



Adventist Tragedy, Heroism in Rwanda

Rwanda's genocide through the eyes of missionaries and the voices of the victims' relatives.

by Sharise Esh

IN THE KILLING FIELDS OF RWANDA, ADVENTISTS were involved in killing other Adventists. That is the darkest report coming out of Rwanda. Not only did Adventists participate in the killing of tribal enemies in their communities; Adventists were involved in the deaths of fellow Seventh-day Adventists. According to 1992 figures, one in every 33 Rwandans is an Adventist, one of the highest densities of Adventists in the world. If Adventists were killed as frequently as others, of the 300,000 Seventh-day Adventist Rwandese (1994 figures), more than 30,000 Adventists have already been killed.

J. J. Nortey, president of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division, which includes Rwanda, estimates that perhaps 10,000 Adventists died in the massacre. Nortey says he himself does not have evidence of Adventists killing Adventists.

The terrifying days of violence were set off by the assassination of the presidents of Burundi

and Rwanda on Wednesday, April 6, 1994. They were returning from a conference in Tanzania, where they had discussed ways to end the ethnic killings in their countries. A rocket fired from the ground shot down the plane in which they were traveling. Both men were Hutus presiding over countries composed of Hutu tribal majorities and Tutsi minorities.

At approximately 5 a.m., Thursday, April 7, Rwanda erupted in violence. The fighting, which started out to be political, soon turned tribal. The militia, comprised of the Hutu majority, began the slaughter. Armed with makeshift weapons, they rooted out Tutsis and Hutu moderates, and committed mass killings. From the April assassinations of the presidents to September 1994, the United Nations estimates that there have been one million people killed.

When the violence first erupted, Seventh-day Adventist missionaries were serving in universities, medical and dental clinics, relief agencies, and orphanages. As Per Houmann, an Adventist dentist, told the *New York Times*,

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what those missionaries saw and experienced “left a scar on our souls.” Here we bring you the story of six missionaries who experienced these events firsthand. Four were based in Kigali—three working at a dental clinic on one Adventist compound, a fourth working for ADRA at another compound. The fifth and sixth, whose stories we share first, worked on the faculty and staff of the Adventist University of Central Africa about 50 miles northwest of Kigali.

Witnessing a Blood-Lust . . .

“I had caught something on the news late Wednesday night about the two presidents,” said Ron Booth, an Adventist missionary working at the Adventist University of Central Africa. His wife, Sanita, worked as a secretary in the university president’s office. “However, I didn’t hear the whole story until Nils Rechter, the business manager of the university, called the next morning to notify us that there would be no school that day.”

Instead of classes, students and workers spent the day listening to automatic weapons fire and watching smoke from burning huts as violence erupted in the streets outside their campus. The day was also spent inspecting and fueling vehicles in case they were needed on short notice. The students gathered for a special convocation where faculty explained the events and calmed their fears, and special housing was set up in the administration building for the Tutsis who were arriving on campus, seeking sanctuary from the fighting outside. Throughout the day, the campus was relatively quiet. Nonetheless, special security precautions were taken that evening. Americans and other expatriates took turns driving around the campus with a large spotlight.

It was about 8 o’clock the next morning, Thursday, April 8, when the violence hit home. Booth was headed to the home of a

friend when he heard shouting—followed by an exploding grenade. About 500 Hutus had broken down the doors of the administration building, and were dragging the Tutsi students and faculty outside, where some fleeing Tutsis had gathered. Booth watched the Hutus beat the Tutsis to death with sticks and clubs.

“I witnessed whole families participating in the killings,” said Booth. “There were mothers with babies strapped to their backs, alongside boys of 10 or 11, all participating in this blood-lust.” The killings continued until 12:20 p.m.—Booth remembers looking at his watch. When the fighting had eased, approximately 250 Tutsis lay dead in front of the administration building, with roughly 200 more dead outside the science building.

Booth remembers standing in the midst of the bodies, watching the Hutus that were milling about—still hitting some of the Tutsis who weren’t quite dead, trying to silence them. “It’s hard to watch children being killed,” said Booth. “I felt so helpless. [The Hutus] were still wanting to hurt people, they still had the lust for blood. We weren’t sure that they wouldn’t turn on us if we tried to interfere. The few people who did speak up were pushed aside or ignored.”

