

## *Jean-Marie and Émérita*

### **Flight without knowing where one will end up ...**

*A migrant experience like many others ... certainly many other cases would have been worth mentioning had we obtained the testimony. This experience was probably not the most dramatic nor the most painful... Since the first events happened over twenty years ago, the people involved have sufficient hindsight to reappraise those events today. Recorded in March 2016, this oral testimony was edited by the Spiritus editorial staff.*

In 1994, Jean-Marie and Émérita lived in Kigali with their four girls, aged twelve, ten, four and one year. Their mother, Émérita, worked for a company in the city, while Jean-Marie their father, was a senior officer in the National Gendarmerie of Rwanda. On the evening of 6<sup>th</sup> April, the 'plane bringing Rwanda's President Habyarimana and President Ntaryamira of Burundi from a regional Summit in Tanzania was shot down as it was about to land at the airport. This set the country ablaze. Jean-Marie immediately realized the threat hanging over him and his family as ethnic Hutus. On 8 April, Émérita managed to be extradited with her daughters to her prefecture of origin, Kibuye, before going on to Bukavu, the big city closest to neighboring Zaire. Jean-Marie joined them in July.

#### *Save one's life and that of one's kin*

However they were not safe. Some Rwandans came looking for Jean-Marie; his life was in danger. An official, a Zairian, whom they had helped and who had become a friend when he was stationed in Kigali, yielded to the entreaties of one of his daughters, whose godmother Émérita was, to try to get them out of Bukavu. Finally, in August 1994, they were got out and this family welcomed them to their home in Kinshasa, far from the border with Rwanda.

Even there, the situation was difficult and uncertain; it was not safe. The UNHCR (High Commissioner for Refugees) officers advised them not to apply for refugee status in this country. But where could they go?

Here too another bond of godmother to goddaughter came in. The director of the company where Émérita had worked in Kigali was of Belgian nationality. His wife, an airhostess, had become a great friend of the family and godmother to their last little girl. This friend then did her best to facilitate the process to obtain visas for them for Belgium, but without success. They were advised to go to Cameroon: because they could settle there on a long term basis.... However, despite all the steps taken, no visas were issued. Under pressure, thanks to a friend at the airport who used his influence, they managed to board, with almost no luggage, a flight bound to Douala in March 1995.

From Douala, the family went to settle in Yaoundé. The Belgian airhostess' friendship again proved very precious. On flights to the capital of Cameroon, she was able to bring clothing from Belgium for them as well as for other refugees from Rwanda in Yaoundé. She also asked some of her airline colleagues to contribute funds to enable Émérita to start a small business. On a plot of land that was made available to Jean-Marie he set about learning to become an agriculturalist: growing cassava and sweet potatoes that also benefitted other refugees.

## *New departure for the unknown*

However due to health issues a new departure was necessary. Émérita was insulin-dependent and, in Yaoundé, the supply of drugs, which were very expensive, was not regular. The eldest daughter who was asthmatic often suffered from allergies. To leave again ... but where to? In August 1996, the two older girls caught a flight to Belgium unaccompanied. The elder one was welcomed by an old neighbour from Kigali whom Jean-Marie had one day helped and narrowly saved. There she received treatment and be healed. Émérita tried to join her daughters, but without success. Ill, without a visa, she took the risk of applying to smugglers and finally succeeded, at the end of 1996, to take a flight to France with the two youngest girls. She settled in the suburbs south of Paris. Jean-Marie had to wait until April 1997 before he could join them.

