

Testimony of Valentina Izibagiza

This is the testimony of Valentina Izibagiza, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide. She was 11 years old in 1994, at the beginning of the Rwandan genocide.

Before the genocide, I lived with my parents, four brothers and three sisters in Kibungo which is near Nyarubuye. We were a happy family and lucky children who didn't want for anything. I was third in the family, and I was in at school in primary three. We are Tutsi and we had many friends and neighbours who were Hutus.

On 7th April, the death of Rwanda's President Habyarimana was announced on the radio which greatly worried my parents. The following days, fires were burning in the neighbourhood, and the army came and killed some Tutsis in the local market place. Then we heard that the killing of Tutsis had begun in Rwanda's capital Kigali. On the 12th April, we heard that one of our Tutsi neighbours was attacked and murdered.

We knew what this meant for us Tutsis. Several people adults went to see the local mayor, Sylvester Gacumbitsi. He was a Hutu mayor but when he advised that Tutsis should go to the Catholic Church for sanctuary, everyone took him at his word. After all this, as my parents told me, this is where Tutsis found sanctuary, in previous attacks, in the 50s, 60s and 70s.

We arrived in the church on the 13th April to find that the priests had left so it was 'everyone for himself.' We had no food or water, but at least we had shelter and we were safe. Or so we thought. Now we know that around 3,000 Tutsis sought refuge in this church.

At 3pm on the afternoon of the 15th April we heard the sound of gun shots. Some people ran as soon as they heard the firing, but they were immediately gunned down and killed by the *interahamwe*, the Hutu militia who were very close. Soon the church was encircled, and the militia was shooting at everyone. Inside the church it was chaos as everyone ran around, screaming, trying to find a place to hide. Originally I'd been with my mother and brother but we became separated in the hysteria which ensued.

The church had lots of little rooms off the main church for storage and for the priests that lived there, so many people hid in here. Just as I'd crouched down in a corner, Gacumbitsi appeared. He had a microphone with him, and he shouted at us, "We are the *interahmawe* and we're about to eliminate every Tutsi so that in the future no-one will even know what a Tutsi looked like". He added, 'If anyone is hiding in this church because of a mistake, because really he or she is a Hutu, they should tell me now.' After a few seconds a boy of about seven or eight stood up. "I am a Hutu," he said. Of course everyone knew that he wasn't Hutu. Two *interahmwe* soldiers ran forward and beat him with machetes so fiercely that his body went flying up in the air, and came down in several pieces. I sat watching all this terrified, as everyone screamed, begging to be saved.

I'd been hiding in a small cubby hole quite near the entrance of the church. I think it was so small that nobody bothered to check to see if anyone would be hiding there. Sometimes the militia would just take a child and throw it at the wall. Or if they were killing people with machetes they'd throw them so that some fell very close to and almost on top of me as I lay

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crouched hiding. Towards the end of the day when many people were killed more men came and stuck knives in those who lay wounded to make sure they were dead.

By this time, I was lying underneath several dead people, and they thought that I too was dead. That night all you could hear was people wailing. The survivors wandered around discovering who was dead and who the killers hadn't quite managed to kill. I crawled out from beneath some dead bodies, and tried to find my parents but I couldn't find anyone from my family. The next day, the killers returned and the same slaughter happened all over again. It's impossible to tell you how terrible it was.

Three days after the first killing had begun, on 16th April, another group of killers came, this time led by Antoine who had been our neighbour and a friend of our family. As Antoine and his companions passed me by, I held my breath. Later that day, when it seemed that almost everyone was dead, the *interahamwe* brought their dogs which began eating the dead. That was horrible. When the dogs came near me, I swiped at them and they went off to someone else. But some soldiers walked around checking exactly who was left, and they dragged out 15 people including me.

I knew one of the soldiers, whose name was Fredina. I begged him, "Can you find it in your heart to forgive me for being Tutsi? Please spare me." He spat at me, and said "Is this a hospital that I should forgive you? But I'm not going to smear myself with your blood. I'm going to ask someone else to kill you." He gestured to Antoine, our other neighbour.

"I'm going to kill you," he said, and I put up my hand to protect my head from his machete. Then he began smashing my hands with a clubbed stick, so that my fingers were broken and my skull was bleeding and the pain was terrible. After that he beat me some more on my shoulders and then again on my head, which was agonising and soon the pain was so terrible, that I knew no more. I had passed out.

I stayed among the dead in the Church at Nyarubuye for 43 days without food and only holy water or rain water. Now I'm not sure how I survived. I do remember that in the first few days I was in terrible pain, from the wounds on my head, but then I became like a log; it was as if I couldn't feel and I could barely move, except to crawl out to drink rain water.

During those days, the dogs would come round to eat people, but they became scared of me, so they never came into the room where I lay.

On the 26th May a man appeared who lived near the church. His name I now know was Caliste and when he caught sight of me, he wasn't sure whether I was dead or alive. He brought some food and threw it to me, and then he returned with a white journalist, a *mzungo*. He was a Frenchman who'd been making a documentary, about the genocide and he'd been filming all the dead bodies at what I later learnt was the massacre of Nyarubuye when 3,000 people were killed.

Now I am 19, but I feel a lot older. I live with a cousin, who had gone to Kenya, before the war, but now he's returned, and I'm studying at school. Now the church at Nyarubuye has gone back to being a proper church, and I took part in Fergal Keane's film when he returned to find out what had happened to the survivors.

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Last summer I went to Arusha to testify at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), where I could see Gacumbitsi. I knew him but of course he didn't know me. He looked fat and healthy and he wore a smart suit with a tie, and he looked contented. I was terrified, and then I felt very angry. That gave me the courage to speak and tell my story. He didn't seem remotely concerned at what I had to say. Then his lawyer asked me questions which made me both scared and furious. What right had they to question my credibility in this way, after what I had suffered? My testimony at the international court brought me no relief. All it did was to make me relive the horror. To me it didn't feel like justice; it just made me relive the horror of what happened in the Church at Nyarubuye.

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