About 5 p.m., Ron and Sanita were at home when they noticed Hutus gathering outside their house. They were attracted there by a girl of about eight, intently looking in their windows, something that normally never happened. Afraid that opening the door would bring the violence inside, the Booths negotiated with the crowd through an open window. The crowd had a fairly detailed list of Tutsis they believed to be on the campus, and not having found all of them, were convinced that the Booths were harboring them in their home. After Booth arranged for a committee, including the original girl, to search the house, the Hutus, with the encouragement of some local authorities, finally moved on.

Except for the little girl. She continued to

stand on the back porch, peering in the windows. Because of the blood stains on her dress, and forlorn look on her face, the Booths assumed that she had lost her family in the slaughter. Actually she was still convinced the Booths were harboring Tutsis who needed to be killed.

Saturday returned to relative calmness, with those on campus preparing for the evacuation

they believed would come that day. Workers spent the day building trailers and putting sides on trucks so they could haul non-Rwandan students and missionaries across the border into Zaire.

Part of Booth's job was hosing blood out of truck beds that had been used to haul dead bodies away from the campus. The university's trucks had been lent to authorities, but now

Adventist Violence: The Case of the Sefukus

Gerard Sefuku, a Rwandan, the son of an Adventist minister and member of the Tutsi tribe, is a graduate student in organizational management at Bethel College, Mishawaka, Indiana. He lost 32 members of his family in the Rwandan bloodletting.

Gerard has been studying in the United States for five years. This fall, he was looking forward to his father, Pastor Issacar Sefuku, beginning doctoral studies at Andrews University, very near to Gerard's college. But the day he was to receive his visa to the United States, Pastor Sefuku was killed.

The day after the plane crash in April that killed the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, Gerard called Rwanda and spoke with his family in Rwamagana. He was told that the genocide had already begun, and that the Sefuku family were going into hiding at a nearby Catholic church. Two of Gerard's brothers would stay by to care for the home and to communicate with other family members.

A few days later, the two brothers were also forced into hiding. After his last telephone conversation with his brothers, Gerard did not hear any news regarding his family for four weeks. Then a letter arrived from his sister. His father was dead, his mother was barely alive and in a hospital in critical condition. Wanting his mother to receive the best care possible, Gerard paid individuals in

Rwanda to take his mother to a hospital in Burundi. Gerard was able to speak with his family after they were in Burundi, and discovered the details of the massacre.

Four days after the plane crash, Gerard's father was severely beaten and then shot and killed in front of his family. His mother, Adele, and 14-year-old brother were also beaten, slashed with machetes, and left for dead. For three days Gerard's mother lay in the midst of the holocaust until she was found, barely alive, and taken to a hospital. Lying beside his mother, Gerard's younger brother had died of his wounds two days before.

Among the dead were members of not only Pastor Sefuku's family, but also his Adventist congregation. According to Gerard, thousands of people died inside and in the area around the Catholic Church.

As Gerard began to investigate the deaths of his family, he was shocked to discover that the individual who reported his father's whereabouts to the executioners was another Seventh-day Adventist minister—an individual whom he and his family knew well. Innocently, Gerard's brother had told this Adventist pastor in Kigali how happy he was that his father was still alive. The following day, two soldiers were dispatched from Kigali, specifically assigned to kill Pastor Sefuku.

Gerard keeps in almost daily contact with his mother, now in Burundi. Because she has been unable to secure a visa to the United States in Burundi, Gerard's mother will soon return to Rwanda to apply for the visa.

Throughout the summer, Gerard has been appealing to the leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church to help his mother. "The church owes my father for 40 years of service. The church can do nothing to help my father now, so why can't they help my mother?"

