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Interview with Alain Muragwa

Alain Muragwa

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Alain Muragwa was interviewed over Zoom on April 2nd, 2021, by Cami Anjewierden and Miranda Maynard.

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[13:12] MM: Alain, where did you grow up? Can you tell me a little bit about that?

AM: I grow up in DRC - Democratic Republic of Congo - from my childhood until nineteen years old - that's when I left actually my country to neighboring country Burundi. But since my childhood, until nineteen, I was in Congo DRC.

[13:49] MM: And how old were you when you became a refugee after what happened in Burundi?

AM: That's the time, then I was nineteen, so it was 2004. It was in summer, in June, that's when we crossed the border actually there was the ninth I can remember in June. That's the first day I can say I become a refugee. I was nineteen.

[14:25] MM: And where exactly did you go when you became a refugee? You mentioned a couple neighboring countries, where exactly?

AM: Like I said, DRC - as you can know - it's a big country, massive country, the second largest country in Africa after Algeria. DRC is a big one, but it used to have - it's divided in provinces, that's what we said in Congo - and it used to be eleven, but now with the new division they made it into 26. But, the time we left the country was eleven, and that time it's in South Kivu provinces, precisely in Uvira - Uvira was a territory, now is a city, but was a kind of territory - which is bordered with Burundi as a country. That's where I left my country, from Uvira, through the Kavimvira border, which is a border between DRC and Burundi. So I crossed over to Gatumba - Burundi's side - from Uvira - DRC's side.

[16:05] CA: When you were traveling - were you with your family then?

AM: Yeah, fortunately. That time, when we left the country, it was in South Kivu - like I said, province - and there was a war, in a big town, I can say, Bukavu. And we were worried at that time that the war will come straight away to where we used to live in Uvira. Then we left our country, all of us as a family.

[16:46] CA: What was the event that made you and your family decide to leave?

AM: The problem was, there was a conflict between the soldiers in army of DRC, but two commanders were fighting each other. One of them was from our ethnic group, and the other side, was another commander, from the other ethnic group. But the main problem was, they were attacking us, as Banyamulenge, as ethnic group as Banyamulenge. Then the commander from our side, did not like the way we were treated, so there was an argument and they start the fighting. In that sense, the problem becomes bigger and bigger. The civilians started insult us and attacking us, as civilians. So, we were worried and said, "if they started to attack us, tomorrow after tomorrow it's going to be another things." Then we decided to leave immediately.

[18:22] CA: With these experiences that you had, how would you say that you feel justice should be now, or should have been imparted?

EB: What happened really it is an unspeakable tragedy, if I can say - you may recall I told you I was nineteen. And the worst what happen and what I say - it was really horrific. I don't know know if you saw already the film, which show the images what happen then. Really surprised until now you're asking the justice, since then, since 2004 - when the massacre happen - as a survivor, we were asking for a justice to be done. And we don't see any much - the world, I may say, the world, they recognize - they know that it happen - but we need more action to be done to have to have a justice, and tell us why this happened - who did this, and why this happen, so that we can feel really released. And to learn from that, so that tomorrow after tomorrow, this will never happen again. I don't know if I answered your question.

[20:10] CA: Yeah, no that's perfect. Whose responsibility do you think it is to accomplish justice?

EB: Honestly, I'm not expert in the domain. But as a survivor, all I need is a justice. Whoever can be able to give us the justice - it's more than welcome. But I can say, that many stakeholders, or the parties which I want us to participate in this process of justice - if I may say it - we have our government - DRC. Their people were killed like animals - they should involved, and investigate, and have that political willing to say, "our people were killed, so let us investigate and find out who did this." That's number one. Number two, we were in a neighboring country as a refugees, in Burundi - Gatumba, precisely. So the government of Burundi as well as the country they have that obligation to say, "we want to know who did this. They were refugees - we hosted them - and at the end, they were killed." So themselves as well, they as a country should involved in this process, to find out what happen. That's number two. Number three, surprisingly we were under UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] as a refugee. UN must involved as well to help that - even if I can say - the pressure under those

government, to say, "these people deserve justice." It's not really, I don't know if it's not for the first time - maybe you will tell me - I have never understand where the people are refugees, under UN protection, they were killed like we did. Themself as well, they should involved us, parties of this process, to find out and to see if we can have a justice. For a better - for our sakes, and for the world's sakes, for world population, because it happen to us, tomorrow it's going to happen to someone else. Briefly I may say, those are the people I think, they should, really put the effort in needed to see if the justice can be done for a future well-being of people and the population. I don't know if I answered the question.

