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7-9-2022

Interview with Ndisabiye Steve

Ndisabiye Steve

Ezra Schrader

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Recommended Citation

Steve, Ndisabiye and Schrader, Ezra, "Interview with Ndisabiye Steve" (2022). *Interviews*. 8.
https://commons.clarku.edu/gatumba_interviews/8

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Steve Ndisabiye was interviewed in Concord, New Hampshire, on July 9th, 2022, by Ezra Schrader.

[1:45] ES: Where did you grow up? Where did you spend most of your childhood?

NS: I'd say Uvira. Uvira's like DRC. It's in the South Kivu province of Lake Tanganyika, that's where I grew up.

[2:00] ES: How old were you when you became a refugee?

NS: I became a refugee - like to go to Gatumba? Because in the Congo, it's hard to think while there is too much stuff going on, but '98, you know, '96 when Mobutu was moving out. I would say we were going back and forth.

[2:23] ES: While you were inside Congo?

NS: Yes, I was in the Congo, yeah! But going to Burundi I would say, I was like twelve years old.

[2:30] ES: And when you left for Burundi were you with your whole family, or?

NS: Yes, with my mom, brothers, and pretty much everybody. There were my people, No! It wasn't just my family, a whole group of Banyamulenge people moving at the same time.

[2:45] ES: How big was the group you went with?

NS: It's hard to tell, but at the camp, it was a good size, but top of my head, I don't know, but I'd say a thousand, maybe.

[2:59] ES: What was the event that made you and this group flee?

NS: The war, you know. In Congo, the big issue came from Bukavu. Bukavu is the province's capital. That's where the war started, it was between one of the Banyamulenge tribes, like my tribe, and then the government was the issue they fought. After the fight, I would say it's like 200 kilometers from Uvira, it's too far, but when that happened there, people in Bukavu were killed, Banyamulenge were killed, and then in Uvira the same thing started happening; killing of people, some people like civilians. Then we had only one option, it's either we flee quickly, or we get to be killed. That's when we moved to Burundi.

[3:53] ES: When you got to Burundi from Uvira, what was the general atmosphere of the camp like before the violence, and then after the violence?

NS: Actually, there were two camps; There was Gatumba one, went there and went back to Congo, so..., the second is Gatumba, that's when the violence happened. I would say when we were there before the violence, it was okay... It was okay. But the location itself wasn't that great. But at that time, we did not think about it, because from the Congo, border to the camp, it was maybe like two kilometers. So, it was pretty much from the Congo the place you kind of pass through before going to Burundi... You pass the camp. It was right there on the border. Before the violence, it was okay, there wasn't anything suspicious or something like that, it was just like - we got used to it, you know? Been there for a little bit, so...

[4:48] ES: How long were you there?

NS: Maybe like three months. Because the violence happened, the genocide happened on August 13th, so we fled in May, so about three months, that's how long we were there.

[5:06] ES: Obviously, it changed, but how did it change after the violence, the camp?

NS: After the violence at the camp, we for sure knew many people who had changed. Because the stuff happened, some people were wounded - physically - and some people got mentally affected. Even myself too. After the camp, and after the violence, I wasn't the same guy for a long time. I believe I went back to normal, but it was too much, you know. Because a lot of stuff happened in a very short time.

[5:47] ES: Can you talk about those challenges you faced after the violence?

NS: After the violence, I would say - I think I had something called anger, and fear. I had anger and fear, I had no trust - stuff like that happened to me for a long time. I remember after we fled, we moved to the place a little bit temporarily, so when somebody dropped, let's say you drop something down, everybody would start running. So, people were very affected by what happened there, and then we see as time goes by. Maybe some people went back to normal, but other people are still affected even today.

[6:37] ES: How did the violence affect your friends and family who were there?

NS: I would say for myself, I must say that I lost my dad there. So... my dad, my two young brothers, they both were killed, and I saw my dad's body. I only tell because he was wearing the same clothes, I can tell because the bones were down, and I can tell what

was left there, that's how I knew it was my dad. My young brother, the second youngest, saw him, and my youngest brother never saw him. My mom got shot, it's like a grenade fragment. Me too I got a little... this little... [Shows scar on the back of left arm, above elbow]

[7:17] ES: What caused that, do you know?

NS: It's the grenade, you know there's a fragment. So, after it affected me of course. I lost my dad; I lost my two brothers. My young brother, whose name is Timbasi, even right now he's in the mental hospital. I think after that happened; he got damaged in his brain. He wasn't physically damaged, but mentally damaged. He has never recovered from that.

