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Bearing Witness to Mass Murder

René Lemarchand

> The third day after leaving Tingi-Tingi we began to pass the bodies of the dead and the dying.... My eye fell on a teenager hardly sixteen years old. Like the others she was lying at the side of the road, her large eyes open.... A cloud of flies swarmed around her. Ants and other forest insects crawled around her mouth, nose, eyes and ears. They began to devour her before she had taken her last breath. The death rattle that from time to time escaped her lips showed that she was not yet dead. All who passed by glanced at her and then took up their conversation where they had left off. I stood in a daze in front of this sixteen-year-old girl, lying in agony by the side of the road in the middle of the equatorial forest more than five hundred kilometers from home. As in 1993, when I heard about the extermination of my mother's family, as in 1994, when I saw the burned houses, the fear in the eyes of the fleeing Tutsi, and the arrogance and the hate in the faces of their executioners, as in 1995 when I saw pictures of women and children assassinated by the RPF in the camps at Birava, I was overcome by revulsion. What crime had all these victims committed to deserve such a death?
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> Marie Béatrice Umutesi, *Surviving the Slaughter*

In the "witness literature" on the Great Lakes, Marie Béatrice Umutesi's wrenching narrative surpasses all others by its searing, intensely personal quality. She bears testimony to an almost forgotten tragedy: Between October 1996 and September 1997, hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees lost their lives in the course of a massive manhunt carried out by Rwandan-backed rebels and units of the Rwandan army. She is unsparingly honest about the scenes of apocalypse she witnessed in the course of her grueling

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trek across two thousand kilometers in eastern Congo. Hers is the voice of hundreds of thousands who never lived to tell their story—of the countless men, women, and children who died of hunger, disease, and sheer exhaustion in a murderous game of hide-and-seek with advancing rebel units; of the untold numbers trapped at the Tingi-Tingi death camp who fell under the bullets of the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) or drowned during the river crossing; and of the hundreds gunned down in Mbandaka as they were about to seek refuge in Congo-Brazzaville. Hers is the voice of the orphaned eight-year-old girl Zuzu who, after walking barefoot for months in the forest in the footsteps of "Auntie" Béatrice, told her one day that she "could do no more, and decided to squat down by the side of the road and wait for death" (193).

The agony of the Hutu refugees in eastern Congo has been all but eclipsed in public attention by the even greater tragedy of the Tutsi genocide. Although the two are intimately connected, compared to the sustained media exposure given to the latter, very little has been said of the events related by Umutesi. One notable exception is Maurice Niwese's moving autobiographical account (2001), a chronicle of his own tragic odyssey during the same circumstances. Unlike Niwese's, however, Umutesi's story is now accessible to the English-speaking reader, including those decision makers in the United States and the United Kingdom who bear much of the responsibility for giving Kagamé's RPF and its client movement, the *Alliance des Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Congo* (ADFL), a blank check to carry out their manhunt from October 1996 to September 1997. Not the least of the merits of her book is that it lays bare the central piece of disinformation disseminated by the Rwandan media and uncritically endorsed by the United States (thanks to the thoroughly disingenuous efforts of the U.S. military attaché in Kigali, Rick Orth). The official line was that after the return of some seven hundred thousand refugees to Rwanda in October 1996, the only persons left behind were Interahamwe and former members of the Forces Armées Rwandaises (FAR).[1] Neither Zuzu nor Marcelline, Virginie nor Assumpta, all of them among Umutesi's closest companions, quite fit into this picture.

I first met Béatrice Umutesi in 2003 in southern France, where I had rented a house for the summer. A mutual friend told me she wanted to talk to me and I was happy to oblige. I met her at the railway station in Brive and recognized her immediately. She wore the same sad expression I noticed on the cover of her book. I was struck by her diminutive stature, wondering how anyone so fragile looking could have sustained the ordeal she went through. For the next couple of days she effectively retraced her steps through forests of eastern Congo, from Walikale to Lubutu, from Tingi-Tingi to Ubundu and Obila, and on to Ikela, Bokungu, and Bobenga, all of them way stations evocative of her agonies. As I listened to her tales of horror, I asked myself what sort of impact such excruciating experiences are likely to have on the hearts and minds of those who shared them. Is it

any wonder, I thought, that those who survived the ordeal, and who have since joined the militant Hutu-led Forces Démocratiques pour la Libération du Rwanda (FDLR) in eastern Congo are among the most radical, uncompromising enemies of the Rwandan state? What role did indiscriminate violence on such a scale play in bonding survivors into a community of avenging extremists?