[23:49] CA: No, that's perfect, and that makes complete sense. I think you're absolutely right that if there aren't consequences for events like this then, what's to prevent them from happening again.

AM: Thank you.

MM: So your family - you were traveling with family at the time - your siblings, children, whoever was with you at the time - how did this impact them? How are they? What happened?

AM: Yeah like I said, this is something which can't be forgettable in our lifetime. Especially in August time, every year in August time, it looks like - to us, it's like it happened yesterday. Psychologically, we are really touched, and it changed our way of thinking. Especially - you can see this time of period, how many years now, without justice, and the world is silent, it's like we are not human beings or we don't deserve a right or we don't deserve a justice like other people.

So like you're asking this question, I don't know how I can answer you, but we still live with the wounds physically, mentally, psychologically, and it going to be forever in our heart and our mind - I don't know if I make sense.

[25:58] MM: Oh absolutely that makes complete sense. Thank you so much for answering this, I really do appreciate it. So were any of your family or friends directly impacted, or injured, or otherwise hurt in some way, at the time.

AM: Fortunately for us, I'm from the family with seven children. I'm the first born. And I still have both parents, dad and mom - we all survived that day. It was a miracle, I don't know what happen, and no one injured in that massacre. But we saw - we were around, we saw what happened, but - and we did nothing, but by miracle really, we were really safe. No one were injured, no one were killed. But that's our direct family I may say - parents and siblings. We survived that day.

[Discussion of similar family experiences]

[27:44] CA: Does all of your family live in the United Kingdom now?

AM: Yes. The process is, after the massacre, we left immediately - we didn't want to stay in Burundi, we didn't really trust the government anymore. We left Burundi 2010, for after the massacre we cross border again between Burundi and Rwanda. We went to live in Rwanda. We went to Rwanda as a refugees. In Rwanda as well, they proposed us to take us again in a refugee camp. We were traumatized, we said, "no, we'd better die in an urban area instead of going in a camp again." Because the system is - down there - if you want the assistance from the UNHCR you need to be in a camp so that you can considered as a refugee. You can have full assistance. But because we were traumatized, about what happened in the camp in Burundi/Gatumba, we said, "no, we will live in urban area, even if we die with hunger, we'd better die with that instead of going in a camp again - we don't know what's going to happen again in a camp." So we stayed there in Kigali city as a urban refugees from 2004 until 2011. That's when we had the resettlement for the UK government, and we all came - we live here in the UK, all of us now we live here in the UK. Sorry for a long... but I want to really show our process, how it happened.

[29:36] CA: That's perfect, thank you. What part of the United Kingdom do you live in?

AM: We live in a north-east of England, a city called Hull. That's the city we live in. Which we consider as the second home. Since 2011, this is ten years now, so it's like our second home. That's where we live now.

[discussion of England]

[31:09] MM: The refugee camp, where you initially were - how would describe the atmosphere, the general feeling there, before and after what happened? Can you describe a little bit what that was like?

AM: Life in a camp is not really easy if it's your first time to live in camp. First of all, when you leave your country, it is the bad things in life you can have. Like they said, east, west, home is the best. You can leave your country for different reason. Maybe you are moving for economic reason, you are moving for studies reason, you are moving for relationship reason - you marry someone from one country, decide to join him or her. That's normal. But to leave your country because you are obliged, because your brothers or your relatives or your neighbor, they don't like you they want - they

chase you out, you become a refugees - that's the worst thing you can have in your life. That's what I realized for the first time.

I was very young, but home - we were fine, it was very easy. You speak your language, the life is very easy, you know the area, you know the place, you know all the system. But when you go in a new country, you start from scratch. And in any new country you learn everything from scratch, and the people from those country - as a host - they never consider you as the human being as they are. I'm sorry to say this. So in a camp, you are not really considered. Yeah you are helped by UNHCR, but you are not really, no way - you leave your country, you don't have a choice.

So life in the camp, it was a transit camp, but we lived there two month, but with the hope that the conflict will end up, and then go back home. That was the idea. Unfortunately, in those two month, things happened suddenly, and that massacre happened. But we were really hopeful that we going to go back home straight away.

[34:15] MM: So how did you feel after - in that time when you were still in the camp? How did you see other people around you, react? What was the atmosphere like?

