

100 Days of Genocide in Rwanda

by Jacqueline Murekatete

Introduction: Rwanda is a small, mountainous and landlocked country in east-central Africa with a population of approximately seven and a half million people. Its neighbors include the Congo to the west and Tanzania to the east. Most of the workforce is involved in agriculture and major products include coffee, tea, and bananas. Approximately 55% of the people are Roman Catholic, almost 20% are Protestant, and about 25% practice indigenous religions. Its largest ethnic groups are the Hutu (80%) and the Tutsi (19%). The national literacy rate is about 50%. Rwanda was first visited by European explorers in 1854 and became a German colony in 1890. Following World War 1 it was given to Belgium as a League of Nations mandate and it remained under Belgium's control until it secured independence in 1962.

I was born on November 8, 1984, in a district of Rwanda known as Gitarama. We lived in a small village where both of my parents were farmers. They grew crops such as yams, peas and beans. My parents had seven children. I was the second oldest.

Rwanda is a small country in central Africa with fewer people than New York City. Most Rwandans are members of one of two ethnic groups. They are either Hutus or Tutsis. The Hutus are the majority. My family and I belonged to the minority group, the Tutsis. There are stereotypes that Tutsis are usually tall and have long noses, while the Hutus are short with broader features, but if you are a foreigner it is not easy to tell the difference between Hutus and Tutsis. We speak the same language, live in the same villages and attend the same schools and churches. Most people in Rwanda are Roman Catholic.

Tutsi and Hutu

If you were born in Rwanda, you always knew whether you were a Tutsi or a Hutu. When you were registered for school, it was required that your ethnic group be listed. One of the major adult identification cards also listed a person's ethnicity. There has been little intermarriage between Hutus and Tutsis. A child's ethnicity is determined by his or her father's ethnic groups. For example, if a Hutu man married a Tutsi woman, the children were considered Hutus. My father never taught us to hate Hutus and since we went to the same schools, my brothers, sisters and I had both Hutu kids and Tutsi kids as friends.

According to history, the Tutsis were cow herders in the distant past and the Hutus were farmers. As a monarchy, Rwanda was ruled by Tutsi kings. Our country became a European colony after World War I and the colonial power, Belgium, started the ID system. They did this to divide Rwandans and make it easier to conquer and govern our country. European colonists helped Hutus rebel against the Tutsi kings when the monarchy demanded independence. Bloodshed between the Tutsis and Hutus started in 1959 as Rwanda prepared for independence. Some Tutsis were killed and others fled to neighboring countries. The new government was controlled by the Hutu majority and there was discrimination against Tutsis in public schools and public jobs. At the beginning of the 1990s, a rebel group known as the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) started to fight against the government. It was led by Tutsis who had fled the country after the trouble in 1959 and wanted to return to their homeland. However, before 1994 there was no trouble in my village. I had never experienced any sort of violence between the Hutus and the Tutsis.

In April, 1994, the President of Rwanda, who was Hutu, fled to a neighboring country to negotiate peace with the RPF. On his way back, his plane was shot and he died. The government accused Tutsis of being spies for the RPF and murdering the president. I believe the president's death was just an excuse used by the government to justify genocide against the Tutsis and that the attacks had been planned in advance.

One of the first steps in their campaign was the dehumanization of Tutsi people. On a daily basis, radio broadcasts called us “inyenzi” or cockroaches, inciting our Hutu neighbors to start killing us. A few days later, we heard about Tutsis being massacred in other parts of Rwanda. In my village, we thought these things were just rumors. We could not believe it was actually happening.

A couple of days later, spring break ended and it was time for me to go back to school. I attended school in my grandmother’s village and I stayed there with my mom’s mother. My father was afraid to let me go there because the Hutus in neighboring villages had begun setting up barricades in the streets where they were checking ID cards and attacking Tutsis using machetes and clubs. In the villages, the genocide was carried out by machetes and clubs and any other weapons that the killers had.

When I got to my grandmother’s village, I noticed that things had changed. Some days my cousins and I would go to the nearby hills and from there we would see smoke rising from nearby villages. Tutsis were being killed and their homes burned. About a week later, the kids realized that school was not going to start and the adults started to face the reality that our lives were in danger. We needed to flee and find a place to hide if we had any hope of survival. About 10 o’clock one morning, my grandmother and I were in the fields getting potatoes for lunch. We heard people screaming and saw them running. Smoke was rising from houses not far from where we lived. Hutus had started killing Tutsis in our village.

Genocide

My grandmother and I went back to the house where we met some of my uncles, cousins and other relatives. We decided to run to the County Administrative Office. During the genocide, the most common places to seek refuge were government offices where we thought authorities would protect us or in churches since people

believed that nobody would enter a church and commit murder. Little did we know that there would be a time when neither the church nor the county office would provide protection, that government officials would assist the killers and that some priests and nuns would join the perpetrators of the genocide. We stayed at the county office for a few days. At night, Hutu mobs would come with weapons to wake us up and Tutsi men would go out to try to defend us. Each night there were casualties on both sides, but mostly on the Tutsi side because we were outnumbered.

