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Interview with Sasha Chanoff of Refuge Point

Sasha Chanoff

Chris Davey

Sasha Chanoff was interviewed over Zoom on July 6th, 2022, by Chris Davey.

[0:00] CD: My name is Christopher P. Davey, I'm a visiting assistant professor of genocide studies and genocide prevention at the Strassler Center at Clark University, and in addition to this collection I'm talking here today with Sasha Chanoff, of Refuge Point. Thanks for joining me this morning, appreciate your time.

SC: Hey Chris. Yeah, good to be here, I'm glad to talk about this.

[0:30] CD: We're going to talk a lot about your role in what happened after Gatumba, and we're going to talk a little bit about the work that you do, but then also some of your perspective on refugee life, particularly as it defines the Banyamulenge community here in the diaspora, whether it be in parts of Africa, Europe, or here in the US. So if you could please tell us a little about yourself, and about what Refuge Point does.

SC: Sure. I'm the founder and CEO of Refuge Point. We're an organization that finds lasting solutions for the world's most at-risk refugees and supports the humanitarian community to further solutions for refugees as well. Prior to starting Refuge Point - which was founded in 2005, actually right around the Gatumba Massacre, in fact, the Gatumba Massacre was kind of a seminal moment that helped create Refuge Point - but prior to that I had worked for the International Organization for Migration across Africa and I'd worked for - consulted with the UN Refugee Agency in Kenya and prior to that had worked in the US in the resettlement space.

Refuge Point's focus is on identifying refugees in often life-threatening circumstances and helping them to resettle to the US, to Canada, to Australia, EU and other countries and expanding opportunities for refugees who can't stay safely in the countries to which they fled to resettle to countries where they can rebuild their lives. And another dimension of our work is our efforts around self-reliance for refugees who are stuck semi-indefinitely in the countries to which they fled, so that they don't have to be dependent on erratic humanitarian aid. We partner with refugees in our work and we have over the past 17 years built up an organization that's one of the leaders, globally, in overseas identification of refugees for resettlement, working in close collaboration with the UN Refugee Agency and governments, and and we're also a leader in this very nascent space of self-reliance for refugees in countries to which they fled.

[2:58] CD: Thank you. So how does becoming a refugee and then a resettled person impact individuals, but then also families and whole communities.

SC: One of the things that struck me very viscerally and immediately when I started this work - my first job was a job developer in Boston helping refugees to find jobs here where I'm based - was this sense that when people resettle to the US it does transform their own lives, their families lives, but also the history and the trajectory of that history. I've worked with people who have been refugees for sometimes 10 or 20 or 30 years. And sometimes those same people have been discriminated against in their countries of origin as well, and then they fled when war and conflict broke out and continued to be discriminated against. So the opportunity to resettle actually changes the trajectory of a family's history, and you see that in the US, too - I mean my own family had the same experience with my great grandmother who came here fleeing anti-semitism about 100 years ago. I didn't know her, but I heard a lot of stories about her from my grandfather. She raised four kids on her own and established a new life here and that changed the trajectory of our family's history. So I've seen that, with many refugee families as well. It's of course an extraordinarily difficult process to resettle to a new country and gain a purchase there, start to integrate there, and it comes with a lot of extraordinary challenges, but at least you kind of have a view of the future. People have the opportunity to raise their eyes from daily survival - which is often the focus when you're in a refugee situation - to what the future can look like.

[5:15] CD: Given what you mentioned earlier about having worked in Africa in different capacities,would you be able to comment on what the state of refugee processes were in Africa, particularly in Central Africa around the time that you got started in this work.

SC: Well sure, I went to Africa, for the first time in 1999, but I started my work in the US and was working with refugees from Africa - Somalis, and some Sudanese and others in the mid 90s, and at that time, in the kind of late 90s, war was just breaking out in Congo 1996-1998. Somalia had been at war since 1991, 1990, 1989. Sudan had been at war for some time now. The mid 80s people had fled, and obviously the conflict was happening in Sudan and what's now South Sudan too, since the mid 50s on and off. So we were in a situation where the US was resettling a lot of refugees, but more were stuck in Africa. What I saw broadly - I guess this is before the Cold War ended - was that many countries that received refugees and - now I'm actually thinking of Western African countries - gave them opportunities to integrate there and build new lives there.

