

PART I

The Genocide

Encountering the Genocide

In a recording studio at Solace Ministries, Mama Lambert described in detail how her husband and five of her children had been killed during the genocide against Tutsis in 1994. She escaped the slaughter of more than 800,000 Tutsis by Hutu extremists by hiding in the bushes for three months with her one-year-old son.¹ To the interview she brought a picture of her murdered husband, the letters written from prison of the young man who confessed to killing her two daughters, and the little shirt that her son had worn while she carried him on her back. At the end of the interview she volunteered to take us [Don Miller and Lorna Miller] to the actual location where the deaths of her family occurred. She wanted us to see the foundation stones of her destroyed house, the beautiful hillside where their cows had grazed, and the memorial where she had buried her family members and other loved ones.

At the top of the hill we climbed out of a four-wheel-drive vehicle and made our way down the side of the hill. Stopping at a clump of bushes, Mama Lambert said, "this was the entrance to our garden," and pointing, she said, "there was where our house stood." Describing their property, she continued: "We had a very big land that was fertile. We cultivated and grew all kinds of crops except rice." As Don set his video camera on a tripod, Mama Lambert looked across to the green valley and the hills in the distance, populated with houses and small farming plots. When she turned to face the camera, tears were streaming down her cheeks.

On a not too distant hill, in April 1994 they had the first warning sign of an impending disaster. Houses were being burned. Suddenly their Hutu

neighbors with whom they had enjoyed good relations became hostile. Her husband, who was the headmaster of a school, was loaded onto a truck at the roadblock up the hill from their house, and along with other leaders in the community he was taken down the hill to a lake where he was killed and his body along with hundreds of others was discarded. Mama Lambert has been able to exhume the bodies of her children and give them proper burial, but her husband's bones are mired somewhere in the sediment of this lake. Many times, she has wondered if the lake could be drained so that she and other survivors could uncover the skeletal remains of their loved ones and bury them properly.

Amid the tangled brush, we then made our way to the actual site of her house. The foundation was completely overgrown. In addition to slaughtering Tutsis with machetes and clubs, the "killers," as survivors refer to them, looted the houses of their victims, stealing kitchen items as well as door frames, windows, and metal roofing sheets, and then lit the houses on fire to make certain that no one would return so that they could assume ownership of the land. Later Mama Lambert said that she wanted to rebuild this house, not to live in it herself, but so that the neighbors would say, "This was Placid's home." For her, it is important that her husband's name not be erased.

And then several surprising, unscripted encounters occurred. As we walked a short distance to a neighboring house, we saw a young woman and her child. Mama Lambert greeted her and then told us that they had been godparents to this girl's elder sister. "Whenever we had parties, we would share together." She said that her children had taught these kids how to read, and her husband had generously supplied milk and even paid the school fees of Hutu children in the area. After greeting her, Mama Lambert turned to this young woman and said, "Could your family have not hidden at least one of my children?" In response, the woman said, "Please forgive us. . . . It hurts me that I have no neighbor, that my child has no one to play with." She was a girl at the time of the genocide and protested that she didn't have any control over what was happening. Reflecting on the events of the genocide, she said, "We did not benefit anything by killing you."

We then looked up the hillside and saw an older woman walking down the path from the road. Mama Lambert embraced this woman—a Tutsi who was married to a Hutu—and turning to us, said, "This woman's son killed my two daughters." In 1998 this young man wrote a letter to Mama Lambert from prison in which he explained what he had done. In the letter, "He narrated how he killed my children. Some were stoned in the chest and others had their

heads cut off. When I read this I was so confused, and I actually got angry with the leaders of the prison for having allowed him to send me this kind of letter. I knew that my children were killed, but I did not know all those horrible details.”

We then made our way back up to the road where our vehicle was located. Mama Lambert pointed to a house that had been owned by a Hutu who now is hiding in France, or at least this is her assumption since he escaped Rwanda with French troops. It was in this house that her daughters were raped, along with many other girls. After the *gacaca* courts,² where many killers confessed to their crimes, survivors found twenty-six bodies that had been thrown into a pit latrine behind this house. Everyone was naked, including her two daughters and the body of her mother-in-law. In this latrine, they found the decapitated head of one of her daughters. Across from this house Mama Lambert had built a memorial with the names of those who were buried there. She went down the list, one by one, recalling the names of each person, including her two daughters, other relatives, and a neighbor who is buried there along with her five children.

