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Interview with Elie Byishimo

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Elie Byishimo was interviewed over Zoom on April 5, 2021, by Emelia Winterhalter, Monica Miramontes, and Drake Seifert.

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[4:07] MM: Where did you grow up?

EB: I grew up in Congo. I was born in Congo until the age of eleven.

MM: At around what age would you say you became a refugee?

EB: At the age of eleven. That's when I will move to Burundi, specifically Gatumba. I'm sure you've heard of the name of Gatumba. We lived there for roughly three months, until the massacre happened. Basically, we have to be dispersed into different countries, like all over the world.

[4:48] DS: When you moved to Burundi, were you with your family, or were you alone - how did that work?

EB: Yeah, I was with my family.

DS: What was the event that made you guys decide to leave Congo, and go to Burundi?

EB: I'll probably start by giving you a little of the background of the Banyamulenge people. So we are Banyamulenge - we've lived in the Congo for, I think, from seventeenth century, I would say - like our great-great parents, basically were born there. But since then, we've never, literally had, the rights to be citizens of the Congo. We've always been called, like er... that we are not citizens, and if I can remember - since I was young, the youth call us that we are not citizens, that we should go back to where we came from, and personally I didn't know where we came from, so I would ask my parents, "where did we come from? Why do people keep calling us 'foreigners' and stuff like that?" They used to call us that we came from Rwanda - I don't know if you know a little bit of history of the continent there - so as Banyamulenge, they say that our ancestors came from Rwanda, but that was like, years and years ago. So back to your question, where you ask me why did we go to Burundi, it was a constant, basically, civil war, like us Banyamulenge being killed because of who we are. People, other ethnic groups, chasing us, killing us, and then, at that point in 2004, we got to a point where we're being hunt, everywhere you are, as a Munyamulenge - they were killing you. So we have to move the borders from Uvira - that is a neighboring to Burundi - then we move to Gatumba, and we wait in the refugee camp there.

[7:31] DS: How would you describe the general atmosphere at the refugee camp at Gatumba, before the violence?

EB: I would say it was, not the greatest, but bad because I was with my friends, people that I grew up with. We're playing everyday, we didn't go to school. For children, the age of eleven, probably we would have thought, "oh it's a good thing we not going to school. We playing football everyday." It wasn't bad - it wasn't great as well.

[8:11] DS: And, how would you describe it after the violence occurred?

EB: Well after the violence, some of us were traumatized. So things we saw - personally, as an eleven year old, it's not something that I would wish for somebody else to witness in their lifetime. It was crazy.

[8:41] MM: Did you personally have any close friends or family that were directly impacted by all the violence going on?

EB: Yes. Luckily enough, my whole family we survived that night. But, I had friends - like I said, these are the people that I grew up with, who I used to play with everyday - and I had my aunties, my uncles - yeah.

[9:16] MM: So what challenges did you and your family face directly after the violence? Because obviously, you know, when those things first happen, they're overwhelming and so hard to manage, so how did your family deal with those challenges after?

EB: To start with, we didn't have anywhere to go, we didn't have anything. Everything was burned down - we were basically left, I would say, homeless, nowhere to go. We had relatives who lived in Rwanda - that was my uncle from my Dad's side. He came for us, but, we were traumatized as I can say, it used to be nightmares after nightmares - you wouldn't want to go to sleep - you want to stay up all night because you don't want to go through the same thing that just happened. We didn't have counseling, there was no counseling, we didn't get to, have anybody else to look after us. As you can imagine, children seeing this stuff - it's like things that you see in horror movies, but you actually witness it just happening to you basically. So it was hard, I'm not going to lie to you, it was really difficult. I would say our parents tried, but they were also in shock, so it was difficult. It wasn't an easy journey.

[11:15] DS: In your opinion, how do you feel justice should be, or should have been, imparted?

EB: Right, when it comes to justice, personally, it's like I gave up, if I can say, that we'll never get to justice, because the people actually who did it that night, the next morning they came and claimed the responsibility. One of them actually is a leader in Burundi right now, he's among the highest leaders in the government of Burundi.

So us being Congolese, our country didn't say anything - they kept silent, and they never followed up afterward. When it comes to justice, when people say justice, I feel like it's like we're cursed - seems like we were born, basically. But I still feel like there's hope. Like for instance, me sitting here with you guys interested in knowing our story - that gives me hope actually.

[12:44] DS: I'm happy to hear that. That's kind of the next question - to what degree do you feel like this justice has been or will be done in the future?

EB: Like I said, awareness of - many people getting to know about our story, maybe, will push our government or, even the international courts to follow through. Obviously, we were protected in the refugee camp we were in, we was protected by the UN. So, they already know about it. It's a matter of us creating the awareness around the world so that at least, many people get to know about it. Therefore, it might take years and years, but I believe that maybe one day we'll get to get the justice that we deserve.

[13:51] DS: So you mentioned the Congolese government, international courts - whose responsibility is it to accomplish this awareness?

EB: It's a good question. Personally, I'm not a politician, but I believe that our government - Congo, because we are Congolese - should have been number one trying to come through for their citizens. But they didn't. Secondly, I would say, obviously we were under protection of UN, in the refugee camp, so they should have done something as well. I'm not saying that they didn't do anything, but still, this August, it's going to be the seventeenth anniversary of the massacre, and no one has been held accountable for what they did to us.

[15:07] MM: Just like you mentioned, there has been basically no accountability for the people that committed that violence, and like you mentioned one of the leaders of the people that did this is a government leader in Burundi now - and even with that in mind, what do you think would be the next steps to, maybe if we can't accomplish justice, at least attempt to walk towards justice for you and the other the survivors of the massacre?

EB: Personally, it's difficult to say what could be the next step, because as I'm talking right now, I've been resettled in the UK - I live in the UK since 2011, with my family, and I'm grateful. But, there's some people still, who are survivors, who are still in different refugee camps, going around, in different refugee camps, around the world basically. So I would say, maybe the next step will be at least resettle them as well, somewhere they can have hope, at least to lead a normal life. Because being in a refugee camp all your life is never a good thing, for your children to have at least hope for the better future.

[16:45] MM: It's been about sixteen years, or fifteen, since the massacre occurred, and how has your life been different, because of this event?

EB: It's been basically different forever. I don't know whether it's ever going to change. But the only thing that I know is that, I was given a second chance, because that night, basically, I didn't know whether I was going to survive. I'm grateful for the life that I have, and like I said before, I'm grateful that me and my family we've been resettled here in the UK, and we're sort of leading a normal life, I would say. I feel like there's hope, and there's humanity. So once humanity is there, if we get together we can accomplish anything.

So coming back to your question, my life has changed forever. I don't know how to say it, but it's like, there's things that I don't take for granted, basically. Me being here - I never imagined that I would be here - if I can say, I've managed to study. I came here, I didn't speak no English at all, and I've studied here - done a degree in pharmacy, so I'm a pharmacist. So I can say that there is hope. If given a chance, you can achieve anything. And that could be one of the thing that I would say to the other survivors, if we are given the opportunity, we can become, what we want to become in life, basically.