

## **The Rwandan Genocide.**

Little did we know that in the Spring Break in April 1994, tragic events were about to start in Rwanda. One of the most politicized Genocide of the 20th Century followed by decades long wars in the Central East Africa region and all kind of human atrocities were about to unfold. For me, as an 11 years old child, it was a normal rainy season in April. I grew up with diversity: I lived with my family in a high class neighborhood where majority of our neighbors were expatriates of different nationalities. For instance, I grew up playing with multinational neighbors kids without speaking the same language. To put things in perspective, my Dad was a career politician: he had co-founded a political party in opposition. That time, my Dad was the Mayor of my city and had just been elected as a member of Parliament. Thus, my house was guarded by the police.

Also, I was a feeble and sickly child who was always surrounded with love. For instance, I had several aunts, uncles and cousins who all showered me with love and gave me special treatments even though I was the oldest child. Theodosia, one of my aunt had five children aged 10 to 2. Every Summer vacation we spent a week at their house and in Easter vacation my cousins spent a week in my house. I used to overhear aunt Theodosia telling my cousins: "Be gentle and kind with Claire she is sick and weak."

Thus, most of my cousins treated me like an egg except my cousin Meddiatrice ( Meddy) as she always tested boundaries. I did not know that I was getting all these special treatments because I was a child dying of AIDS.

**April 4, 1994**

As we were accustomed to, during the Easter vacation in April 1994 my cousins were spending a week at my house. On their third day, I had a fight with my cousin Meddy and I claimed that she had beaten me up and I lost a tooth. When my uncle Vincent learned that we were fighting he decided to pick up my cousins on April 4, 1994. .

" I warned you Meddy! You should be gentle with Claire . She is sick and weak." My uncle Vincent told Meddy.

My other cousins and my young sister teamed up and started crying : " We don't want to go home. Punish Meddy and Claire and let us keep playing."

"Tonton [ uncle] I don't want my cousins to go please , my tooth is just bleeding....I fell that's why.. , it was not Meddy's fault." I pleaded with my uncle Vincent. However, my uncle had already made a decision to take my cousins back to their home . He ordered my cousins to hop in his pick up truck and took them home crying. I hoped we would meet soon and reconcile. This was the last time I saw my cousins as all my 5 cousins , my uncle Vincent and aunt Theodosia were killed by the Tutsi soldiers along with other more than one thousand Hutu refugees in the south of Rwanda in one of the Tutsi rebels revenge operations. I always wonder if at least one of my cousins could have survived have they stayed at my house for the whole week. However, it is hard to tell given my family harrowing journey I am about to share with you.

**April6, 1994**

April 6,1994 was a sunny normal promising day. In fact, the national TV had been broadcasting all day about the Arusha Peace agreement.

Finally, President Habyarimana had signed a peace agreement with the Tutsi rebels [Rwandan Patriotic Front] in Arusha Tanzania. Per Arusha agreement the Tutsi rebels and other political parties in opposition were to cease fighting and share power with the extremist Hutu led government. The extremist Hutu led government had denied any kind of political space to different political opinions for decades. My Dad, a Hutu himself had co-founded an opposition party forcing the extremist Hutu led government to open up the political space. President Habyarimana signing the Arusha Peace agreement was a big relief to ending a four year war between the extremist Hutu led government and the Tutsi rebels. Also, the Arusha agreement signing meant that the extremist Hutu led government was accepting to equitably share power with the opposition. Thus, my Dad was going to take office as an elected member of parliament. By the time we were getting ready to go to bed, we were in anticipation of a more stable country. Around 8 p.m., we heard the gunshots. We were used to hearing guns shots but this time the guns were louder and followed by a huge fire that could be seen in the distance. We could see the fire from our backyard. Remember, my father was the Mayor, so we lived in the Kicukiro District where the Kigali International airport is situated. From our backyard we could see the sky of the airport.

My father as a Mayor of a district where the airport is situated, was one of the first people to receive a phone call " President Habyarimana of Rwanda and President Ntaryamira of Burundi have been assassinated." On their way back from Arusha, unknown people shot the plane that was transporting President Habyarimana of Rwanda and President Ntaryamira of Burundi while the plane was landing at the Kigali International airport.