T. Lynn Caldwell, who conducted the interview with Gerard Sefuku is an assistant professor of communication at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan, and acting chair of the department. She graduated with an M.A. in communication from Western Michigan University at Kalamazoo.

they would have to haul students and faculty out of the country to safety. The job was especially dangerous because that area of Rwanda has one of the highest incidences of AIDS in the world. Forty percent of Rwandans are HIV positive. Booth couldn't help but realize that the blood of the victims could cause further casualties.

Evacuees from the university were finally able to leave on Sunday, April 10. Students, missionaries, and expatriates crossed into Goma, where they spent three days with other missionaries. From there, some were taken to Nairobi, with others leaving through western Africa.

"While it was happening, I wondered about myself," recalls Booth. "I have been in several evacuations. However, I've never witnessed anything this bad. While it was going on, I had little emotion. With all the atrocities happening around us, it was like a switch we had to flip to get through it. What I do remember is the supportiveness and caring of the people we worked with, how hard everyone worked for each other."

This Is My House . . .

For three years, since December 1990, Jerry Phillips (a pseudonym), who directed an SDA community project in northern Rwanda, has lived the war Americans have only recently heard about. However, it wasn't until four months after he moved to Kigali, to work as a dentist at an Adventist compound, that the fighting became real to the rest of the world.

"When the plane carrying the two presidents was shot down on April 6, all hell broke loose. We didn't know who was killing who. People from both tribes were being killed," said Phillips, recalling the first day of intense fighting. "From what we knew, it was the presidential guard that had taken power and was doing the killing. There was also a group called the Youth Group of the Extremist Hutu

Party. This was a group of civilians armed with machetes, sticks, clubs—basically whatever they could find. They knew the people in our area and where they lived. They would pick which ones they wanted to kill, and then go find them."

These groups were in search of Tutsis, or anyone opposing the president's party. If a person belonged to these groups, he or she was on the list to be killed. Later, the Adventist compound—hosting four missionary families and an unmarried young woman—found itself in the midst of the fighting, sandwiched between the government forces on one side, and the Rwanda Patriotic Front on the other.

Worried about the people outside the compound who were already being killed, Phillips took some American friends to check on some Adventist Rwandans down the street from the compound. While en route, Phillips and his companions witnessed a band of Rwandan men making their way down the road, going from house to house, killing and looting.

Assuming that no harm would come to foreigners, Phillips and his friends stood in the doorway of their Rwandan friends' home, claiming it to be their own. The band of men moved on to the next house. Luckily, the family who lived in the house next door had left the day before, leaving behind only one young boy. He was able to sneak out of the house and jump the fence to the house where Phillips and his friends stood guard. By the time the band of men left the house next door, it had been gutted—right down to the doorknobs.

When the young men had finished their job, one of the soldiers returned to the house where the foreigners still stood. "Aren't you scared?" the soldier asked in the native Kinyarwandan. Not wanting the soldier to realize how much of his language they understood, they replied in broken fragments, "We aren't scared because you are here to protect us." The soldier, angered by this, replied, "But you saw what we did! You don't

understand. I will make you scared!" With this declaration, he raised his gun till it was pointing at the group. Phillips reached into his pocket and pulled out some bills. "Here, this is for you," he said, holding it out to the drunken soldier. As the man pocketed the money, the group took off running for the compound, with shots ringing over their heads just as they entered.

Shut Your Gate . . .

The director of the dental clinic in Kigali where Phillips worked was Per Houmann. When Houmann and his wife Alice stepped off the plane in August 1993, they could already tell that there was tension in Rwanda—armed soldiers lined the runway. The Houmanns had been warned of the growing tension, but realized the meaning of this more fully when a rash of incidents took place in February 1994. They were forced to temporarily close down their clinic, the only full-service dental clinic in the country.

"The tensions were bad enough even then that my Tutsi workers would have been killed if they attempted to come in to work," said Houmann. "We remained closed for a week. Things seemed to calm down after that, but the tensions were never resolved. About three weeks later, our gardener came in and told us to shut our gate, because there were people right down the street having their throats slashed. About three weeks after that, our Tutsi night watchman came in after being severely beaten by six people, and had to have his eye patched."