But after the Cold War, those opportunities were not as many and there were more refugees and people were stuck without the rights that would enable them to move forward in their lives and productive ways - and so they're stuck in situations where they're essentially waiting for something else to happen, waiting to go home, or waiting to be resettled because the pathway to any sort of normalcy and integration in the countries to which they fled were minimal. There are some exceptions now. Uganda has done a really good job of helping refugees to integrate there and build productive

lives there and Tanzania allowed the 1972 Burundians to apply for citizenship as well - over 30 years later - but these are more exceptional and what I've found more is the norm then and now is that people are stuck in a situation where they don't have enough rights or opportunities to really move forward productively, and so they're either waiting for that or to resettle, and the humanitarian response system is predicated on the idea that people will return home and so it's focused on emergency aid - tents, food, and basic assistance - that helps keep people alive, but really doesn't afford them an opportunity to move forward, or to live really with any sort of dignity and normalcy.

[8:36] CD: So we mentioned Gatumba a couple of times here. How did you first learn about what happened there and how did you get involved?

SC: I had been involved in 1999 and 2000 with the US evacuation of Congolese Tutsis from Congo. In 1998 when then-President Kabila announced - I think it was in August 1998 - that Congolese Tutsis were the enemy and needed to be hunted down and imprisoned - this was in response to Rwanda his presence in the Congo, you know more about this than I do - but that essentially triggered mass attacks and imprisonment of Congolese Tutsis across the Congo, and this happened in 1998 in the US Government, probably in part out of a recognition of the fact that there was no action around the Rwandan genocide, decided to negotiate with the Congolese administration - the Kabila government - to evacuate Tutsis who are being attacked there. And even though the administration was supporting those attacks they also allowed the US to come in and evacuate Tutsis.

And so the organization I was working for at the time, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which is now a UN agency, was tasked by the US Government with creating a set of evacuations, and my boss - David Derthick at the time - was kind of the architect of these evacuations. And there were a series of evacuations that brought out about 1500 people, and I met all those people and was providing cultural orientation classes to them as they were in transit countries on route to the US - Benin and Cameroon were two transit countries - and then my boss David sent me in on the last evacuation mission to evacuate people. This is a different conversation, but my colleague and I faced a kind of life-and-death decision during that evacuation where we had been given a list of people to take out and told by our boss that under no circumstances could we diverge from that list, and yet, when we arrived in the safe haven outside of Congo's capital, where the 112 people were gathered who are on our list, we found in addition to them, a group of 32 widows and orphans, who were actually Banyamulenge Tutsis, who had lost many family members and had barely survived and were in really bad shape. And it was clear that if we did not try to include them on our evacuation, they would not necessarily survive, but if we tried to include them, we were jeopardizing the lives of everybody on our evacuation, and my colleague

Shaykah, who was a senior operations officer, told me we had to try to take them - and my boss had given me very explicit instructions, not to take anybody else and that Shaykah might try to convince me to take other people, and I have to stand up to her. And I told her we couldn't take them and she finally convinced me by saying “Sasha are we or are we not humanitarians” and it made me really reflect on who I was, what I was doing there - but she convinced me, and together we made the decision to try. Anyway long story short, we managed to get all those people out.

