only during the holidays.

In 1990, after the start of the civil war in Rwanda, Xavier received a letter from Eduard telling him not to return. Shortly after, Eduard and one of his brothers were imprisoned and tortured as suspected RPF members. Xavier's uncle was murdered; Eduard was miraculously released. Xavier did not return home for his school holidays and in 1991 he received the devastating news that Eduard had been murdered by Hutu neighbours, who had been close friends of the family. The whereabouts of his body was unknown. Beatrice wrote to Xavier and implored him not to return. Xavier recalled his immense grief and helplessness, ***"I sat next to the road with the letter in my hand. My head and heart were empty. There was nothing left ... it was as though my life had ended."***

Xavier decided to leave school and join the RPF. He arrived at the training camp on the border of Uganda and reunited with his uncle William. They took an oath to ensure that Eduard's killers would not go unpunished. ***"We knew who they were, and my uncle was a witness. We were going to take them to prison. That was when the RPF became my father and my mother. I gave them my body and my energy."***

On 6 April 1994, when President Habyarimana's plane was shot down and the genocide began, Xavier knew in his heart that his family would never survive. Indeed, they were all subsequently murdered. After liberation he returned with the RPF to Gitarama in central Rwanda and worked as an army clerk. He was given leave to return to his home and took with him a military escort to arrest Eduard's killers. He was devastated to find that there was nothing left of his home and that the land had been given to their neighbours, including one of his father's killers, Boniface and his family. He found out that Boniface was already in prison for several murders, including that of his father.

At 30 years old, Xavier decided to finish his schooling. He matriculated with five distinctions, but sadly had no money to go to university. He made his way to South Africa where he started a small trading business in Johannesburg. During this time, he also volunteered at the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre, sharing his testimony with many groups.

When Xavier shared his testimony with the students of St Stithians Girls' College, he expressed his wish to discover what had happened to his family. One of those learners, Bianca Biehler, recalled hearing his story when she was 14 years old: ***"Before us stood this kind, humble man. And a survivor ... With tears in our eyes we were deeply moved by all that Xavier had endured. Xavier had lost his entire family before and during the genocide."*** Between 2009 and 2010, Bianca and her classmates organised a fundraising project, which would eventually raise enough money to allow Xavier to return to Rwanda.

In 2009, with the help of the St Stithians learners, Xavier went home and was able to uncover the fate of his parents through the *Gacaca* court. When he located and exhumed his mother's remains, she was still wearing her rosary and holding the key to her house. He donated both of these items to the permanent exhibition of the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre. On 9 May 2010, the remains of Beatrice and Eduard were buried in one coffin at the Mukamira Memorial Site. Xavier chose to remain in Rwanda and work in the field of education and memory.

THÉOGÈNE NIWENSHUTI

BORN 1977, KIGALI

“One of the ways that has helped me to start the journey of engaging such difficult memory is the creative medium of movement, song, poetry, dance, art making.”

Théogène Niwenshuti lost over 100 family members during the 1994 genocide. His father, Elie, was murdered in a mental hospital in Ndera, where his family had worked and had been hiding in April 1994.

Théogène believed that it was crucial to share his harrowing experiences from that time, but found it challenging to put into words the extent of the violence and trauma that he endured.

“I know at least for sure that in order to prevent similar violence and atrocities from happening again, to heal and help bring about sustainable peace, we have to find ways to engage such wounded and wounding experiences and related memories. One of the ways that has helped me to start the journey of engaging such difficult memory is the creative medium of movement, song, poetry, dance, art making.”

On 3 April 2002, while Théogène was sitting alone near the memorial site of the National University of Rwanda, he suddenly started singing to himself. The words that had eluded him until then came pouring out into a song he titled, "*Oya Ntibikongere* – No, never again". He dedicated the song ***"to all survivors, and to everyone contributing to healing, peace and prevention of war and genocide in Africa and the world."***

Oya Ntibikongere (No, never again)

You saw blood and darkness
Where there used to be milk and happiness
Where there used to be wealth
Now it is poverty and danger to health
You saw your people losing humanity
Evil overloaded conscience and made it empty
Evil overlapping your culture
But nothing was done to stop the fire
So-called enlightened in sciences, educated, civilized and so-called free
Destroyed you instead of saving us *ayiwe*

Ayiwe
Rwanda oya (Rwanda no)
Oya ntibikongere (No, never again)
Hangariza ubumwe n'amahoro (Strive for unity and peace)
Utere imbere ube rebero ry'ingero (Achieve growth and serve as example)
Amasomo n'amasoko ya nili (Lessons and sources of the Nile)
Bisakare afurika no ku isi (May they spread across Africa and the world)
Ayiwe

Afrika oya (Africa no)
Oya ntibikongere (no, don't ever let it happen again)
Komeza utwaze udahuga afrika (Keep striving, don't allow anything to distract you Africa)
Twese tugusigasire duhe ikirezi kwanda (Together let's support you and allow the best in you to keep growing)
Hangariza umurimo n'urukundo (Keep hardworking and compassion)
Urwanye kwikubira ibirwara n'inzara (Fight against greed/ selfishness, diseases and hunger)
Ntakabuza imbere hawe ni heza (No matter what your future will be beautiful)

Ntakabuza imbere hawe ni heza (No matter what your future will be beautiful)
Mbasezeyeho mbasaba yemwe (I say goodbye still asking you all)
Ntakabuza imbere hawe ni heza (No matter what your future will be beautiful)
Kwitaba iyi mpuruza (To respond to this pressing call)
Ntakabuza imbere hawe ni heza (No matter what your future will be beautiful)
Yego imbere hawe ni heza (Yes, your future will be beautiful)

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