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### Interview with Espoir Habimana

Espoir Habimana

Dan Raleigh

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Espoir Habimana was interviewed over Zoom on October 21, 2021, by Dan Raleigh.

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[15:16] DR: Espoir, where did you grow up?

EH: Multiple places. I was born, in, Rugaraba - Nyamara is in Haut Plateau - then we were moving in Minembwe - which is still in the Hauts Plateaux - then I left Minembwe 2001. I went to live with my uncle, in a place called Uvira. So I went to school there. Then I left Uvira. I lived in Bukavu for one year, I lived in Goma - I lived in a lot of places

Yes. But I could say, majority of the one places I have live in my entire life, it would be Chicago, which make it my home.

[16:30] DR: So tell me, at what age did you become a refugee? Was that when you went to Uvira with your uncle, was it before then, later?

EH: No. I became, internal refugee, maybe at the age of, seven? eight? Because, where we used to live in Nyamara, I remember at the age of six-seven years, they start wars. They were coming - the militia - to destroy, to take your cows. I remember we would spend the night in the forest. This is a place where they have big forests, big trees, like untouched forests, [inaudible] no one ever cut those trees. So we would spend the night there. I remember, I would not understand why do we go, because, we are in a forest, by the river - very cold - and that area is very cold, not as Chicago. But, in the morning, we would carry our belongings, we will go back home. Because we were afraid they would come and burn the houses while we're sleeping.

So then 1999, that's when Nyamara - my village - was completely destroyed. We never went back to there. So we come move not far from there, maybe, four-five hours walking. I don't know because in this area we don't have a car. Because the place, it was near the biggest forest called Itombwe - Itombwe is a chain of mountains that came from Uvira area. It touch a different province of Congo. So that chain of mountains, so we were by the chain. So on the other side, that's where is what they call the Mutambala, on this the population where the Bembe or the other militias were coming from.

So our houses were near the forest, which makes it an easy target, because once they get into the forest - I mean I'm talking about a forest that is bigger than Chicago, so no one can follow them in. Every time they take the cows, they get into the forest no one can, because they can't see them. So it was an easy target for that reason. So I would say at that time yes we were internally displace. There was no

refugee camp, we just went and restarted life somewhere else. Which makes it a difficult situation, like, what makes somebody refugee? We were internal refugee in our country.

[19:59] DR: And that was '99, what year were you born?

EH: I was born '95.

DR: '95. So you were young-

EH: To be frankly honest, it was on paper. On my paper, there was a mistake, my mom was she was just starting in the camp, there was a two year gap, so a little bit older. I was born '92-

DR: -'93-

EH: They don't know exactly the date. But she just wrote '95. But at that time I was seven-eight years old.

[20:40] DR: Yeah it seems common that the ages are sometimes incorrect. So when you left, was your family intact? How many siblings did you have? Did you have both your parents?

EH: In that time yes.

[20:52] DR: How many siblings did you have?

EH: This is actually one of the questions I - maybe I would like to speak to you as an expert or something - which is, when we talk about family, in Africa, the terms - even this is my brother, this is my cousin - it's very different. Even the definition of family. I'm telling you like when I left home, my village, I went to live with my uncle. Here, I would call him my uncle. But actually, in our language, it called baba mdogo, like my "small father" or my "other father." Because it's a collective family things, when my grandfather - the first killing of the Banyamulenge things - he was a very well-known chief. He was buried alive in 1965, along four other people. If you ask any Munyamulenge, they would tell you, other people they would say they know that family. So that's when the tribalism things [began]. At that time my father took responsibility - he stop his schooling - he send his brother when his brother finish school, it was his obligation to carry on the family. So I went to live with my uncle. So he was what I consider as my father because, every need, education and everything, shelter, he was the one who provided. I may

have to ask if I'm even qualified because, he was my father, even on the papers, but he's not my biological father.

DR: Yeah.

EH: So when I'm asking what's your siblings, my biological siblings we are total of ten. And all them stay alive. But my uncle, the one who raised me, he had five children, so he was killed, and his wife and four boys, and the only one child remaining.

DR: Did you move in with your uncle, after his family - this is before he was killed, him and his family were killed?

EH: Yes. So technically male in the Eastern Congo, because of the lack of infrastructure of great education, there's no like universities - now, they started having some university before there wasn't. Even in a good high school. If you wanted to go study, you would go in a town. My uncle went to study in Bukavu. After he finish, his education, he become one of the manager of one of the big port, the big port in Uvira, where the ships come from Tanzania and everywhere. So as soon as he got the job, he called his family to come live in the town. On the same day, I came with the family, because he said I have to come to have an access to a better education. Which was an advantage he gave me, because normally, I would leave home when I'm 18, closer to that, but I lived in Uvira because he's already there - he already have that infrastructure, family, stuff like that, so I could go benefit from the education. I left Minembwe with his four children and the wife. They had another baby, in Uvira, who ended up being killed.