So through that process and working with that group of 1500 survivors I got to know a lot of Congolese Tutsis, and they all came to the US and resettled here, and some number of them were Banyamulenge. And then jump forward to 2004 and the Gatumba Massacre right when it happened, my phone started ringing because I had established really close friendships with a lot of those people and had watched them build their lives. They arrived in the US from those evacuations, and in the year 2000 mostly. And so over the next four years, I visited many of them, I saw them rebuild their lives here - I helped many as Refuge Point was starting and as I was doing my work we found family members who had survived and from IOM’s perspective, we were able to help reunite many of them, get them resettled - so I kind of immersed myself in people's lives and become very close to this community. So when the Gatumba Massacre happened people started calling me and saying, “my brother was at Gatumba he just lost his life, and he has kids and can you get them over here is there, something you can do.” And so I called up a woman named Kelly Ryan - this is during the Bush administration - and she was a political appointee, an assistant Deputy Secretary of State at the Bureau of Population Refugees and Migration at the State Department. She was in charge of the US refugee program, and I said “Kelly, what's the US doing, for the Gatumba survivors” and she said, “well as far as I understand they're going to be moved to another refugee camp.” And I said, “I know that people don't want to go to another refugee camp - in fact many are in hiding and I also hear that the killers are looking for people and the US should resettle them. If we're going to resettle anybody who's at risk, it makes sense to resettle this group. They can't stay where they are safely, obviously they can't go home, they're afraid to go to another refugee camp,” and I suggested, “why don't I go over there and put a resettlement proposal together for you,” and she said, “great if you do that, then I will make sure they’re resettled.”

And so, then I called up the UN Refugee Agency - I had worked for them too - and said, “I think that we should resettle the Gatumba survivors and I’d like to help you do that. Could I come to Burundi and meet with them? I'll need your assistance in that, because I want to go out to the Gatumba camp, and I'll put a resettlement proposal together for you, so that we can resettle them. I talked to Kelly Ryan, and she was interested in this,” and they said “yes please let's do that we're interested in doing that too.” So I went over to Burundi and went to the Gatumba Massacre site and people were still there. This was - I think it was a few days after, so they had not been moved

anywhere else, they were still there. The site had been cleaned up but I started talking to people there and one man came up to me and said that he had managed to escape that night and the next morning came back and had taken photos of everything, and he handed me this whole trove of photos and said, “please tell the world about what's happened here.” So I interviewed people, talked to people there. Then I went to Bujumbura and some people were in hospitals, there was an MSF [Doctors Without Borders] clinic there that was treating people who'd been injured. So I went to that clinic and I went into hospitals and some people were just hiding in impoverished areas and in Hudson I went and visited them there. I was in contact with lots of my friends in the US, who had given me people's numbers, so I knew where to find people and how to connect with people. So I went and talked to people - many of the survivors, then - and some of them were evacuated to Kenya for medical care. I saw them, I saw some of them later in Kenya, too.

And so, then I came back and put a kind of a rescue/resettlement proposal together and gave it to the State Department and gave it to the UN Refugee Agency, essentially, saying, “this is a specific group of people that face this particular situation, this massacre. They're still in danger here.” The US Government has a history of resettling groups of refugees, and I had been working with many groups of refugees and - as part of my work with IOM [International Organization for Migration] my boss David and I had actually spent time looking at how the US could identify and resettle groups. So this kind of fit right into that idea of a group of people with a distinct collective experience that you can kind of draw a circle around and say, “all the people who faced this experience should be resettled.” So if you present that kind of group to the US Government - at least in the 90s and early 2000s - the idea was you don't have to do individual refugee status determinations and interviews, you can kind of skip all that, because if you were in the Gatumba Massacre it's clear what happened to you. So, then, I don't have to gather that story as part of the resettlement process - the earliest process is to gather people's stories of persecution - I can just jump right to who are you, what's the bio data, and it cuts out a lot of time that it takes to resettle people. In any case, that rescue/resettlement proposal was used as the basis for resettling the Gatumba survivors.

The really tragic thing at that point is it took way too long. It wasn't until I think 2005 and 2006 that everything got into place, which was very painful because people were living in really awful and desperate circumstances. They’re injured, had lost family members, - as you know - had lost parents, a lot of children. But finally people did come to the US and - as far as I know - about 1000 of them came to the US and so that was kind of my involvement, but it was also right around the time that Refuge Point was starting, and what I realized with that experience is that an organization from the outside that understands how the system works, and is connected to the UN Refugee Agency and to governments, can actually play a really important role in identifying and enabling

individuals families and groups of refugees to resettle. And the Gatumba survivors - that was the first example for me of what was possible in terms of creating an organization that would focus on doing this for refugees across the African continent and we've expanded around the world now.

