



Experience

Expérience

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## Words cannot describe: a trip into Rwanda's heart of darkness

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After a day full of rain, the sun broke through and reflected off the wet tarmac. Drooping plantain leaves glistened along the side of the road. The mood was upbeat, with a tinge of anticipation, as about 70 of us crammed into a single bus and made our way to Murambi, the genocide site.

At the time I was working in the Casualty Department of New Mulago Hospital in Kampala, the capital of neighbouring Uganda — a Canadian medical student doing a research elective in injury control and trauma care at Makerere University.

The medical students' associations from Makerere and the Université Nationale du Rwanda (UNR) in Butare organized a visit for the Ugandan students in order to forge friendships between the student bodies and discuss medical issues. I tagged along.

In Africa it doesn't take long to realize that the perceptions presented by Western media are usually one-dimensional. Many only think of misery, violence and "backwardness" — witness the plagues of starvation, AIDS, genocide and corruption that have flashed across our television screens. I had seen more than that and experienced a little of the rich and varied cultures, agreeable attitudes toward life, and the beautiful land. But I didn't really know what Rwanda would be like. Genocide remains a dark cloud hovering over this little country in middle Africa, obscuring the day-to-day reality. The conventional wisdom is that you don't want to go there — a message Joseph Conrad had delivered 100 years ago in *Heart of Darkness*. I figured I would go and draw my own conclusions.

As I expected, the country was beautiful. The land is hilly and extensively cultivated, with fields of plantain, beans and cassava reaching the peak of every hill at absurd angles. Every valley seemed to be a drained swamp that now grows tea, its carpeting of bushes all at uniform height. No wonder it has been called *le pays des milles collines* — the land of a thousand hills — and the Switzerland of Africa.

We arrived at the UNR campus in the rain and were welcomed by the Rwandan medical students, who were incredibly hospitable and friendly. We laughed and joked as they gave us a tour of their campus. Then we departed for the Site. It was Halloween, Oct. 31, 1997.

The bus pulled around a final bend and we arrived at a grass field where half a dozen long brick buildings ran parallel. They were so new it looked as if construction hadn't been completed. As we disembarked and walked toward them, gigantic rusted cement mixers and tattered tarpaulins over some of the windows gave the impression that work had been stalled for a few years. It was a secondary school that had almost been finished before the war. The buildings were on a mid-level plateau surrounded by more lush green hills. Far off, people were working their plots. Despite the idyllic location, there was an ominous sense of foreboding.

The background events leading to the genocide are complex. The bulk of an estimated 500 000 to 1 million Rwandans, the vast majority of them from the Tutsi tribe, were massacred between April and August 1994. An oversimplified explanation does not convey the sophisticated interaction of political, religious and economic forces that crested in a monstrous wave of wholesale ethnic slaughter. Various descriptions have been published<sup>1,2</sup> that cover these events in detail. However, it wasn't "primitive tribal bloodlust" — reflexive retribution for some injustice or other — that created this chain of events. To motivate thousands to pick up weapons and kill their neighbours on the scale witnessed in Rwanda re-



quired organization, discipline, a well-manipulated propaganda machine and a population that didn't question authority. And that, unfortunately, is the population found in the Switzerland of Africa.

We divided into groups of about 15 students, each with a UNR medical student acting as tour guide. My guide was Joseph. We proceeded to the first building as he explained in excellent French that this school was a genocide site during the war. Hutu death squads, the *Interahamwe*, brought people here and slaughtered them with whatever was at hand, mostly with *pangas* (machetes). It is estimated that at least 40 000 bodies are buried around here, though there are likely very many more.

At the moment these bodies are being exhumed and the school is being set up as a memorial site to showcase the horrors of this genocide, in much the same way Auschwitz has been preserved to commemorate the Holocaust. In this school, the classrooms are filled with corpses.

Joseph unlatched the door to the first classroom. As he opened it the stench of death emerged in a warm gust, a smell so vile and loathsome I could not breathe. Even with my handkerchief over my mouth I could still only take short gasps. Inside, we could vaguely perceive human shapes on the concrete floor, perhaps 40 or 50 lined up in rows, their heads against the wall.

The bodies had reached an advanced stage of decomposition and were considerably desiccated, but limbs and heads were unmistakable. Thankfully, most of them had been placed face down. Some were long, some very short. Many were missing limbs. Strips of faded rags, the remnants of clothes, still covered some of the bodies. Joseph encouraged us to look briefly and told us not to spend too long inside. I'm not sure if he said this because the nauseating smell could cause a visceral reaction or because we had so much left to see before it got dark.

I felt drained, nauseated. We walked toward a bigger building a few steps over. Some of the UNR students chatted about the rigours of schoolwork and the excessive emphasis on book learning now that they had so few lecturers. Then they changed the subject and cracked jokes.

We came to the gymnasium. Here clotheslines were strung from wall to wall for the length of the building and hanging from them was clothing, the remnants of genocide. Doves flapped around inside. The stench here was so incredible we couldn't bear to come within 3 metres of the open double-doors. Eliciting disgust at these atrocities was simple for the caretakers of this site — 20 seconds of this sensual assault is all that is needed — but to impart understanding was going to take time. Horror was softening to a despair for humankind. Humans did this?