Collecting ourselves after these rather dramatic encounters, we crossed the road and made our way up another hill. Mama Lambert waved her arms in all directions saying this entire area was populated with Tutsis; now only an occasional house was in sight. She said that what hurts her is that Hutus now live in nice houses, but houses of Tutsis are destroyed. In her view, perpetrators of the genocide look at the lack of Tutsi homes and say, “What we did was a success.” The fact that she has forgiven the killer of her daughters does not alter the bitterness that she feels about the genocide.

Near the top of the hill we entered a small banana plantation. There was an indentation in the earth, which in 1994 was the pit where the bodies of Tutsis were being thrown as they were slaughtered. Miraculously, a young woman survived the killing and gave witness to what happened. The woman who survived said that she saw her own mother’s head being cut, falling on the stomach of one of Mama Lambert’s sons. It is also in this pit that Mama Lambert found the remains of her other son, who wanted to be a doctor.

At a nearby memorial, where 109 bodies were exhumed from this pit, flowers had been put on the gravesite. One bouquet said, “We cannot forget you.” Another one read, “You left when we still needed you.” Mama Lambert said that they had hurriedly buried these bodies after they were discovered so that they would not be dug up and eaten by dogs. From the banana plantation, we

trudged up to the top of the hill. Mama Lambert pointed across the valley to a hillside some distance away. It was there that she and her one-year-old son hid for three months. At this site and throughout the day, Mama Lambert wiped away her silent tears.

SURVIVING

Mama Lambert's personal odyssey of the genocide began on April 24, 1994, when her husband was killed, although she did not witness his death nor that of her children. These details were revealed in the *gacaca* court and in the confession that was sent to her from prison by the individual who had killed her daughters. Her own memory of the following three months is absolutely vivid, however. She survived with her one-year-old son, Lambert, whose name she took after the genocide—the “mother of Lambert” or Mama Lambert.

During the three months from April through June, she experienced several different moments when she could have been killed. On one occasion, with Lambert on her back, she remembers being chased through a banana plantation by the killers. A Twa³ woman saw her running and motioned for her to crouch behind some pottery that she was making. “I hid behind the pots and they did not see me. The Twa woman told them that neither Hutus nor Tutsis are allowed to step near unfinished pots. That’s how I survived.” This woman then made porridge for Lambert and this kept him from going hungry for the moment, but they were sent away since it was dangerous for anyone to harbor a Tutsi.

After leaving the Twa woman she narrowly escaped death again. Killers were placing Tutsis into three different lines—men in one line, women in another, and children in a third line. One by one they were cutting them with machetes and throwing them into a pit. She recalls people calling on God for help. “Some were praying, Catholics were reciting the rosary, and children who had been cut and were still alive in the pit were saying, ‘Please forgive me, I will not do it again.’ Others were saying, ‘I did not urinate in bed.’ And still others were pleading that they will never be a Tutsi. And others were asking God, ‘Please receive my soul.’” In remembering such things, Mama Lambert said, “My heart becomes unstable.”

When her time came to be cut and thrown in the pit, she asked the lady in front of her whether she or her daughter was going next. “I told her that I was scared seeing our children being cut down, and she answered me, ‘All I know

is that we are entering heaven. Just be silent.” Then, just as she was putting Lambert down from her back, a boy appeared who had once been her student. He said to the leaders, “Look at my teacher, just hand her to me. I will kill her the way I want.” This boy then started kicking Mama Lambert, leading her away from the rest of the group. This was his strategy for saving her.

When they were at a sufficient distance, Mama Lambert remembers the boy saying to her that you are not going to die. That she had treated him well and encouraged him to study. She remembers him saying, “If you die, you will die from another place, but I cannot stand seeing you killed.” He told her to stay in the bushes and not enter any houses, because the next day they were going to search to see if anyone was hiding Tutsis.

During the period of hiding, Mama Lambert began to question God’s intentions, saying, “You protected me in ’59, ’63, ’73, why don’t you protect me in this war of ’94?” She told God that if she survived, she would serve as a witness to what happened to the Tutsis. Meanwhile, her son Lambert was very near death. He groaned for a while and then grew silent, so she put him on her back and continued hiding. Some fleeing mothers would put their babies near the home of a Hutu, hoping that a sympathetic woman would take the child. Mama Lambert refused to do this, but in the month of May she thought that her son was nearly dead from lack of nutrition and water. She said that Lambert developed a very thick yellow fluid in his mouth, which she tried to extract without success. He was literally dying in her arms and she began to wonder, “If he dies, where am I going to bury him, and what will I do?” In fact, she began to regret that she and Lambert were not killed at the pit where people were being slaughtered.