[20:15] CD: I just wanted to ask two follow-up questions to what you just described. First, what were your impressions about the impact of this massacre on this group of survivors, from those initial interviews that you did? What were some of the first things that you started taking away from this?

SC: What was really clear to me was that people were just in shock. They were in total shock. There had been a few times in in my work where I've been really close to these kinds of situations - the Gatumba Massacre was one, and being in the Nuba mountains when Darfuris were arriving there was another time - but in both times, and this, it seemed like people were just in shock, with blank faces if they could talk at all about what they had been through. A lot of people were injured too - I mean physically injured in the hospitals - I have a bunch of pictures of this - and their children were injured, too. So I think it was both people in shock but also just focused on, “is my child going to survive these wounds that she has?” So it was kind of both of those, shock and just focus on, “we need to survive right now.” But also people were scared too because there were rumors that the killers were going to look for survivors. And so people were in hiding in different places.

I contacted a photographer named Christophe Calais, whom I had worked with, and he did a whole series of photographs and came to Burundi sometime later to document Gatumba survivors, and came later to the US to follow up with some families too. Have you seen those photos, by the way?

[22:40] CD: Yes, those photos will be included in the collection that we have. We've been in touch with him. Christophe has given permission for us to use those.

SC: I had worked with him previously on the Somali Bantu resettlement, which was a few years earlier. He had a focus on the Great Lakes and Rwanda, and so I called him up with this group and said, “you should really come and document this” and so he did.

[23:17] CD: You mentioned earlier, the length of time in which families had to wait to go through this process of resettlement and that seemed like a challenge both for you and colleagues working on this but then also for the people experiencing the situation. Maybe if you could say a little bit more about that, or about any of the other challenges that were faced in this particular process of resettling survivors of Gatumba.

SC: After 9/11 there were many more security checks that were put into place, so the resettlement process started taking a lot longer, but there's a lot of complexity around resettlement, and everybody wants access to resettlement, so you have to look at what kind of documentation exists. With the Gatumba survivors, there were lists of people who were in that camp, but they were very ad hoc and rudimentary lists of people. I don't think there was any really good registration done at that time when people had arrived, and so there's a process of just trying to figure out who is actually part of that circle - who makes up the Gatumba survivors - but also the US Government ultimately gave the UN Refugee Agency funding to hire staff to interview those people and get them resettled. But that process also took some time. And so there wasn't immediately the resources, and then when there were, it was just complicated figuring out who's part of this group, and then once you refer these people, the next step is that a US Government Department of Homeland Security official has to come out and actually interview you and then approve you for resettlement. And so that process can take some time depending on when the government sends somebody out - and then, once you're approved, there are a series of medical exams and security checks and cultural orientation classes before you can finally come here. But the whole thing was awful because people were stuck there for more than a year after that, and they needed to leave as quickly as possible. I mean that was an emergency situation. Even after the massacre, that was an emergency situation.

What it signaled to me was that there is a need for an agency that could focus specifically on this sort of thing - bring resources to bear as quickly as possible and act in a nimble way to help people who had faced this sort of horror to resettle as quickly as possible, and that was part of the real motivation and vision for Refuge Point too - is to be able to do that.

[26:15] CD: You mentioned earlier about the different versions of lists, of not only people who were at Gatumba but then those who were survivors and trying to identify people, the general understanding is that Gatumba was a refugee-run camp. Given your experience in other countries as well - are you able to say what your impressions were of the conditions of the camp before the massacre, having got there after the fact? Was this a camp that was reasonably well run, did it offer safety and protection or not?

SC: No, I don't think it offered safety and protection. In fact, as far as I recall, before the Gatumba Massacre happened, the people who were there had said, “we can't stay here, this is too close to the border, the extremists who are attacking us might cross the border and attack us here. It's not safe.” But as far as I understand the Burundian government did not give the UN Refugee Agency permission to move people to another camp, and so they were stuck there. I remember looking at registration cards with lists

of names on it and was told that you know there's food distributions that go on, we use these cards to get food distributions. But all of it was very rudimentary.