The intense fighting started before sunrise on April 7, the day after the assassinations. The Houmanns could hear tremendous explosions of gunfire about 150 yards from their home on the compound. "The militia would be fighting, and then there would be silence for awhile. But the silence worried us more

than the fighting, because we realized that during the silent times, they were going to the surrounding houses rooting out Tutsis, sympathizers, and moderates to kill them." It was during one of these times that the Houmanns heard their backyard neighbors being killed.

Employees—Adventist and otherwise—started coming to their compound, seeking protection. "There were workers and their families from both tribes. I couldn't understand how they were together, protecting each other. It was amazing to see them putting their lives on the line for each other." The Houmanns were putting themselves at risk as well, harboring workers in their home. "But," says Alice, "the militia were coming to our home just as much to rob us as to hurt our workers, so [our workers] protected us as well."

The Houmanns remember one worker who was a particular inspiration to them. Francois had come in to work the night before the fighting, but was unable to go back to his home. His strong Tutsi features would have gotten him killed in the fighting. "He was unable to return to his family, who he was sure were dead by now. Yet he never looked scared. Every night and every morning he would lead some of the others in singing hymns and reading the Bible. He was at such peace with God it was as if he had no fear. When we left the compound, all the other Tutsis were looking at us with sorrowful eyes, because they knew that they were going to die. Francois was the only one at peace. It reminded me of that text that says 'perfect love casts out fear.' That was Francois."

As the Houmanns left Kigali—four days after the violence began—with their children lying on the floor of the car, they felt for the first time that they were the focus of the hatred. "Going out of Kigali, we were shot at. At roadblocks we would see trucks of bodies being hauled out, as well as bodies lying in the road. At the last roadblock, there were about 400 or 500 men and boys with sticks, clubs,

and machetes. They had a vacant look in their eyes. It was as if they were possessed. They became more and more bold, asking for money and threatening to puncture our tires. This was the first time we really felt we were the focus of their anger.”

I'm Needed Here . . .

Carl Wilkens, director of Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Rwanda, was the only American—and Adventist missionary—to stay in Kigali throughout the months of killing. During that time, only a very few expatriates of any nationality tried to remain in Rwanda's capital. Indeed, both the United States government and the world leadership of the Adventist Church ordered their personnel out of Rwanda. But Wilkens stayed. Now, both the United Nations and the U.S. State Department have recognized his unique bravery by awarding Wilkens written commendations for his continued humanitarian service during the most dangerous of conditions.

When the crisis broke out, Wilkens had a house full of relatives. Not only did he have to worry about his three children, ranging in ages from six to 10, and his wife, but also his parents, who were visiting Rwanda and working on an ADRA project in the area.

“At first, we thought it was similar to the crisis that occurred in February. We thought the city would be shut down for a few days and then business would resume as usual. But

by the third day, we could tell that something was different,” recalled Wilkens. The first sign of trouble came when an Adventist orphanage sent a message over the shortwave radio asking for assistance. The somewhat frantic message stated that the militia had already killed one worker in front of them, and they couldn't gauge what was happening in the other areas of the grounds where violence was breaking out.

“Shortly after this came the big push to evacuate the missionaries stationed there,” said Wilkens. “The telephones had gone out

after the first two days of fighting, but we still had radio contact with the American embassy, so it was our job to coordinate the evacuations with them.”

This was an especially tense time for Wilkens and his family, not only because of the fighting in the city, but also because Wilkens and his wife had already decided that if anything like this ever happened, he would stay behind while the rest of his family evacu-

ated. “We wondered if it was the right decision, but everything happened so fast, we only had one night to think about it. We decided that we would sleep on it that night and make the decision in the morning. That night, God gave us so much peace, we felt it had to be his will that I stay in the country.”

One reason Wilkens chose to stay behind was to help protect two of his houseworkers. They were at serious risk because of their strong Tutsi features. Wilkens' wife, children, and family evacuated to Kenya. Wilkens spent the next 88 nights sleeping in the hallway of

Wilkens chose to stay behind to help protect two of his houseworkers, and spent the next 88 nights sleeping in the hallway of his home. Their diet consisted of oatmeal, granola, rice, and beans—food they had stored away for just such an occasion. During the ordeal, Wilkens' weight dropped 20 pounds.

his home. His house guests now included his two houseworkers, a church worker and his wife, and their relatives. Their diet consisted of oatmeal, granola, rice, and beans—food they had stored away for just such an occasion. During the ordeal, Wilkens' weight dropped 20 pounds.