[7:48] ES: He's your younger brother, right? So, he was even younger than you -

NS: No! He's not the youngest - [he's him], there were two youngest that were killed, but he's younger than me. So, it's me, him, then the other two. So obviously it affected my family from there, because when it got to my brother, he started acting stuff, and then stopped talking stuff about Gatumba - I thought he was going to get normal, and then he just kept getting - and even now, he was a normal child, but now he's, I don't know if he's not coming back. So, it affects me, and my family, especially losing your dad, and your brothers, of course it's going to affect you. And when you see the world and the same things happening - in 2004, and still happening today. It's very scary that there're no people to help, to stop what happened and not from happening again. So that's also the biggest fear because I'm afraid it's going to happen again. It's happening, actually in Congo. It is happening here.

[8:57] ES: How do you feel that justice - stopping it from happening again - what should've been done? Has it happened at all, or?

NS: I think nothing happened from justice. Because, after the genocide happened, there's a guy - I think now he lives in Burundi, with National Force of Liberation (FNL), Agathon Rwasa, he was the leader of this group - one of the speakers of the group, came out said they killed us, and then he said only because we are Tutsi. Then he said all the Hutu people were killed, I don't know, there was a war in Burundi. They saw Hutu people being killed and they were going to kill them. So, I think the justice, like the guy who admitted he did that in my mind it's a genocide you know. He plotted it, and then he did it, and then... his intention was to destroy everybody. Those who survived, it's not like he - I would say it's for God's mercy you know. But I would say the justice wasn't there, if there was justice, maybe the people who did stuff like that then, even talk about it on the radio, the BBC, then say like we did it, and then the international did nothing. None of the

refugees there was armed. The people who were killed - there were like a hundred people, from the Banyamulenge - there's no soldier or the people who were attacked, nobody was killed, so that's been - we had nothing. So, I believe if there was justice then that could prevent what happens now because people will see [like] those who did those stuff that happened, but now I think justice must be there to just stop that from happening again.

[10:40] ES: Who's job is it to bring it there - to bring justice?

NS: I think when it came to this, I would say it's international. Everybody, we're all human, you know. Because it's not just like one tribe issue - it's a big issue. Justice should be there from the United Nations (UN) and the United States (U.S). They can help, because I know it's a powerful country and Europe - but we say the UN should. In my mind, it's a genocide, you know. When genocide happens, it's not who's going to do it - it's everybody's doing it. It's going to raise involvement and stop that stuff from happening.

[11:18] ES: And your life after the violence - I mean, it's been eighteen years - how has your life been different, has anything stayed the same, is there anything that helps you heal from this?

NS: I would say my life has changed, and as I said, after that happened I had fear and anger - that emotional stuff. And even today sometime - sometimes when I reflect on my mind, I think about the past, of course, I feel like something is missing, something is missing - especially when stuff is still happening right now. When I see something happen, it's like I try to - I don't know how to explain - I try to live and then think like I have to give a better life, you know because my mom is here, I have to be better than I was. But sometimes stuff happens in my life too, and I'm still trying to improve my life, but Gatumba definitely affected my life.

[12:30] ES: Coming here to the U.S., has that improved your life? Coming here to New Hampshire?

NS: I would say yes because when I got here, I would say yes. I'm happy, I'm proud of America, and I'm happy to be here. So, I would say yes, my life has improved, in many different ways. So, when I moved here, I joined the cross country team, I tried to be involved with the community stuff, that keeps me busy - that's when I start getting busy and not think about what happens often, so that helped me a lot, then, meet new friends, get involved. And sometimes, when you're here you make a little bit more money - more money than Africa - sometimes you help friends back home - those stuff make you feel like you're doing something productive for you for the people, so I would say yes.

[13:26] ES: Those are all the questions I have. Is there anything that you want to share? Is there anything that you feel I missed?

NS: What I can say about what happened in Gatumba, it's a small refugee camp and then the people who killed did not want us to go back - that's what I think. Because we were planning to go back to Congo, and this time, there're too many opinions - some people say it was the Burundian government, it was the Congolese government - what I can say is I think there must be justice because if there's no justice it's going to keep going. People need to be accountable for that stuff, killing people, refugees, innocent kids, stuff like that. Shouldn't just let it go, no. It may take like - it's been eighteen years, but it may take like twenty or something, but we can't stop. People who're doing research, can also help us to explain our feelings and then we need justice, it must be there.