Béatrice Umutesi was born in 1959, the year the Hutu revolution erupted, in Byumba, in northern Rwanda. After obtaining her baccalaureate at the Université Nationale du Rwanda (UNR), she received a scholarship from the Belgian government to complete a master's degree in sociology at the Université Catholique de Louvain, and on her return to Rwanda she played a leading role in promoting cooperatives. By early 1993 she was heavily involved in a support program for women's associations. In February 1993 she experienced firsthand the deadly attack launched by the RPF on her hometown, in violation of the July 1992 cease-fire. Several of her siblings were killed by RPF troops. Less than a year later the shooting down of President Habyarimana's plane triggered the bloodbath that forced her—along with some 1.2 million refugees—into exile. In the Adi-Kivu and Inera refugee camps she went on to organize several Rwandan NGOs into an association in support of the refugees (the so-called Collectif des ONG Rwandaises). After the fall of Bukavu to the AFDL "rebels" in October 1996, she moved farther north to the Inera camp, and after being chased away from Inera she joined the huge mass of refugees fleeing the search-and-destroy operations of Rwandan and ADFL soldiers.

There is more to her story than a chronicle of heart-rending episodes. She offers the reader a vivid picture of everyday life in the camps. The larger ones, such as Mugunga, where two hundred thousand refugees found shelter, were microcosms of Rwandan society, replicating many of the administrative divisions, regional ties, and social patterns found in pregenocide Rwanda. Amid the improvised shelters provided by the UNHCR (the so-called *blindés*) there emerged an amazing variety of economic and social activities—in the midst of widespread insecurity. This is how she describes the social landscape at the Inera refugee camp: "In addition to working for the locals, women planted kitchen gardens in the spaces between the *blindés*. The sight of this greenery brightened up the misery. Other economic activities such as small businesses, production of banana beer and corn fritters, basketwork and carpentry took place in the camps. Those with a little money even opened up small restaurants, boutiques, butcher shops, cafes, sewing ateliers, hair dressing salons, and so forth" (78). Nonetheless, violence always lurked beneath the surface of day-to-day activities.

Insecurity in the camps was inscribed in their social profile, owing to the presence of a fair number of Interahamwe and ex-FAR in their midst: "In the camps bandits, ministers, bankers, assassins, businessmen, simple peasants and soldiers lived side by side, and victims lived with those who

had persecuted them in times past.... There were people with weapons and grenades everywhere.... The situation was most dangerous in the camps of Panzi and Bulonge, where there was a large concentration of soldiers. Grenades exploded there every night and in the morning you mourned the dead, victims of jealousy or account settling." Adding to this climate of fear, the "repeated attacks by soldiers from the RPF were an additional cause of uncertainty and created a state of generalized psychosis" (79). "Suspicion and fear," she adds, "themselves created insecurity." No one was more likely to be viewed with suspicion than Umutesi, whose Tutsi-looking features raised persistent doubts about her identity. "At Inera I was considered to be pro-RPF," she writes, "because, among other things, I looked like a Tutsi and had a Tutsi name, and I preferred the company of old women in my neighbourhood to that of the directors of the camp" (81). As economic conditions in the camps worsened, armed robberies and killings increased. "Killings for vengeance or out of fear began to give way to killings committed for the purpose of robbery. A priest who was visiting his parents was killed in Kashusha camp and robbed of two thousand US dollars.... In Mudaka camp a young man tried to strangle his friend with a rope for a hundred US dollars" (8–82). Nor was security improved by the arrival of the Zairian contingent in charge of protecting the refugees, the so-called Contingent Zairois Chargé de la Securité des Camps (CZSC): It is difficult to think of a more ironic misnomer when one considers that CZSC became, in her own words, "a principal source of insecurity" as they went about stealing refugee property and raping women.