During this time, they were surviving on wild fruits that would cause sores in their mouths. Because it was rainy season, they would wet their mouths by licking wet leaves. She even remembers putting damp soil in her mouth, trying to suck out the moisture. And other times, when it was raining hard, she would cup her hands to catch falling drops. At one point, in anger at God, she threw a Bible that she was carrying into a bushy area. And when she looked to see where it landed, she said, “I saw wild fruits which were ripe.” She immediately picked them and squeezed the juice into the mouth of little Lambert, which revived him from a coma-like state. Momentarily, they both regained strength.

But life was miserable in this location. Caterpillars kept falling on them, and Lambert would make a sign to her so that she would brush them off him.

He also would sometimes alert her to danger that he sensed. And somewhat miraculously, he never cried. Perhaps he lacked the strength.

Finally, she grew tired of the rain and caterpillars and thought of going to the house of a Hutu man to whom her husband had given a cow. They had also paid the school fees of his son who lived with them, and she thought he might take pity on her. But instead, when they arrived the man got his *panga*—a machete—and was going to cut her. Heroically, the boy whom they had supported protested, saying that the rest of the family has been killed, let us save just one. So, he took the two of them inside the house and told Mama Lambert to climb up into the ceiling area, saying, “They will have to kill me before they kill you.”

That night the father brought some men to the house, and one of them said that he could smell a Tutsi and started stabbing his spear into the ceiling, searching for someone who was hiding. The spear pierced Mama Lambert in her rib cage but did not fatally wound her. And in the process of poking around in the ceiling their eyes met, and Mama Lambert held out a 5,000 franc note for him to see, and he stealthily tucked it in his pocket in a way that the others could not observe—which in turn saved her life, since he didn’t want to share the money with the other men who were present. (Ironically, in the *gacaca* court he acknowledged this event and wanted to refund her the money, but she refused, saying that he had actually saved her life.)

After leaving this house, with Lambert once again on her back, she had another narrow escape with a group of killers, but she spotted a grinding stone that she started to turn and, pretending to be a Hutu, told them she was going to make them beer. Eventually, however, she grew so discouraged that she sought out a leader of the Hutu militia and asked him to shoot her, but the man refused, saying that the Tutsi rebel forces were nearby and that she could testify to them that he had protected her. At this point, she said that she had become nearly insane and had given up all hope of survival. Shortly thereafter the Rwandan Patriotic Army⁴ took control of the area and she was safe, with many of the killers fleeing to Zaire⁵ and other neighboring countries.

Somewhat miraculously, in addition to Lambert, two of her children survived the genocide, although five were killed, along with her husband, mother, and father, and other relatives. One son was hidden by an Italian Catholic priest who found him under a pile of dead bodies and then hid him under a bed. After the genocide, this boy was returned to Mama Lambert, although the priest was very interested in taking the child with him to Italy. A daugh-

ter was saved by a Hutu servant who fled to Zaire. When they were reunited after the genocide, the daughter, who was quite young, did not recognize her mother but did recognize the older brother whom the priest had hidden.

Mama Lambert said that her oldest surviving son is very quiet. "He was taken out of the dead bodies and saw his sister raped and later killed. When anybody begins talking about the genocide, he avoids the conversation. He refused to participate in *gacaca*. He puts his effort into studying and has completed his degree at the National University in Butare." The younger daughter avoided seeing many of the traumatic things witnessed by her brother since she was taken to Zaire by a Hutu servant. Heroically, Mama Lambert has also adopted four surviving children of relatives.

Mama Lambert's story is just one of several hundred interviews that compose the data for this book on the genocide and its aftermath. But her story is a defining one that touches on key themes throughout the book—how the genocide was experienced, what precursors were in place, and, perhaps even more importantly, how survivors deal with the ongoing trauma of the atrocities they experienced. We will revisit her story in later chapters on healing and forgiveness, since she deals with survivors on a daily basis at Solace Ministries, where we did a number of interviews and ethnographic observations for this book.