For the first three or four weeks, Wilkens and his group remained completely house-bound. The government had announced a curfew in the city, and no one could leave his or her home. "We spent those weeks in Bible study, reading, and prayer, not knowing what was about to come. I think God outlined that time for us to strengthen us," said Wilkens. "There were some long days, but I feel it was needed for us to prepare for the shelling, gunfire, and militia we would have to face when we were finally allowed to return to work around the city."

When Wilkens was finally able to leave the house, it was only in furtive spurts. "We would go out for a couple hours or so, and then have to stay inside for a couple of days. . . . We would have to rebuild our strength and work up the courage to go out again. But even on the days when we felt as if we accomplished nothing, God would show us something that we had done. It was often tempting not to go out at all. Some didn't, but it was hard for them as well. They had to sit and listen to the bombs all day and wonder if we would return. It was a hard time for everyone."

Wilkens said that "people questioned why I was staying, when there was nothing I could do. But God showed me that he could still use us to help people." Wilkens and his housemates spent their brief excursions out of the house working with groups of orphans in Kigali—about 750 in all—taking them food and fresh water. Since the ADRA vehicles and supplies had been stolen, Wilkens worked with his own car trying to transport the supplies, and finally with a large dump truck he borrowed from the U.N. It was better equipped to haul

the large containers of water. Food and dry milk were bought for the orphans from the thieves who had been looting.

A secondary responsibility during this time was to keep up communication between church workers and the union administration, working as a link between the groups inside Rwanda who couldn't contact one another, as well as getting messages to concerned parties outside Rwanda. During the entire time, Wilkens was in daily radio communication with his wife who stayed in Nairobi, Kenya, so she could be close to her husband. "That contact was so important," said Wilkens, "and to learn about the huge prayer network. There were literally thousands of people praying for my safety—people I hadn't seen in years, people I was sure had forgotten about me. It gave me a sense of courage."

And God's Hand Led . . .

These prayers, and the reassurance they gave him, carried Wilkens through some very tense times. Wilkens remembers one day when a group of about 10 militia—neighbors of his—came to his home armed with machetes ready to kill the people in his house. "It was only an hour of negotiating and God's protection that saved the people in my home," said Wilkens. "We would go back and forth, arguing:

"You're my neighbors, you know me.'

"But our problem is not with you, it's with the Tutsis in your house.'

"Yes, but they're not part of the war.'"

With laconic understatement, Wilkens added, "The group finally left, and no one in the house was harmed."

Another day, Wilkens went with his group to take food and water to a group of about 250 orphans, as well as 60 women and children who were also seeking refuge at the orphanage. They had been harassed for four or five

days. Each day the militia took away one person to kill. The militia had warned the occupants that this would soon stop, and they would come to kill them all at once. By the time Wilkens arrived with his group, the militia had already surrounded the building.

When the group of militia saw the foreigner approach, carrying a radio, they hesitated. They obviously wanted to wait until Wilkens and his workers left. Wilkens took advantage of this time to call the Red Cross and the local authorities on the radio. It took about two hours, but finally the local authorities came and dispersed the crowd. Wilkens also secured a guarantee from the prime minister that the orphanage would be protected. About 10 days after Wilkens' arrival, the occupants of the orphanage were finally evacuated to a more secure area. During that time only one more person had been killed.

Wilkens continued his work for close to three months, until the new government was in place and the fighting in the city drew to a close. While many consider Wilkens a hero, he disagrees. "I'm no hero," he told his family. "I'm just thankful that I could find out just how precious the Lord can be."

When the fighting quieted down and the city became more stable, Wilkens turned his focus to his family. "The whole time I was there, my wife and I looked for indications that the immediate crisis was over and I could return to be with my family. This seemed to be it. My wife had been so selfless in allowing me to stay in the country. It was just as much work for her to see me stay as it was for me to stay. With the crisis almost over, I knew it was time to go be with my family."