How to cope with this semi-anarchic situation was the key issue facing humanitarian NGOs in the camps. For Umutesi, her immediate concern was to use her "Collective" as a counterweight to the informal networks of murderers and political extremists: "With the goal of helping the refugees to put the brakes on this moral self-destruction, the Collective set up a self-organization program in the camps to begin to establish more credible leadership and to organize for return" (83). For many, however, the prospects for return soon became an illusion, and after the destruction of the camps, kinship and regional ties became the only source of solidarity and self-protection. Some of her closest companions during her flight through the forest were friends and relatives from Byumba, like the thirteen-year-old Bakunda who, she says, became her adopted son; Assumpta, her younger sister's classmate; Gisimba, one of her sister's eight children; and Virginie, whose uncle was engaged to her sister. Refugees are not the anonymous glob of humanity that some imagine. They are individuals, each with their own social identity. They each have their own story to tell. Umutesi captures the human dimension of their shared ordeal like few others have.

A critical reading of *Surviving the Slaughter* raises a key question: whether Hutu extremists were not responsible for bringing onto themselves and their kinsmen the abominations they endured at the hands of

the rebels. This is a fair question, up to a point. There is little question that the presence of tens of thousands of Interahamwe and ex-FAR in the camps posed a major security threat to Rwanda. I doubt that anyone in Kagamé's position would have hesitated to use force to counter that threat. History is replete with examples of preemption as a means of warding off the threats generated by power vacuums.[2] What the argument leaves out is Kagamé's determination to go far beyond the destruction of the camps in ensuring the safety of his newly conquered state. By early 1997 the aim was to annihilate all refugees in sight, without distinction, whether or not they posed a threat to Rwanda.

Is this a case of genocide? The June 1998 U.N. investigative commission does not shrink from using the *g*–word, but adds a cautionary note: "The killings perpetrated by the AFDL constitute crimes against humanity, just as the denial of humanitarian assistance to Hutu refugees. The members of the team feel that certain types of murder could constitute acts of genocide, depending on the intention of the perpetrators, and request that such crimes and their motives become the object of further investigation."[3] Despite disagreements among scholars as to what constitutes genocide, there appears to be little doubt that the slaughter was intentional, that the victim group was clearly identifiable ethnically, and that the killings went far beyond the threshold dictated by security concerns. If the violence in Darfur, resulting in the death of some seventy thousand civilians, can be officially described by the Bush administration as a clear case of genocide, it is hard to see how the extermination of anywhere from one hundred thousand to two hundred thousand Hutu refugees in eastern Congo can be described otherwise.

Just how many lives were lost in eastern Congo is impossible to tell. By May 1997, when the killings were still going on, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported some two hundred thousand refugees "unaccounted for"—or in plain language, dead. Of these, at least as many as those who died of exhaustion, disease, or starvation were killed by the RPF or ADFL troops. Stephen Smith, a *Le Monde* correspondent, speaks of "200,000 Hutu killed by Rwandan troops during the march to power of Kabila-père" (2005:95). In an interview with the Congolese news agency Congopolis on October 15, 2002, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Africa Herman Cohen flatly stated: "I believe that the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) massacred as many as 350,000 Hutu refugees in eastern Congo." Although this may well correspond to the total number of refugees who died in the DRC, this figure largely exceeds the estimates of more reliable observers in assessing the numbers killed by the Rwandan army and AFDL.

On the circumstances of their deaths, Umutesi leaves few doubts. The reports of Refugee International add more gruesome evidence. A standard practice was to lure the refugees out of their hiding places by the prospects of food distribution and then mow them down by a hail of bullets: "What does seem increasingly and horribly clear is that the rebels, as a matter of

deliberate policy, have been dispersing the refugees for six months in the hopes of destroying them. When after this time refugees still survived and the food pipeline was turned on, the rebels attacked the refugees. In fact it now seems that the rebels have been using aid agencies to lure the refugees from the forest in order to kill them." Elsewhere no such ruse was required. All that was needed once the refugees had gathered in any given place was to gun them down, as happened in the Kasese camp near Kisangani, home to some eighty thousand, where an estimated thirty thousand were reportedly killed: "On April 22 rebel soldiers surrounded the camps.... Once the camps were sealed off, the killing of refugees reportedly began. The vast majority of the refugees in the camp were survivors of six months in the forest" (Refugee International 1997a).[4] Among the bloodiest killing grounds were Tingi-Tingi, Kasese, Kisangani, and Mbandaka.[5] Beginning on May 13 in the port city of Mbandaka, near the Office National des Transports (Onatra), PRF units ordered the Congolese to stay inside their homes and then fanned out through the city, arresting and killing every refugee in sight. According to Stephen Smith, "eight hundred Hutu refugees were gunned down...." (2005:95)