When I arrived there, it was a few days after. There were big UN military vehicles there guarding the place, kind of tank-like, white protection vehicles. Obviously, maybe necessary at that point but didn't prevent what happened because they weren't there prior to that - but I think the flag had been raised around security concerns by the refugees themselves before the Gatumba Massacre.

[28:06] CD: So a lot of the survivors that have spoken and had their voices recorded around what's happened that we're documenting in this project, talk about justice, and given your experience with this community as a group of refugees and then others as well, how important is this notion of justice for survivors? And then also remembering what happened - why are these two things important for them?

SC: I think there are probably many elements of things that are important for them. One is, initially, the security and safety, and along with that is the security and safety of family members. There are many Gatumba survivors now who're in the US who have family members who are still in Burundi or in other countries, and may not be safe or feel safe. Justice was a big one, because bringing the perpetrators to justice could prevent this sort of thing from happening again. One of the things that I found important was the fact that when a group of people are in a place where they're safe and can rebuild their lives - those for example those who've come to the US - then they can pursue the things that are most important to them, including seeking justice for those, including calling their Congress people, including engaging in whatever ways they - feel politically or personally or through their community - to try to bring justice to bear in those situations. I know that that has been complicated in Burundi, because of the very fraught political situation in Burundi, since then, before then, after that time as well - but from what I've seen from the community, that feels like a really important point that - I don't know if it helps to bring closure - but helps people perhaps to move forward.

And then in terms of remembering, I've been to a number of Gatumba memorials, and they have a very - it seems to me - pretty explicit way of remembering what's happened, which has included showing video of what has happened and photos of what's happened, which has seemed both cathartic and horrifying, to bring those things back to the surface again. And I've seen, been part of Gatumba memorials and spoken at Gatumba memorials and watched as others have spoken and as videos have been shown, and just seen the kind of trauma that it brings up for everybody again, because everybody's connected to those people. It's not like you're watching a video from far away - it's your family and friends that you're seeing. I'm not sure if that answers your -

[31:13] CD: Oh it does, definitely. So just to sort of round-off our conversation here, a lot of the work that you've described that you do and your organization is involved in, is around not only the act of resettlement, but then life after and getting people prepared for life in a new country. What would you be able to say about survivors of Gatumba - having had some long term contact with them - in terms of how life has turned out for many survivors now that they've resettled in a new country.

SC: A few big things, I mean the trajectory of people's lives, I think, is not dissimilar to the trajectory of other refugee families' lives when they arrive in a new country and help to establish themselves. And some of the key dimensions of that are real challenges. First, of course, like just getting a footing. Getting jobs and supporting yourself, but then your kids have opportunities for school, there are inevitably cultural rifts between parents and children for a variety of reasons, where children are becoming Americanized and parents want to hold on to their own culture and want their children to hold on to that own culture, and so there are a lot of conflicts and challenges that come up in an interpersonal dynamic within families, because of these challenges. Also parents often don't speak English and the kids speak English, so they're in these strange positions of power of translating for them.

But overall I've seen that people have established themselves here, have built new lives here, have gone on to marry, get educated, build businesses, find productive jobs, contribute to their communities, become citizens and really become part of the American fabric - while at the same time there's a really distinct Gatumba survivor group that stays together and knows one another - and Banyamulenge more broadly. So those are some of my broad thoughts around building new lives here.

As part of Refuge Point's work we started advocating for the most at-risk refugee groups across the African continent, but this included Gatumba survivors and Banyamulenge too in different countries, as well as other groups from Congo. But one of the things we saw is that Banyamulenge who had fled to Tanzania or Kenya or Ethiopia didn't necessarily feel safe going to refugee camps, and so ended up in urban areas instead. And so at that time, back then after the Gatumba rescue/resettlement proposal, we put another proposal together for the State Department/UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] to resettle groups of Banyamulenge in different countries across the region, as well as to look at other Congolese who were in really desperate circumstances as well, so not just Banyamulenge. But that is a specific group that felt like after the Gatumba Massacre - and also there had been attacks in Tanzania too - that people didn't feel safe in the countries to which they had fled.