Questioning Oneself . . .

In the aftermath, Booth, a professor in the business department at the Adventist University of Central Africa, is left with questions.

"We weren't able to evacuate everyone. The Rwandans couldn't get out of the country, so they had to stay behind. There are still some killings going on. People who sympathize with the Tutsis are at risk. We worry for their safety. We ask ourselves if we should've stayed behind and helped more. These are hard questions to answer."

Equally hard to answer is what these missionaries will be returning to in Rwanda, which, according to Booth, many of the missionaries are eagerly waiting to do. There have been several conflicting reports as to the amount of damage and stolen items, and it will be interesting to learn the truth.

Until that time comes, Booth and his wife will be working on a temporary assignment in Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast. "We're just working there until it will be possible to re-open the university. We're hoping it'll be about three months, but it's hard to tell."

A Country Dark With Hatred . . .

"It's so hard to imagine the people in the country being able to recover from the hatred that has been passed down from generation to generation," reflects Alice Houmann. "There are neighbors and family members killing each other to save themselves. If your son married a Tutsi, then you were expected to kill the son and daughter-in-law both to keep from being considered a sympathizer. I remember hearing one story of a man living down near the orphanage. The militia had surrounded his house and were calling for his wife, a Tutsi, to be sent out to be killed. They said if he didn't comply, they would come in to kill the whole family. The man had to send his wife out. How do you recover from something like that?"

"And what's going on now, that's a whole

other tragedy that's happening," continues Houmann. "All the disease and starvation. This is a little country in the center of Africa that no one had even heard of before all this happened. And yet it has to touch your heart. It's so meaningless. There's basically two tribes, they have the same race, language, religion, and history. And yet they can't get along to the point where they would murder their neighbor or they have to run and hide because someone else is in charge. It all boils down to basic selfishness. It's so overwhelming."

"When you're in a situation like that, it suddenly becomes very hard to differentiate between your duties as an individual, a parent, wife, dentist, citizen, and missionary. You have a responsibility in each one of these areas. It's very hard to blend them all together into making the right decisions, and not just think in one mode. I understand now why not everyone took people into their homes. If you took one person in, you risked getting everyone else killed. Plus, you never knew if the person you were taking in from one tribe to protect wasn't doing harm to members of the other tribe in return. It's hard to know which role to play in a situation like that. And yet, it was very hard to get in our car and drive away."

The Houmanns have since learned that of the four families and three single men who stayed with them at the compound, one is confirmed dead, three are missing, and three are accounted for—two of them known to be still working for the church.

Alice and Per Houmann left in October for Malawi, where Per serves as director of dentistry. "If and when Rwanda opens back up, there's a possibility we will go back to Kigali in an attempt to restart the clinic there. It will take some thought."

Unfinished Business . . .

The Phillips family has already been assigned to return to work in Rwanda; they will be returning to uncertain circumstances. When they left Rwanda they had no electricity, no water, not even a home—everything they owned had been taken in the looting. Phillips will also be returning to a community where he knows both the people who were killed and the people who killed them. "From the extensive outreach nature of the community project where I worked for three years, I got to know the people in the community very well. I knew both groups. I had become very attached to the people there," he said.

Phillips, who was originally assigned to work as a dentist in Ethiopia, says, "I was very glad when my assignment was changed so I could return to Rwanda. If I were unable to return, I would feel that there was something unfinished in my mind. I'm not nervous. I want to return.

"The biggest need when we return will be helping the people who have been displaced," he continued. "I don't think I will be working in dentistry for quite a while. What the people need now is to re-establish the social structure. We need to collect the children and start orphanages. We need to feed the people and teach them how to provide food for themselves."

"I feel like this has given me an opportunity to put a correct value on my priorities. Everyone likes security. We could've easily moved on to dentistry in Ethiopia. But I've realized that human life is the most valuable thing. It was very hard to leave my friends. I felt like I had let them down. I want to be there for them when they need us. I want to rebuild the trust—to put 100 percent into the people."