

Perpetrators, Victims & Rescuers: 1994 Genocide in Rwanda

“Mass violence and genocide do not occur by accident. They are caused by human will, and they can be prevented by human will.”

- Lt. General Romeo Dallaire, Commander, UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda

Dallaire implies a choice; people could choose to help, to do nothing, to betray or even to kill. The Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Centre is a place of education that examines human behaviour in different circumstances, such as genocide, and the consequences of such choices. Personal stories help to break down the sheer scale of genocide to make it accessible to study and understand. This paper looks at moral dilemmas and choices faced by perpetrators, upstanders, victims and survivors during the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda.

Between 7 April and 4 July 1994 more than 800 000 people were systematically murdered in a nationwide genocide that targeted the Tutsi population. Extremist Hutu were responsible for the killing. Alexander and Gregoire, are two examples of genocide perpetrators. When interviewed, each of them responded differently as to what motivated them to become perpetrators.

Alexander describes his involvement in the killing of Agnes’s husband, three of their six children and the burning of her house. Agnes’s family were his neighbours and friends. He admits, that had he seen Agnes and the other three children, he would have killed them as well. He justifies his actions saying that he was following government orders and his Elders, and that Hutu resisters were being killed, so he did it to survive. Alexander was not imprisoned; he cooperated with the Gacaca courts and helped Agnes to rebuild her home.

Gregoire explains that he was head of his district’s militia responsible for the killing of 8 000 Tutsi in his area. Even though he did not personally kill anyone, he admits to brainwashing those under him. He believes that “a sin is personal” and accepts full responsibility for his actions. Gregoire is serving a life sentence.

Alexander’s story gives insight into how neighbours and friends became enemies, and what made it possible for a neighbour to kill his neighbour. Gregoire, shares insight into his choices and the power of propaganda.

There are many sad stories recalled by survivors of the genocide, but the stories of Agnes and Fifi are particularly tragic. Both suffered greatly during the genocide.

Agnes, a Hutu woman who married a Tutsi man, tells how she witnessed the murder of her husband and three children and the burning of her house. Hiding under the bed of a neighbour, unfortunately she was found by the killers, stripped naked and was raped. Then she ran to her

aunt’s house begging for protection, only to be rebuked, for marrying a Tutsi. Running back to her neighbour, they agreed to hide her. Agnes weeps remembering that she is a rape victim, with the prejudice that goes with it.

Fifi’s mother was injured in the genocide and could not walk. Her father carried her to the house of some nuns, believing that she would be safe there. The nuns betrayed her to the Interahamwe, and they cut off her legs, her breasts and finally, killed her. Fifi was only 10 years old and alone. Following some people to a roadblock, she witnessed killings there. Spotting children of family friends, she went to play with them. Their father told his children to take her home and she was saved.

The stories of Agnes and Fifi, hard as they are to read, help us experience empathy and understand the pain of victims and survivors.

More than 800,000 Tutsi were killed during the genocide, but there were those who helped to save lives. These stories of resistance and rescue are important to tell, because they display great courage by ordinary individuals, who made the choice to be upstanders.

When the Western governments decided to pull westerners out of Rwanda, most chose to leave. Limited resources, extreme danger and uncertainty made the choice to stay, an enormously courageous one. **Carl Wilkens**, the Director of the Rwandan Adventist Development and Relief Agency International, was the only American that chose to stay. **Damas Gisimba** was the Director of a Kigali orphanage for 60 children that eventually sheltered 400 children and adults. When the militia asked the children to split into two groups, they refused - Gisimba had taught them that they are all Rwandans. It was impossible for the militias to distinguish between them. Wilkens assisted Gisimba to rescue the people. When militias surrounded the orphanage preparing to attack, Wilkens pleaded with the Rwandan Prime Minister, and persuaded him to intervene. The 400 people in the orphanage were evacuated and saved.

Could different choices have resulted in different outcomes in the stories shared?

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Damas Gisimba and Carl Wilkens