

# Rwanda's Genocide: Memorials and Memories

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, April 7, 2004

How do you wrap your mind around genocide?

On a hillside overlooking their capital, Kigali, several hundred Rwandan workers are busy—hauling bricks, smoothing concrete, digging dirt. They have no heavy equipment. Instead, men and women carry most building materials on their heads. They're in a race against time, determined to finish constructing this genocide memorial site before the ten-year anniversary of a hundred day massacre that cost an estimated 800,000 lives.

Rwanda, in eastern Africa, is the size of Maryland. With around eight million people it's the most densely populated country on the continent. The former Belgian colony has been independent since 1962 and historically plagued by internal social prejudice, particularly between two groups: Hutus and Tutsis. Between April and June of 1994, gangs of Hutu extremists, with clubs and machetes, terrorized the more educated minority Tutsis and their moderate Hutu sympathizers. The marauding men hacked their victims to death, often keeping the women in bondage, raping them repeatedly for weeks, leaving them to die from AIDS. Individual stories told me by dozens of Rwandans are too lurid to print here. Words like "atrocities," "horrors," and "masochism" are polite but paltry substitutes. Watching the tortured death of those around them, some offered to pay to be shot rather than hacked to death.

My guide at the genocide memorial was Beate. She was 14 when she arrived in the capital from the countryside on a visit to her uncle for Easter vacation ten years ago. She's convinced American officials knew two months ahead that the genocide was being planned. But, she adds, "I remember hearing on the radio, Tutsis being called 'cockroaches'; still, no one could imagine what was going to happen."

One morning the Hutu president's plane was shot down. Tutsis were blamed for the shooting, and the massacre began. Classical music was playing on the radio as roadblocks ringed the city within hours. The first victim was not even Tutsi. She was the prime minister—and a moderate Hutu.

Beate fled the men who attacked her uncle's house, leaving behind his dead body. "We were in constant fear, thinking if we didn't die at noon, we'd die at 1 PM." Because she was a stranger, she was not on a list of targeted people, and so she survived. Back home, every member of her family was killed.

For an hour, I listened to this willowy young woman with carefully applied makeup and smoothly pulled back hair. There was a disconnect between the exquisite features of her face and the grotesque details of her stories. Once her tale was interrupted by her cell phone ringing—a tune from "The Entertainer." No, I didn't have room for Beate's account in my tidy, civil construct of reality.

Problem is, in Rwanda there are as many genocide stories as bones. Beate's account became all too real as we walked into a room piled high with skulls, femurs, tibias, and bloody clothes waiting to be buried in mass graves. The remains of a quarter of a million people have been collected at this site, one of 200 around the country. At the most practical level, it's helpful for farmers to have a place to bring skeletons they unearth as they till their fields. At a symbolic level, survivors want to provide a proper burial by piling the bones in coffins draped in purple sateen trimmed with fancy white lace. I peered into the last of half a dozen large holes with coffins stacked inside, about ten high. There was room for only about 40 more. "I'm not sure what we'll do after that," said Beate.

A Holocaust survivor in Israel is making a large stained glass window to greet the stream of visitors. People say, "Never again," notes Beate, "but genocide has happened again and again and again." That's why the education center will host Rwandan school children as well as tourists. Planners have laid out a series of rooms portraying life before the tragedy, followed by the warning signs, the genocide itself, heroes who resisted the rampage, and a vision for the future. In fact, a new day may be dawning: The words Hutu and Tutsi are rarely spoken anymore. Official policy is to expunge the distinction.

I understand jealousy. I've had ignominious moments. I've seen crowds caught up in frenzy. But the scale of this evil is overwhelming. As Beate says, "It's not meaningful to think of revenge. Even justice doesn't make sense. Not even reconciliation. We simply must live together."