We toured a few more classrooms in the same fashion: after a preamble by Joseph we held our breath, opened the door, stepped inside, looked around for a few seconds, got out fast. After a half-dozen fetid plunges the differing states of the bodies became apparent, with clumps of dirt still attached to the newly exhumed ones. In stages the bodies were cleaned and dusted with a white powder, presumably lime. The powdering room, a classroom with about two dozen bodies, had gloves and aprons and a ventilator mask hanging on the wall. But the stench remained unchanged.

We finally came to the "display rooms," where treated bodies lay on low white tables. There was a room with just children, short dried forms that repelled close inspection. There was a room filled with bones, the femurs stacked like so much cordwood. Skulls, perhaps 200 of

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**These bodies washed up from the Akagera River, which flows from Rwanda toward Lake Victoria in Uganda, in May of 1994. Aid organizations estimate that 25 000 bodies of victims of Rwanda's violence ended up in that lake.**



them that had once belonged to infants and adults, were laid out on another table. The forensic pathology wasn't subtle — it didn't take much imagination to guess what caused the linear holes the width of a *panga* blade in so many of the skulls.

At dusk we emerged from the buildings and walked into the field. We were sombre and quiet. Some people signed the visitors' register. A tall, quiet man stood off to the side, smoking quietly. His hollow black eyes seemed to stare even as they darted about. He was the caretaker, the one who cleaned the bodies. Why the empty stare? Because of the void that the death of your entire family leaves behind? Or had this troubled soul been involved in the killings?

Back at the students' canteen, we discussed things over a few beers. It would be fair to say that all the Rwandan students had lost a brother, a parent, cousins, but understandably very few of them would relate personal experiences on such slight acquaintance. I didn't pry. But they all had archetypal stories to tell of husbands killing wives, mothers killing their own children, roommates and best friends in university dormitories killing one another. Most of the physicians were killed — there are now only about 150 of them in a country of 8 million people. By the same token, many physicians and clergy were involved in the atrocities. The dean of medicine at UNR was recently imprisoned for crimes against humanity; he would tip off the *Interahamwe* about whom in the hospital was to be targeted for death, and then they would go and abduct them from the hospital or even kill them in their bed.

Of the half dozen students I talked to in depth, 5 were out of the country when the massacres occurred. Many others weren't so lucky. More than 600 people from a student body with less than 5000 members are buried under a few dozen concrete slabs in a simple mass grave on the UNR campus.

Didn't they want retribution, to see the killers brought to justice? They admitted that it would be very difficult to forgive and forget. But again, the situation is complicated. You couldn't possibly try the tens of thousands who actually did the killing, most of whom are simple peasants who had been brainwashed by government propaganda that had demonized and dehumanized the "enemy." The *Interahamwe* leaders, on the other hand — the instigators of the genocide — are out of the country rallying their forces within the Hutu refugee camps. This conflict, unfortunately, is far from over.

Again, the mood was festive. Was there an element of fatalism at work here? The genocide in Rwanda, the AIDS scourge in Uganda, the injury epidemic across the developing world — in parts of the world where suffering is everywhere and can strike any time, the habit of living for the present can indeed take hold. When your time is up, your time is up. You can't stop living, right?

For me, I had been working in the Casualty Department of New Mulago for the last 2 months, and I know how difficult it is to fix damaged bodies. Now, upon seeing

destruction of this magnitude, I wonder pessimistically if there was any point to my minuscule efforts. Why bother trying to get people to wear seat belts in the face of so much murder?

The treatment of patients has sometimes been likened to pulling drowning people out of a river. Physicians spend much of

their time trying to pull these people out, missing some of them, and this goes on and on until an angry physician looks upstream and asks: "Why don't we just stop these people from falling in the river?" This is often the motivation for primary prevention, a notion that was summed up perfectly by Lao Tzu in *The Art of War*: "To win without fighting is best."

But the causes of war, of genocide, are not as straightforward as the causes behind road traffic injuries, and the effects can be much greater. Could we have seen this coming? How can we prevent the complex and sophisticated cauldron of human affairs from boiling over into violence? What interventions could have kept so many lives from being lost?

The triteness of the commandment "Love thy neighbour" matches the inadequacy of the words that have been used to describe what neighbours were capable of in Rwanda. What can be said? All genocide that has taken place in the last 60 years shows that misunderstanding and hate grow best where extremism is used as fertilizer.

I was deeply moved by what I saw in Rwanda, but I still don't understand it. Synthesizing a message to take home to Canada, to McMaster, will be difficult. But it is clear that remembrance is crucial and that part, at least, will be easy.

The smell of death only clung to me until I left Rwanda, but the memory is there for good.

## References

1. Brauman R. *Devant le mal. Rwanda, un genocide en direct*. Paris: Arlea; 1994.
2. Prunier G. *The Rwanda crisis: history of a genocide 1959-1994*. Kampala: Fountain; 1995.

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