They both applied for refugee status to the OFPRA (French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons). It was a long and complex procedure to obtain official recognition of their refugee status. Émérita was granted one after two years. But things were much more difficult for Jean-Marie. Despite several testimonies in his favour, the authorities in charge of his dossier demanded formal proof that he had not taken part in the genocide: "If you did not kill, how is it that you were not killed? Explain why you are alive? It seems that every Hutu soldier or official was, until proven not guilty, presumed to be "genocidal". Multiple summons followed, interrogation by soldiers supposed to understand the course of events better, appearance before a Board of Appeal, presentation of documents approved by the Rwandan justice itself to the OFPRA Services.... It took a long-drawn out four years for Jean-Marie's dossier to be eventually approved. Meanwhile, it was only as Émérita's daughters, that the two older girls who had been granted refugee status as minors in France, could go to Belgium.

## **Re-appraisal of the road travelled**

### *To be stripped bare*

The most difficult moments of our journey were the departures: leaving Rwanda, leaving Bukavu, leaving Kinshasa.... In Rwanda, we had made our way: career, respectable profession ... we were esteemed. We had begun to prepare for our future retirement.... Then we fell into the "void": had to start again from zero as we were of "no account", "stripped" of everything, in a state of permanent insecurity. In particular, when we left Kinshasa dressed in the minimum, we were stripped of everything we had and we did not even know where we were going. Materially and socially, we had lost everything. Indeed, with regard to our children we were unable to provide for our own needs. We were alive thanks to the help of others.... Had we not continued to struggle tirelessly, we would probably have died or even gone mad. Now we have both found a job, a normal life; we have regained confidence in ourselves. Life is an on-going struggle.

Another very difficult time was the procedure and the delay in being granted the status of refugees in France, in particular for Jean-Marie: "What enabled me to keep going through all of this was that I had nothing to hide. I knew I was innocent, my conscience was at peace. I also had the support of my wife who knew the whole situation well. Anyway we could not have lied because we were known in Rwanda". Émérita: "Having a clear conscience, we never deviated from our path; we trusted in God. We prayed a lot; God gave us the strength".

## *The treasure of friendship*

In addition there was the friendship of people. This Belgian lady, the stewardess, whose husband had leukemia, continued to help us despite everything on numerous occasions. That family in Kinshasa who made us leave Bukavu and welcomed us to their home. The Cameroon neighbour in Yaoundé who, to enable our two older girls to be able to leave Cameroon, agreed to act as their guardian which enabled them to travel with other children who were going to a summer camp in Europe.... It was a succession of “miracles” of this kind that helped us to survive all this. As Christians, wherever we went, we visited parish communities and we were always met with friendship and support. In the Paris region, *Secours Catholique* effectively supported us. The Church did not let us down. We are now members of the parish animation team.

As regards who we really are today and if we feel at home here in France? Each of us has his/her way of responding:

Jean-Marie: « I am from Rwanda. I have made an effort to enter the French culture. On a professional level, I have won competitions; I have become a counsellor on the Labour Board and I feel comfortable in this role. So, on the one hand, I feel at home. But, on the other hand, I still feel Rwandan”.

Émérita: “I sought straightaway to find social work: first as a volunteer and then as an employee in a socio-cultural center in the neighbourhood. I often had to face homeless people, homeless people worse off than I was. That made me feel useful and it helped me to regain confidence. Furthermore, I did a training course to become a specialized teacher which enabled me to attain the same professional level as the people here. Today I feel totally French; but I am still Rwandan.... I realize that I have experienced “life” in a way few people here have any conception. I feel it is a sort of privilege as compared to them ...”.

Our daughters, now with us in France, did not really have enough time to feel at home in Rwanda, even though the two eldest have childhood memories of the country. Now they have friends, French girls and boys. However, the two little girls are not aware of the difference between Hutu -Tutsi; they say: “you are Rwandan, I am Rwandan: O. K.”, and that's enough for them.

For us it is rather different.... We left behind thousands of dead; some of our relatives remained on the spot, barely respected, in misery. It is distressing to see the current situation in the country. But we have kept up our friendship with all the Rwandans we knew there, Hutu and Tutsi. Of this or that person, with whom we have stayed in close contact, we can truthfully say: This person is a Tutsi; but we feel he or she is like a brother/sister!

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