THE FOCUS OF THIS BOOK

Many good books have been written about the history of the genocide against Tutsis, including books that draw on oral history testimony.⁶ Some of these books focus on the colonial legacy of this small country that placed it under German and then Belgian governance, both of whom favored the Tutsis in part because of their physiological resemblance to western Europeans.⁷ Other books examine the failure of the West to intervene in the slaughter of the Tutsi population, including the cowardly role of the United Nations and the American government.⁸ Several books examine the role of religious leaders in the genocide.⁹ And a number of books focus on the attitudes of the perpetrators, the role of the *gacaca* courts, and the International Tribunal to try the masterminds of the genocide.¹⁰ Recently, there are several books that deal with the political context after the genocide, challenging the narrative offered by the RPF and the president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame.¹¹ Then there are those books that address the task of preventing genocide in the future, referencing

the mistakes that occurred in Rwanda.¹² And, of course, there are books that deal more generally with genocide.¹³

In this book, we have taken a very holistic approach rather than focusing on a specific issue or topic. The stories and analysis presented here draw on 260 interviews and fifteen years of experience with Tutsi survivors. We spent months coding every paragraph of our interviews, identifying patterns and themes in survivors' descriptions of the one hundred days of genocide, their lives before April 1994, and, importantly, their experience of trying to rebuild their lives following the killing.¹⁴ We have followed many of these survivors from 2001 onward, through the various phases of their postgenocide experience. Additionally, for two of our sample groups there are also quantitative data that assess their trauma.¹⁵

These data have led us to several important big-picture conclusions and many subpoints found throughout the chapters and reviewed in the conclusion. First and foremost, we assert that it is impossible to really understand genocide without studying the aftermath of the killing. Yes, the hundred days of killing in Rwanda were horrific—beyond the grasp of people outside Rwanda as well as those who experienced the killing themselves. But to understand the immensity of genocide one must follow survivors through the process of rebuilding their lives. It is there that one sees not only the psychological damage of genocide but also how far-reaching the destruction is—from the microcosm of the social reconstruction of identity, to the ways cultural capital is passed from one generation to the next, to the rebuilding of key institutions in society.

Second, the data teach us important lessons about the context of healing. Survivors' well-being—their ability to cope with trauma and reengage the world in a productive relationship with the present as well as a hopeful connection with the future—is filtered through many things such as their health and physical well-being, their level of poverty and material conditions, the political climate, and their social context and religious worldview. In this sense, the first steps in healing the traumatic wounds of an individual and a society are addressing issues of poverty, health, and political stability.

Third, the data also raise many questions about the healing process itself. For example, what is the role of social life and community in healing individual psychological trauma? Can religion play a negative role during the genocide and a positive role in the healing process? Is forgiveness for the killer, or is it for the victim, and are there different types of forgiveness? What about

trials, tribunals, and the daily performance of normalcy—can they be experienced as destructive for a victim while still being positive for the larger society? Finally, what are the meaning-making processes that survivors grapple with? And have models of healing communities emerged in Rwanda that are effective and might be adapted to other genocides or forms of individual and collective trauma?

This book is based on oral history testimonies with common people, who many times lacked knowledge of policy formation at a national or international level. Although chapter 2 gives some historical background on why the genocide occurred, most of the book focuses on the grassroots experiences of everyday people. What precursors to genocide did interviewees note? How was the killing experienced? How did they survive? What key struggles followed the killing, and what does the healing process entail, both individually and politically?

It is our hope that some of the insights gained here might be relevant beyond Rwanda and even beyond genocide. The aftermath of the killing takes us outside a formal definition of genocide¹⁶ to an understanding of ongoing trauma and the postgenocide reconstruction process. As an extreme form of trauma—about as extreme as it gets—does the study of genocide and the rebuilding process reveal insights into social dynamics and human well-being that are otherwise hard to see in the banality of daily life?

THE JOURNEY FROM ARMENIA TO RWANDA

This book is not our first encounter with the topic of genocide. During the first ten years of our married life, we were focused on the first genocide of the twentieth century, which claimed the lives of approximately 1.5 million Armenians in Turkey. Lorna's parents were both survivors of this genocide. Out of nine family members, her father and a sister survived, and half of her mother's family were killed. Over a ten-year period, we interviewed one hundred elderly Armenian survivors and published a book, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide*.¹⁷

In 2001, we received a surprise invitation to speak at an international conference in Kigali, Rwanda, on genocides of the twentieth century. This was seven years after a genocide that had claimed the lives of at least 500,000 and likely as many as one million Tutsis. Rwandans were trying to understand and contextualize their own genocide, and so they had invited scholars and

survivors of the Holocaust, and the Cambodian, Bosnian, and other genocides to speak about their experience. We felt honored to represent the Armenians and decided that Lorna would talk about her father's experience and Don would give a historical overview.