The most astonishing aspect of this appalling carnage is that so little was said about it in the media. While tens of thousands died in the forests of eastern Zaire, their agony was nowhere to be seen on television screens. The "CNN factor in reverse" is how one commentator described the situation. As Howard French later admitted, "We in the press obligingly failed to cover what was arguably the war's most important feature, its human toll.... As we turned the war into a black-and-white affair, with Mobutu and his Hutu allies playing the irredeemable bad guys, our most important failure was in suspending disbelief over the flimsy cover story of an uprising in the east by an obscure ethnic group. From start to finish this war had been nothing less than a Tutsi invasion from Rwanda" (2004:142).For this information void much credit goes to Kagamé's skill at manipulating the facts, a point persuasively argued by Nik Gowing in a brilliant piece of investigative reporting.[6] When the Rwandan president announced that seven hundred thousand Hutu refugees had walked into Rwanda, and that those left behind were all killers, no one seriously challenged his claim. Further strengthening his position was the blind endorsement it received from the U.S. Embassy in Kigali. "Stop feeding the killers!" is how Ambassador Gribbin reacted to the pleas of Refugee International that "the U.S. should redouble its diplomatic efforts to obtain access for UNHCR and other relief agencies," adding "if we do not we will be trading the children in Tingi-Tingi against the children who will be killed and orphaned in Rwanda" (Refugee International 1997b:6). By July 1997, however, the evidence disclosed by Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) left little doubt as to the magnitude of the crimes committed by the RPA and its allies: "PHR received reliable reports that Rwandan military have committed, and continue to commit, widespread atrocities against civilian populations in

Estern Congo. Reports of robberies, rape and attacks committed by English and Kinyarwanda-speaking soldiers are numerous within North and South Kivu.... The PHR team received reports and eye-witness accounts of killings of unarmed Rwandan Hutu refugees and local Congolese non-combatants throughout Eastern Congo by soldiers identified as Rwandan military. These killings appear to be systematic attacks to eliminate the Interahamwe threat, to annihilate remaining refugees, and to punish villagers in Eastern Congo alleged to have harbored or sheltered Rwandan Hutu refugees" (Physicians for Human Rights 1997:1). Ignoring the evidence, the Clinton administration showed considerable reluctance to condemn Kabila for blocking the investigation of a U.N. human rights team into the killings in Mbandaka and elsewhere. As Howard French puts it, "The United States provided political cover, blocking condemnation of the regime in the Security Council and lobbying for the slimmest possible accounting of the massacres" (2004:148). In what Gowing (1998) calls "the fan-club of sympathetic nations," the United States emerges as one of the most active supporters of Kagamé in his attempt to conceal his shameful disregard of human rights.

In Rwanda as elsewhere (notably, Bosnia), the distortions conveyed by outside observers have had a significant impact on the perceptions of U.S. policymakers. In Clinton's reading list on Rwanda perhaps no book was more influential in shaping his policy options than Philip Gourevitch's acclaimed 1998 best-seller on the horrors of the 1994 genocide.[7] From this magnificent piece of travel writing emerges an image of the Rwanda tragedy in which the perennial good guys are the Tutsi and the archetypal bad guys are the Hutu. There is no room in his story for gray zones and moral ambiguities. Conspicuously missing from the author's breathless tribute to Kagamé—"one of the shrewdest political and military strategists of our times"—and the Tutsi cause in general are the blind reprisals and senseless cruelties visited upon Hutu civilians by Kagamé's troops within and outside Rwanda. Instead the impression one gets is that only Hutu were involved in the atrocities committed in the camps, as in Tingi-Tingi, for example: "On television, it looked like any camp for war-dispossessed refugees, but offscreen it was also a major Hutu power military installation... [where] the ex-FAR and Interahamwe maintained a regime of terror,... killing noncombatants seemingly at random" (1998:338). In the light of such a palpably distorted picture, and given the author's privileged entrée into the inner sanctum of U.S. policymakers, there are few reasons to be surprised at the appalling record of the Clinton administration during the refugee crisis.[8]