My uncle, who was a doctor, lived in one of the cities of Rwanda. One night, he sent an ambulance, with a driver who was a Hutu, to pick up my grandmother and me. We packed the few things that we had and the driver hid us in the back of the ambulance with clothes and other stuff on top of us. At the barricade, he told the Hutus that he was taking the ambulance back to the hospital. They believed the driver and did not search it. After the genocide I learned that a few days after we left the county office, all of the Tutsis there had been massacred. Most of them were my relatives.

When we arrived in the city, my uncle paid a Hutu neighbor to hide us. During this time I had no contact whatsoever with my father, my mother or my brothers and sisters. There was no way that I could go back to my village without being killed. One morning, a Hutu mob came to the house where my grandmother and I were hidden. They stormed the door, came in screaming, and demanded to know what we were doing there. I remember seeing bloody clubs and thinking that our lives were over. The Hutu who was hiding us lied to them, claiming that my grandmother’s husband was a Hutu and that she had come to be near the hospital to get some treatment. They actually left us alone, but the Hutu who was hiding us told us that we had just been lucky and would have to leave because they would mostly like come back the next day. There was an orphanage nearby operated by Italian priests and my grandmother decided to place me there for protection. It was only taking in

children because it was too dangerous for them to hide adults. The soldiers or the killers were stationed at the entrance and would not allow the Italian priests to protect Tutsi men or women. At first, I refused to go because I did not want to leave my grandmother. But she finally persuaded me to go by telling me she would find someone to hide her, the killing would soon be over, and she would come to get me. Finally, the Hutu brought me to the orphanage.

The Orphanage

I spent most of the 100 days of genocide at the orphanage. Each day we had more kids arrive whose parents had been killed and it grew very crowded. Some of the children had hands or arms cut off by the killers. Sometimes parents dropped off their children for safety and then they would try to find a place to hide from the Hutus. There were many instances where I witnessed Tutsi men and women being dragged to their deaths by the killers as they tried to climb the fences of the orphanage. In the orphanage, little children cried every night for their parents. We did not have enough food in the orphanage and many children died from malnutrition or diseases that spread because of the overcrowding. It got to the point that the priests built a cemetery inside the orphanage. Every day or so we all went to the cemetery, the priests would say a prayer, and they would bury a child. It became almost like a daily routine. I was fortunate to never get really sick. Every night, I prayed that the whole thing would be over soon and then I would go back home and see my family.

Finally the RPF soldiers captured the Rwanda capital and the war and genocide were almost over. However, we were still in danger. Once, Hutu soldiers who were trying to escape, came to the orphanage and told the Italian priests that they were going to finish the job and exterminate all the Tutsis, including the children and babies. They herded us into the cafeteria and made us sing their victory songs. Soldiers walked up the aisle in middle of the cafeteria pointing guns at us and pushing around the priests. The

children cried and we thought, “they are going to kill us.” But the priests convinced them we could do them no harm and offered them money to leave us. The day after the Hutu soldiers left, the RPF reached the orphanage and stopped the genocide. The RPF soldiers then loaded us into trucks and brought us to a refuge camp where we stayed in tents. There was not enough food or clean water in the camp and children continued to die. After a month, they brought us back to the orphanage. I was almost ten years old when all of this happened. I do not know how I managed to escape the killers in the several instances when I came face to face with them. I believe that God was responsible for my safety.

At this point, the children who were lucky enough to have a relative who survived the 100 days of genocide started to leave the orphanage. If you were very lucky, your mother and father came to get you. I did not know if my parents were alive or if anyone in my family even knew where I was. Every night I cried and hoped that somebody would come for me. Finally, one morning, the priests called my name and said that somebody had come for me. I started crying tears of joy and wondered who had come for me. It turned out to be my cousin, my mother’s sister’s daughter. She and her father had managed to survive, but I later learned that the rest of her family, her mother, brothers and sisters were all dead. They had been burned alive in their home by their Hutu neighbors.

My uncle, the one who had sent the ambulance to rescue my grandmother and me from the county office, had managed to survive and he sent my cousin to find me. He had dug a hole in one of the rooms of the house of a Hutu man who had agreed to hide him and he stayed in that hole during the genocide. The man who was hiding my uncle would bring him food and water whenever he thought it was safe.

I asked my cousin if she had news of my family or my grandmother; if she knew anything. She knew but she could not tell me. She did not know how I would react

when I learned that they had all been killed. I later learned that my grandmother had been beaten to death. My parents, along with my brothers and sister had all been slaughtered by our Hutu neighbors and their bodies had been thrown into the river near our village.

Soon my uncle arranged for me to live with another uncle in the United States. He felt it would be less painful for me in this country. It was also very dangerous for me to visit my parent's land after the genocide because there were no Tutsis left in our village. I left Rwanda at the end of 1995 and I have never returned since then.