There was a big silence as we didn't know what was going to happen. In the middle of the night, we began hearing guns again. Our house was located in a valley between Rebero Hill where Tutsi rebels were stationed and Kanombe hill where the airport guarded by the extremist Hutu led government was situated. All nights they were shooting at each other. A heavy rain of gunshots was passing over my house. Through the window the dark night sky looked like there were fireworks. The national radio started broadcasting about the assassination of the Presidents. We were asked to stay home until further notice. The war had started as we slept in my father's bedroom. Dad put mattresses on the windows to protect us from bullets and bombs. Dad didn't sleep. How could he sleep? He listened to the radio all night long.

April 7, 1994

Early morning, we woke up and the killing of Tutsi had already begun. The strange thing was, we were asked to stay inside our homes. In the afternoon we received a visit from the Chief of the UN soldiers. They were camped out at Echole Technique Officielle (ETO), a school in Kicukiro. The UN Chief told my father: "We have information that politicians in opposition are targeted to be eliminated. We are here to evacuate you and your family to take refuge in the UN camp."

My father was a big tall guy. As a child, I always admired his physical strengths and always felt safe in his presence. In his big deep and confident voice, my Dad told the UN chief: "I will stay with my people and try to control the situation... people are angry their president has been assassinated give it few days, people will calm down... things will come back to normal." My Dad thought that as Mayor, he should stay and try to get some control over the situation.

As a Mayor, in normal circumstances, my father was in charge of the Police and other institutions within the District of Kicukiro. So, over the course of his political career, he had friends and enemies. He was targeted as a Hutu who was in opposition of the extremist Hutu led government. My Dad had been openly opposing the President Habyarimana extremist Hutu wing for years. Several times, he had been accused of shielding the Tutsi since the Tutsi rebels began a war from the north of Rwanda in 1990. Our national ID displayed our ethnic groups: Hutu ( Bantu descent) , Tutsi( Nomads descents)and Twa ( Indigenous descent). My father would in fact protect the Tutsi by issuing National IDs with the Hutu ethnic identity.

We stayed home, although, there were gun shots everywhere.. The Interahamwe “Hutu militia” placed barricades in all streets and waited for people . They would request to see people National ID. If it was said “Tutsi”, or the person didn’t have an ID at that time and the person looked tall, had a long nose, and otherwise looked Tutsi, they killed that person at the spot using machetes and clubs. There were piles of bleeding agonizing dying people at the barricades. Another strategy Interahamwe used was to attack homes of people believed to be Tutsi and kill them by machetes, clubs or guns and leave their bodies in the yard.

#### **April 8, 1994**

We stayed home, there were more gun shots and uncertainty of what would happen any minute. Over sudden in afternoon hours , Interahamwe attacked my house searching for my stepmother who was Tutsi. My stepmother was beautiful, almost as tall as my Dad who was 6.3’ tall. She kept her beautiful natural hair, she had a beautiful beaming smile. On top of her impressive natural beauty she was a kind soul. She is the only woman I knew as my Mom.

My Mom died from AIDS complications when I was 5 and I was born with HIV. My stepmother had taken good care of me since I was 7. When Interahamwe were searching for my stepmother [my primary caregiver], I felt like my stomach was ripped out of me. I couldn't imagine why they would even think about killing her.

By then, only two armed police guards were left. They tried to stop the Hutu militia but the Interahamwe were a crowd, they had more guns, machetes and clubs, thus they ended up getting inside the compound.

They were scary chanting: "All Tutsi are the enemy of the country. They have plotted to kill President Habyarimana [the father of the country]. They Hutu militia carried whistles, some wore banana leaves as a crown and had colored their faces to look scary, some had machetes and clubs, other carried guns. Interahamwe kept chanting louder: "Iye tubastembastembe," meaning let us exterminate the Tutsi." They were screaming " Mayor, you are a traitor, you are in opposition and married a Tutsi woman. We are about to kill your wife in your eyes and bring you a Hutu woman." "Let us eliminate the Tutsi. The Hutu militia crowd kept chanting louder inside my home compound getting close to the house front door.