[25:43] DR: Can you walk me through - explain a little bit - how you got to the Gatumba camp, and what the atmosphere was like at the camp, how long were you there before the massacre?

EH: This was normal. I mean, the war is normal there. So every time there would be chaotic, since we are very targeting, you hear neighbor be like "Hey, we gonna kill you today. Today is the day." These are the same people who we share firewood, we trade - even if you don't have something you can get it from. So when that happen, it first happen - this is the second time we made a trip to Gatumba by the way. The first one was 2002, around September-ish. There was a war, so we fled to Burundi. At that time we spend about two weeks in the camp. Some of us, two weeks, then when the situation start calming down, my uncle came to get us in the car, like "hey let's go back. Things got back to normal." So we went.

The second times, when that happened, we were like "it's going to kind of like the same thing. It's going to be temporarily, we're gonna go, once the situation calms down, we're gonna go back to Uvira." No intention like go to the refugee camp or ever have to... that I would never come back to the country. Unfortunately, this is my uncle. This time, he refuse to flee there Burundi, because, he don't wanna go live in a refugee camp or stay in the refugee camp. So there was a two-way in Uvira - Uvira, if I could describe a picture - you have this big mountain, underneath there's a valley where Uvira is. So they had two choice. Some people, they were fleeing going Burundi, or you could take a risk, hike the mountains, trying to go to Mulengue, trying to go to the Haut Plateau. My uncle was among the few people - you know some men are like "I don't want to go in a refugee camp, I'm going to see my mother, my grandmother, I'm going to where my father is" - he actually, was lucky enough, he made it to Minembwe. He stay there for, quite a while, over a month or so. Because at that time my family we had a lot of cow, we had over hundreds of cows, so he sold some cows, he was like "I'm going to take my family out of refugee camp. Maybe they could rent a house in the town, waiting for the situation to get better." Because at that time he thought it was gonna be just two weeks. When it become a month, he was like "no, I can't let my kid live in a refugee camp." Because there was so much mosquito. In the area, it's near the rivers - no not the river, there is a lake, but it's near the swamp, there's a lot of mosquitos. So it was like he wanted to move out of the refugee camp so we can rent in the town, but are still register in order to be able to move around, not to be harassed by the government of Burundi. So by the time he came back, he spend one night in the camp, one night in the city. The second night that's when we were attack. So we were in refugee camp since mid-May, to August 13. So it's about like two months.

DR: Okay.

EH: I know I'm giving you long answer. I'm trying to give you a clear picture, so you can understand. But, which I'm going to ask - I'm not sure if I'm qualified for this [inaudible]. On the night of the attack, on that week of the attack, because we had siblings and families outside Burundi, some peoples, if you had siblings, they would send you somewhere - "oh go visit so-and-so" - because we were getting small help, food-wise and everything, some siblings they would call us, or family members. So me, fortunately or unfortunately, I was in Rwanda on the day of attack. So personally, I wasn't there in the night of the attack, which, is kind of like the guilty I carry, like "why me?" It's hard to explain.

[32:00] DR: What relatives did you have in the camp? Were any of them impacted by the violence? Were any of them killed in the attack?

EH: Obviously my uncle, who I considered as my father, who raised me, who cared for me, who gave me education. He was killed. His wife. And his four boys - the one girl who survived, she got shot in the leg, she was young. She actually have a wedding this month I'm thinking about, this next month, which is, something positive out of this. And my other uncle, my other father's young brother's wife - in English it would be an aunt - also was killed. Many others were, extend cousins, and families and friends and childhood friends.

[33:27] DR: So in that, you lost your uncle or your father, and those close relatives. So what was it like following the attack? How did you find out? And then what were some of the consequences - because you're only a young teenager, right?

EH: Yes.

DR: So kind of tell me what that process was like immediately after.

EH: I was in Rwanda in place called Butari. My mother's brother, so he had called me to come visit to them since we're not in the school and we are in the camp. I didn't know them, so it was an opportunity to travel, it was my first-time visit to Rwanda, so I went there. I remember that night too like it was yesterday. I could not sleep. Something was wrong.