[34:52] CD: Lastly, as a reflective point, you've talked about how back in 1998 and 1999 you worked with people who live in the country or are local aid workers to help people find refuge and that happened with Gatumba as well. Could you speak broadly about

how it is that local experts - people who live in conflict-riven countries and refugees themselves - help shape the work that you do, or just generally refugee processes - Is this something that does happen, or should happen more often?

SC: I would say first, back then - we're talking now 20 years ago, or so - if you're thinking about the international aid/humanitarian response regime, you did not see that refugees themselves had any say or engagement in programs, largely, that impacted their lives, and that the regimes are largely run by international staff who are coming in to a large degree. When Refuge Point started in Nairobi, the first thing we did was we started resettlement efforts - the Gatumba survivors was the first resettlement effort - but we started identifying families too in Nairobi who needed resettlement, but at the same time recognizing that people were stuck there for a long time, and recognizing the desperate circumstances that people faced in Nairobi we started medical clinic and then abroad, which grew into an effort to enable people to become self reliant. And this was done in close collaboration with refugees in Nairobi themselves, who were talking to us about what their needs were. We were able to raise funds and build programs based on what they were saying.

That was very different. This idea of building programs with refugees, based on what they're saying and what their needs are, is very different than the the broad, top-down approach of governments providing funding in refugee camps and UNHCR running refugee camps with explicit dimensions of support that are kind of de-facto and necessary to keep people alive. Food, shelter, education, these things are good and necessary, but don't actually help people necessarily move forward in their lives, productively. And so in Nairobi, we very quickly saw the way that people needed to move forward in their lives, and because we weren't going to the UN Refugee Agency or governments for funding - Refuge Point was raising private funds - we were able to build programs that were based on what their needs were and how those needs changed, and so we built a holistic model of support that we now refer to as the “self-reliance runway” - but it's essentially a set of services that ideally lead you to a point where you can support yourself and that you're integrating more economically and socially in the place that you fled and so Nairobi is like our big flagship program.

So I think the short answer to your question is that working with refugees to help them take the lead on programs that impact their own lives was not the norm, still is not the norm. It's certainly something that Refuge Point has been focused on, and I think there are others that are focused on that too, and there's a lot of discussion around the necessity for that and they're starting to be a change now towards centering refugee leadership in humanitarian response so that people can be in charge of programs that impact their own lives and help to build those programs and shape those programs, but that certainly wasn't common or even the thing that you saw back some time ago.

[39:07] CD: Well, I appreciate your time and for adding in this rich layer of detail into sort of the process behind what happened after Gatumba to facilitate survivors coming out of Burundi. Is there anything else you wanted to add, that you feel would be important to mention that I haven't asked you about?

SC: No, I think we've covered everything. I mean, I think that some of the key things are one, the recognition that there are groups of people out there in need of resettlement because they can't stay where they are - the Gatumba survivors were a high watermark of people in need of resettlement. The opportunity to do that - working outside of the normal boundaries of organizations by creating something new, the fact that when people have come to the US they've been able to establish and rebuild their lives and then pursue their own interests, and some of that includes people who are speaking very publicly about what happened at Gatumba and are able to pursue justice, are able to reach leaders, are able to write books and do other things, and some have been motivated to start or to pursue organizations that are helping to bring peace and stability to the Congo or addressing the needs of refugees. So all of that highlights that when people are in a situation where they can advance in their lives then they will do that in ways that make the most sense for them and their communities. It highlights the necessity and importance of getting people who are in refugee situations into places where they're able to rebuild, because, then their vision of the future and of justice and of what's possible and of life, is different from ours and can help to shape their communities and the world more broadly, and bringing those voices to the front is really critical.