Their chanting was so loud all my tiny being was shaking of fear as I felt the glass windows were shaking too. Before they searched the house, one of our guards helped my stepmother and my sister and me to escape through the "icyanzu", which is a secret gate of entry in the backyard. We escaped and went to knock on the back door of our neighbors who were from Congo. I remember our neighbors were fervent Catholics were terrified and started reciting Rosaries pleading God to save us.

My father stayed home and went out for negotiations. My Dad and police guards tried to convince the Interahamwe that my stepmother was a Hutu mixed with Tutsi. The Interahamwe left with a promise that they will come back to kill my stepmother. "Mayor, we will bring you a Hutu woman to marry."

That night, the policemen who were guarding our house received information that the Interahamwe were planning on searching the homes of expatriates because they believed some Tutsi may be hiding there. We returned home during night. We were hungry. Under these conditions, no one was organized to cook.

#### **April 9, 1994**

We stayed home. My stepmother was scared, her face looked pale and blue, she was constantly shaking. She was trying to hide in the ceiling but she couldn't fit. My father was helpless. By the afternoon, three cars had parked outside of our house. A Hutu Member of Parliament (MP) from my father political party, the Honorable Paul Secyugu and his wife, two sons, two daughters in laws and grand children came to hide in our house. The Honorable Secyugu in state of total panic: "Evariste, Interahamwe killed every body in my mother in law house and burned down her house. I am afraid we are next."

Our house was then accommodating more than 40 people. Some of the people who came with the Honorable Secyugu had wounds from machetes. It was terrible. As a child, I was confused. My dad knew that the house was attacked once by the Interahamwe. They may come back at anytime. But, the Hon. Secyugu, was one of my father's best friends. My father could not deny the Hon. Secyugu and his family refuge.

My father now knew it was time to take refuge to the UN camp. He contacted the UN soldiers and they came to evacuate us. Secyugu family , my family and our maids and other workers at my house , we all packed into our cars and the UN brought more cars. They accompanied all the people in my house to the UN camp at ETO Kicukiro. On our way to the UN camp, I saw dead bodies everywhere on the streets. We passed barricades full of Interahamwe, but they could not stop the UN cars and its convoy.

In the United Nations military camps we found many other refugees, some had wounds from machetes and clubs other were crying for their loved one killed and left on streets and backyards. There was no order at all. Only cries and screams. There was no drinking water, no food and we had limited toilets to serve 4,000+ refugees. Women and children we stayed on the floor in a big hall and men stayed outside. Though the living conditions were miserable we were safe from Interahamwe. The United Nations Military were guarding us with their armored vehicles with heavy guns pointing out placed at both the north and south entrances of the huge camp. There were enough UN soldiers patrolling each mile of the fence surrounding the camp. We were safe.

### **April 11,1994 the Apocalypse**

On our second day in the United Nations military camp, the Belgium contingent of UN soldiers decided to leave the country . Ten Belgium UN soldiers were killed while trying to protect the Prime Minister of Rwanda Ms. Agatha Uwilingiyimana. My dad was the one commissioned to break the news. “ The Belgium UN soldiers have been ordered to leave the country.” My father announced through a megaphone to a crowd of refugees. Before my father finished the sentence, as refugees we began screaming: “ We are going to be killed!”



Some of the refugees laid down in the streets in hopes that the UN trucks would be afraid to leave. We begged the United Nations Military to stay but they were decided to leave the people of Rwanda. Instead, the UN Chief asked expatriates to come forward to be taken to the airport as they had to leave the country immediately. The United Nations Military came to my Dad and asked him to come along with his family to be rescued to Belgium. "I cannot leave my people" replied my Dad. As Refugees we kept screaming to the UN Military "we are going to be killed, please do not leave!" The cries and screams didn't help. In less than one hour, all of the Belgium contingent of UN soldiers left the camp. We were left on our own, helpless, and in the hands of killers.