[interruption]

I could not sleep. I was like "something is wrong." I told my uncle, because we used to go make phone calls on a payphone - you know those call and you pay and you dial the number for few minute - I was like "I need to talk to my family. I'm not feeling right." And then I had one of my other uncles number. I wake up early in the morning like seven o'clock it's like, "I want to go talk to my family." He's like "why? Are you ok?" I was like "I don't know. I just want to go talk to my family." Something was going right [wrong]. So I went, I dialed the number, my uncle was like, "did you" - he said "desole", "I'm sorry." I was like, "what's going on?" He was like, "you didn't hear?" I was like, "no." And it was like, "everybody's dead." That's the term he used. I was like, "who?" He started, he told my uncle - I was like "No. My uncle he is still in the village." Because it was less than a week he just arrived in the camp. So we do not even know, I had not even know that he was back here. My uncle's family; everybody's dead. His young brother's wife. He start telling me my classmates and my cousins. I was so shocked I just hang up the telephone. I know it was like ten minute walk, but it felt like, hours, walking home. I was shock. I didn't know how I felt, to be honest. I got, it was on Sunday I believe. They died Friday. So I didn't know until a day or two. Because, the lack of communication. There

was no social media, there was no phone, as in easy accesses. There is very few people here with access to phone. So a news could happen, for days or months, not even knowing. Right now if something happen in my village I know in a minute because Whatsapp and everything. At that time was different. I think it was like, a day after it had happened. I remember it was like, "ok, it was Sunday, we'll go to church, we everybody." I got there, I couldn't hold it, I couldn't hold it - I had a breakdown, came back home. Then I was like, I needed to go, see my family, just to have the closure.

DR: So-

EH: It didn't hit until like, hours, maybe half a day or something, when I start, getting calls - because some of my family they didn't know where I was, so for me they were worried for me. Not being, that happened and not being with my immediate family, they were worried about, is going to affect me more because, others - although we all mourning - but are like, yes you have everybody around, you have more support, than me I'm somewhere else by myself. Yes the family, but I didn't know them much, my other uncles, I was not close to them much, so it hit me really hard.

[39:22] DR: So did you travel back to Gatumba?

EH: I couldn't. They would not allow.

[39:39] DR: So you just stayed there, then. These relatives you knew only a little bit, did they become your new family?

EH: No. I ended up with my other uncle, the one who just lost his wife. Because it was no longer safe in Uvira, many things - so went in Goma, we went Gisenyi, by the border of Goma and Rwanda. So we went to live there. So we we're trying to stay far away far away from that. Because he had a two kids, who just, one was like five years old, another one was was like, seven-eight years old also. They just lost their mother. So I joined that family, since the family I was in everybody - not everybody, there was one girl survived, my other auntie took her, cause she needed medical care and stuff like that. The saddest part, for us, not getting that closure. Not at least revisiting that, or go and see. We were just like, "ok, get out of here, let's go as far as we can, to move away from there."

[interview paused]

[42:06] DR: It sounds to me most of your childhood - up through age 15 or so - constantly, internal displacement, losing some family members earlier, and then losing family in the Gatumba massacre - so there's a lot of changes in your early years.

EH: Yes.

DR: So you talked about, the, being with this uncle again, and some of the survivors of the massacre, and you, throughout the rest of your youth, you lived with them - and where's this at again?

EH: Which uncle? The one who pass away?

DR: No, there was one that survived, after the massacre you went and reunited.

EH: The one who survived, we went to live in town called Gisenyi. Gisenyi is by the border of Rwanda and Congo. We had some family members in Goma, who wanted to help - to assist us with education - and, although we speak Kinyarwanda - I mean, Kinyarwanda, Kinyamulengue, kind of similar - actually the language to study the language is very difficult, we were not, familiar with that system, we grew up in a francophone system, so we wanted to be closer to where we can have access to Congolese education system. So in Gisenyi, we live on one town, so we close to the border every morning to go to school in Goma, but come back to sleep in Rwanda. We spend a lot of time in Gisenyi. Until, UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] started calling the survivor of Gatumba - they had our names and everything, the families that survived - calling us to come back to the process. But it was difficult to even convince a family member that I was going back to Burundi, because our families were terminated there, so they were just like, "no, don't go." It was very, difficult to convince, some of the family member that were like, "well maybe we're not going to come back, who knows."

[45:00] DR: So now moving on to some of the questions about justice - how do you feel like justice should be imparted, or should be done, for the massacre, and do you feel like justice has been severed? Do you think any justice will be served? What are your feelings on that?