It is tempting to think that what happened in eastern Congo belongs to the past. It does not. It lives on in the collective memory of Hutu survivors within and outside the Congo, as does the memory of the Rwanda genocide among the Tutsi. It feeds the radicalism of FDLR extremists, whose presence in North and South Kivu offers Kagamé a convenient jus-

tification for sending his troops into the region. The job, we are told, is not finished yet, and somebody has to do it; if Kabila does not, Kagamé will. What may happen next is anybody's guess. What is hardly in doubt is that the fortunes of so tangled a region as eastern Congo will bear the traces of the mass murder of the refugees for a long time to come. This, too, is part of the subtext of Béatrice Umutesi's mind-numbing story.

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Notes

1. A reliable observer working for the World Lutheran Foundation, present at the border crossing, told me that as the line of refugees at Gisenyi suddenly turned into a flood, no one kept an exact count of how many walked back to Rwanda. His estimate is that between four hundred thousand and a half million, at the most, returned to their homeland.
2. As John Lewis Gaddis (2004:17–18) reminds us, no one was more aware of the need to exercise preemption in dealing with the danger of power vacuums than John Quincy Adams: "The modern term 'failed state' did not appear in Adams's note, but he surely had that in mind when he insisted that power vacuums were dangerous and that the United States should therefore fill them.... One could no more entrust one's security to the cooperation of enfeebled neighboring states than to the restraint of agents controlled, as a result, by no state."
3. See "UN Report of the Investigative Team Charged with Investigating Serious Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC)," 1998, cited in *Dialogue* (Brussels) 206 (September–October 1998): 79.

4. For a horrifying description of the Kasese carnage by a survivor, see Niwese (2001:159 ff).
5. Howard French, the *New York Times* correspondent, was one of the few journalists to visit some of the camps and relate what he saw. This is how he described the scene at Tingi-Tingi, as his old DC-3 was about to land nearby:

> Throughout the flight my mind searched for images of what to expect at Tingi-Tingi, but in the end nothing could have prepared me for what awaited us. When the fading drone from the plane's engines announced our imminent landing, I looked out the window as we banked for the descent and discovered a scene worthy of *The Ten Commandments*. On either side of this road, pressed to its very edges and sometimes spilling onto the highway itself, was a sea of refugees—150,000 people or more, dressed in tatters and jumping with excitement over the arrival of a special visitor bearing desperately needed relief supplies.... As we touched down, the sea of people parted in a feat of just-in-time reactions. I saw mothers reaching out to yank the shirts of overexcited children, and others sucking in their guts or feinting and skipping backward like skilled boxers slipping a punch.... Wide-eyed refugees swamped me as I plunged into the crowd. Many were desperate to tell me their stories, but could speak only Kinyarwanda. Others, their faces severely drawn, their ribs and shoulders protruding sharply through their flesh, held out their hands in hope of food. Others simply wanted to touch me, almost as if to confirm that this tall, well-clothed foreigner was not an apparition.... Most of these refugees were slaughtered. The killings occurred just days after my visit, and the bodies were buried so hastily that later they seemed to call out from the grave. (2004:144, 145, 148)

6. See Gowing (1998:6): "Masterminded by the leaders of Rwanda and Uganda," he writes, "those undertaking the security operation into Eastern Zaire were able to defy western orthodoxy and assumptions of a certain hegemony on information access.... Both the humanitarian community and the media were deceived comprehensively. By and large they did not perceive accurately the hidden military campaign that was unfolding beyond their reach. As a result they never gained the usual upper hand on information that they had come to assume in recent years. They were outsmarted."
7. As I noted elsewhere (Lemarchand 2003:141–74), in postgenocide Rwanda Gourevitch may have played a role similar to that of Robert Kaplan with regard to the Bosnian crisis, but with different implications.
8. In one of the more entertaining passages in an otherwise depressing account, Howard French (2004:243) tells the reader how James Rubin, Madeleine Albright's "spokesman and closest aid," invoked Gourevitch's authority to explain his take on the Congo situation during his trip to Kinshasa: "Actually a lot of my take comes from an even better source (than our best intelligence), and it comes to me directly. Philip Gourevitch is my sister's boyfriend."

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