AM: The thing is, it was a mixture. When we left the country and we went to camp, we found other Congolese refugees as well. If I said other Congolese, those who are not Banyamulenge. They were around. And then the thing is, it was a big area, and they build tent in two ranges. In between us, there was an empty playground. We were in the left, as Banyamulenge, and they were in the right, as the other Congolese.

So in the camp, you don't think as other people they think. You are just thinking about, "what am I going to eat today? What am I going to eat tomorrow? What's going to happen tomorrow?" But you never think, you never plan, you never think of the future - at the time it's like your brain is closed, is locked somewhere. All you can think is about to survive, and what you can eat for today. That's it, that's it. And you can understand that's not the life as a human being.

[36:05] MM: Jumping forward to now, to the present day - we touched on this earlier - what do you feel still needs to occur in order for justice to happen? Do there need to be trials for the perpetrators, memorials, what else? We talked about this a little bit earlier, but is there anything specific that you'd really like to see?

[interview paused to resolve technical issues]

[37:01] AM: What I want to say - when you see me physically, I'm healthy. No concern. But, still insisting we need justice to be done. You know the process of healing, if you are injured or you have a wound, you need a treatment, so that the wound can be

healed. Like I said, every year - I don't know if you know it - we do a remembrance for the massacre - each August of the year.

Each August, to us, is like the massacre happened yesterday. And this, because, when you think what happened, and some of the people claimed to be those who did it, and they are still walking freely without justice to be provided - you feel very sad, and the wound is still fresh and new. You can't be healed. So this justice must be done. It's not like an option - it must be a compulsory, the justice to be done. For us, it's going to help us to be healed.

Even for forgiving, you can't give someone who never recognize, or say, "ok, I did this. I made this for you. I made a mistake - please can you forgive me?" Through justice, if justice is provided, we will feel released. The wound will be healed, and maybe we're going to think for the second process to see how we can forgive, and for better life, for tomorrow. Otherwise, like I said, myself and my direct family, no one injured, no one killed - but we still have our member community. Those who lost almost to their members of their family - parents, siblings, sisters, brothers - they're still around. Maybe stay alone. Put in his or her own shoes, how is thinking today? Without the justice, you think he consider the world as a nice place, or a peaceful place to live in? Never.

So I'm still assisting, please, whoever can bring us a justice, who can help us in this process to find the justice, and find those who committed this massacre, we will really appreciate it. It's for sake of us, and sake of the rest of the world. Like I said, it happened in Rwanda, 1994, the people said, "never again." It happened in Holocaust, the people said, "never again." It happened to us - we still saying "never again." But tomorrow after tomorrow, they're going to do it again for someone else. In order to avoid this, we need to insist that the justice must be done. Those who committed this heinous crime must be treated like they said - the justice must be done, so that the rest of the world said, "ok, if I make this mistake, I would be treated like this." That's what I can say through them.

[41:32] MM: Obviously we've seen how your life has been different and how this has been affecting you - what has stayed the same for you? And what are some things that have helped you to heal, in some ways? Even though justice has not been done, how have you been able to, go about your daily life, with some sort of peace if any - would you mind talking a little bit about that?

AM: Not at all. I can answer you the question. The thing is, even if we left the country - like I said, 2004 - and we experienced that tragedy, that massacre. I was born in the same situation in my own country. We were marginalized by our own people, our own neighbors. We were not treated like other Congolese people in our own country. To be born without the same rights like other people, other national people of the country - you can understand how frustrating is. In your own country. So when you go abroad, and

you find the people are welcome, and who treat you like a human being, and they give you the right of thinking, of expressing, of doing what you want to do, or you like to do - it makes you feel like you are human being. You are considered, you can participate in the world - you know the world is becoming like a village. You may neglect what is happening in Congo now, what is happening in Congo, it's going to have the impact in US. It's going to have impact here, UK where I live. For instance, this pandemic, it showed the world that we are all interconnected.

So, for us - if I answer your question - what feel me released and a little bit of peace is that I'm in the country where, I can feel I have my right. I can express like now, I'm expressing myself, my feeling. I can work, I can do the work I want to do, I like to do. I can go wherever I want to go. I can provide myself, financially, I can study what I want to study - which was not the case then.

But, psychological though, when it comes to justice, you feel like it is incomplete. Even if I'm saying I'm free, I'm happy, I'm in peace - but it is not totally complete.