EH: I mean, the justice has not even attempt to solve. Those who kill us, went on the radio - we could give you record, I'm sure you have access to those - claiming on the radio, bragging that they did that. What was their reward, in their government? They hold minister's positions, party leaders - they still walking free. Biggest disappointment - and this something like for the Banyamulenge will never forget - we were under UN,



protection, that didn't protect us. We did what we can, we fled. That's the effort we made. We didn't want to be killed there, we made an effort. It takes courage, to go through the journey - we did. We wait patiently, for peace. It didn't happen. The little peace we had, where we were, as uncomfortable as it was, as humiliating the situation was, they still find us there - the government of Burundi could not guarantee one thing: safety. As a refugee, it's part of our right. We were not illegal. We were admitted as a refugees, so we should have been protect.

Few weeks after that happen, many people were trying to go back to Congo - to their own country. They were block, by the border. They spend weeks, in [speaking french], in a neutral zone. The government of Congo could not even, allow us to go back to the country. The government of Congo never questioning the Burundi government, "hey, how come our people were killed?" So we are no-man's-land. So I don't even know what justice would look like for us. Because there was a lot of - I don't know the word - complicity or whatever, what I'm trying to say. The Congolese government didn't care for the justice of its own citizens, the Burundian government - the only hope was the United Nation, to try to bring justice. For some of us, to even bring us here, it's kind of like corruption. It's like, "oh ok, you suffer, alright, let's take you there, maybe that will make you forgot what happened." But no. I think it's out of shame. Because I know people who've been in refugee camp for 30-40 year. But they process our process in a rush process - it's a guilt. But they don't want to admit it, and they don't want to do anything about it, because it's going to, ask you, what was their responsibility? Because they would show the failure. For them fighting for our justice, that means admitting the failure of their system. How do you, logistically - people that just fled their country - and you just put them by the border. There's not even another town before that. When you come by the border, that refugee camp is the one that is next. And they just flee there. Few miles away. That's common sense. So the failure of their [inaudible] and terrorists, that's why I feel like they're guilty for bringing us here, they think by bringing us here it would give us closure and that would be a justice for us - it's not.

[50:30] DR: What impact being Banyamulenge people do you think had on the situation? Do you think there was less attention because of your ethnic tribe, politically, whether it was from the Congo or for Burundi, do you think because you were Banyamulenge that affected things?

EH: It's a geopolitics issue. And also, we are not just Banyamulenge, we are Congolese Tutsi. In Burundi they have issues with Tutsis. Rwanda the same things. In place like Burundi - at that time - they had new government, for the first time in how many years, they used to rule by Tutsi, and this time was the Hutus. The President was a Hutu. Those who committed the massacre, were Hutus. For us, being Congolese Tutsi, there

was no laws. Because of those tensions of tribalism in those countries, for us, having that label as Tutsis, it made them care less about the situation. I'm sure if it was maybe other tribes, that just coincidentally happen to them, I'm sure we would have seen some type of reaction. But since it was a Tutsis, in Burundi, in a Hutu government, I think it play some type of role. Look, I could show you the footage, [inaudible] even at the funeral, they were beating people to stop protesting, like people who had a sign "justice" on this and this and that, in front of the President who was there - the soldier, no mercy, they were beating people who just lost their loved ones, because they have, the sign, say "justice" or this, or this must be arrest. It was a guilt, it was shame. Maybe I'll connect you to people who share you some of those videos we show last time to our memorial, last memorial, the one of the documentary show. How do you beat people like they are protesting, they have a sign, when they just lost over a hundred sixty-six people.

[53:45] DR: Did this happen recently as well, that there's been conflict in people protesting remembrance of the memorial and people, combating them?

EH: Yes, but I'm like, I'm talking about, on the actual day of the burial, on the day of the burial, there was, hundreds of people. There was international [leaders] there was the president of that country, there was ministers - some of the Banyamulenge ministers were coming from Congo, there was a lot of people. But it could not help, Burundian military and police harassing, beating people for protesting, because it looks bad on the President.

[54:38] DR: What do you feel like needs to occur, or do you think that there can be any justice one day, in this situation?

EH: Repeat that question, I was thinking through.

DR: Can justice be done in this situation? And if it can - if there can be further justice, what might it look like?

EH: Justice can be done. We can never bring those people back. You can never, my little cousin she's going to walk in the aisle, November sixth. No brothers. No little sister - no young brothers, no parents, no one to walk, or no one who'll see her away. She was too young to even remember a lot of things. A lot of them. Her memory of them is very little. It's what I told her, remind her, because of we used to live in the same house. What would justice for her look like? But, the way that justice can be done, if there is a mechanism for this not ever happen again. If there is, a way to ensure those who commit such things face some type of justice. Or should be a consequence.

Unfortunately, in the Great Lakes region of Congo, great region - Congo, Burundi, all these countries - kind of similar. I like to give an example here. Look at politician who said the outrageous things, who intentionally trying to polarize people for the gains of power. What if there would be a way for them to be punish. If somebody - I'm sorry, I love American politics and we're familiar. Sometimes, I like to do the parallel of that, to make you understand how extremism work in those country. Because we have the politicians, in the Congo, the only way he can be vote, is to say "I'm going to kill all the Tutsi. I'm going to exterminate these people. I'm going to kill the Rwandese." Because they can't even differentiate who's who. Those who has those kind of views, are, being applauded, these are like, "finally someone has the balls to try bring some type of justice or to try and restore peace or stability." But they know deep in mind, they know what they are doing. Intentionally, they mislead people. You have a politician here, Ted Cruz, such a brilliant guys, smart smart smart. But, he would do anything to hold onto power. He knows that he's misleading people. They don't. But I do for the sake of power. I'm sorry, I'm trying to say like, what if there was a way those kind of people they should be punished. That's kind of like the same way in my country, or great region. The reward for killing people is a promotion in our country. That's how most people get into presidencies and many other positions. Which, it gives me almost no hope, because those with the extremist point of views, are the ones who are getting access to power. And, it give me no hope, there will never be any justice, because the way to get into power, is through extremism. But I think there will be a system where those that can be punish, with those extremist views, with those who commit such a crime they should be not accepted within the society, or they should be condemned, like literally condemned by international, everywhere. Maybe, we may not bring our people back, but at least people should know there will be consequences for their actions, but are like, "there's no such a consequence for me" - the action most of them took.

[01:00:45] DR: This next question, I just want to ask generally, in the seventeen years since this massacre, and since your time as a refugee, how has your life been different because of what happened, and what's helped you heal?

EH: We still in process of healing. But it's a journey. There's still so many, horrors, we still have to go through. We came from a christianity community, or faith-based community, my people are very very religious, they believe. I think that also push people, because, religious sometimes it brings hope, so like, people are hopeful, for a better, for maybe not a justice on this Earth, maybe afterlife, you know, for those who believes. I think for some people, that is. For others, one of my favorite author is Viktor [Frankl], "Man's Search for Meaning", one of my favorite quotes is like, "he who have a will to live, can bear almost anyhow" - something like that. So that will to live, my will to live - which is part of the healing - is to never give victory for those who want us to be

miserable. They want us, even those who survive, to live a miserable life. To never be happy. That was their purpose. One of the way to defeat that, is to live a life with purpose, a meaningful life, and actually live a life. And that, defeat the purpose of the enemy.

[01:03:35] DR: That's powerful. That's really great. My last question for you is just, tell me a little bit about your relationship, being a member of the Banyamulenge community, and how has that impacted you - are you still involved in the community here in the U.S.? How would you describe your membership of that community?

EH: I am very involved in the community. I represent the State of Illinois for few years - we have an organization called Mahoro Peace Association. We have a representative. I'm also a member of, Gatumba Survivor Foundation. I'm very involved, I attend the meeting regularly. We discuss issue, we look out for the survivors - like right now, the youth, we are raising money to help my cousin, to give her the best wedding she can - she is in Rwanda. We do those kind of things, to keep ourself, each other - I always attend different memorials. I was in Dallas, in August. I may be somewhere else next year.

One thing, what happened to Banyamulenge in Gatumba - it was not the first time. We said, entire generation, crisis we faces, I told you even myself at the early age, for my grandfathers in the sixties buried alive, going back to their kids, kill or burn alive, their grandchildren. Being a member, Banyamulenge community, it's reminder - I don't know the word to put, because - it's a struggle. It's a struggle. Knowing that I can just be killed because of who I am. Not my views, not because somebody knows me - I have two kids now, and, knowing that somebody can just, kill my son and not because of his views and not, any contribution he has done, and not, political views - it's scary, which makes me more fighting for the justice anywhere else, this should not happen anywhere in the world.

DR: I agree with you.

EH: What is the quote, I don't know who said that, "injustice, anywhere, is injustice everywhere" something like that.

But one thing I can clarify before we end, being here, I thought maybe we would be far, far away. We would never even remember that. We would put that behind. But, it's never. It's never. There's no day we don't think about them. We don't think about those days. Every year. We remember. It's a difficult, but we realize we have to. We must remember. In order maybe not, ever happen to any other generation. But unfortunately, it is happening, even in our speaking in our country. Which is another story.