The meeting was held at the Hôtel des Mille Collines, made famous by the influential movie *Hotel Rwanda*, which only later did we realize was heavily criticized by many survivors who disagreed with its happy Hollywood ending and the heroic portrayal of the manager, Paul Rusesabagina. The conference was appropriately titled "Life after Death," and the keynote speaker was Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame, who was the leader of the rebel army that ended the genocide after one hundred days of slaughter by leaders of the Hutu Power movement.

As soon as Lorna gave her presentation, a small group of young Rwandan survivors gathered around her. They had formed an association of orphan heads of households (AOCM, L'Association des Orphelins Chefs de Ménages). They were fascinated by Lorna's story of her father's survival and the fact that he had gone on to have seven more children—the same number as had been in his nuclear family prior to the genocide. This encounter started a journey that led us back to Rwanda more than fifteen times in the subsequent decade and gave birth to three different oral history projects, and a total of 260 interviews, which form the basis for this book.

The officers of AOCM, who were attending the conference, wanted to tell us their stories. Although they had missed a few years of school after the genocide, many of them were in their early to mid-twenties and were university students, but of a special sort. They were also parenting their surviving siblings, and, in some instances, they had adopted orphan children who had no other parental figure in their life. They were balancing attending school, sometimes at night, and working hard to provide shelter and food for their younger siblings.

It was with some trepidation that late one afternoon, just as it was getting dark, Claudine invited us to her home. We hired a taxi that drove us about fifteen minutes from the Hôtel des Mille Collines, down a dirt road, until finally the driver had to stop because of washed-out areas in the road caused by pouring rain. At the time, we didn't realize that Rwanda is probably the safest country in all of Africa. Nevertheless, as the small living room grew dim and Claudine brought out an oil lamp, all we could think about as she recounted her family's experience of the genocide was how are we going to get back to our hotel.

Later in the week, the conference organizers took us in vans to some of the memorial sites that populate this small landlocked country. Claudine sat next to Lorna on our trip to the Murambi Memorial, where hundreds of bodies have been laid on low wooden tables in classrooms of a former school, *École Technique Officielle*. More than fifty thousand people were killed in this area in a period of three days, from April 19 to 22, 1994. Although a preservative of lime has been sprinkled on the bones, there was still the discernible smell of death as we moved from one classroom to another. Infants were laid next to adults; some still had fragments of clothing on them; others had beaded necklaces holding crosses—reminders that this genocide was one where Christians killed members of their same faith.

Evidence of the means of death was apparent from machete blows to the back of the neck that had severed the spinal column. Other skeletons revealed fractured skulls where their victims had been clubbed. And in several cases, we saw where the Achilles tendon had been cut so that victims could not run from their killers. After going through a dozen rooms or more, we came to one that had nothing but clothing. Tutsis were often stripped of their garments before being killed so that they would not be stained with blood and could be given by the “killers” to their family members.

We were both deeply shaken. It is one thing to read or hear about a genocide; it is quite another to meet it face-to-face. Lorna in particular was grateful that Claudine kept a tight grip on her arm as we made this gruesome tour of man’s inhumanity to man. However, once we got back into our van, Claudine’s pent-up emotions unleashed as she started to cry. Far from entwining her arm in Lorna’s to give Lorna support, Claudine was grabbing onto Lorna for emotional support herself. This was the first time Claudine had been to Murambi. Like many survivors, her emotions related to the genocide were far from resolved.

The other memory that stands out from our first week in Rwanda was a visit to an AIDS medical clinic that was run by AVEGA,¹⁸ an organization of surviving widows. We were joined by a psychiatrist from Bosnia and a young Rwandan Canadian who served as our translator. After some informal introductions, the director of the clinic asked if we would like to interview one of their clients. A tall, slender young woman entered the room; she fit the stereotype of a Tutsi. She told us that her child and husband had been killed, but for unknown reasons her baby had been spared. She was locked in a room and kept as a sex slave where every night men would rape her.

Finally, they decided to kill everyone in the village, and so a pit was dug for disposing of the bodies. By the time they got to her, she said they were tired from the hard work of killing, and so they pushed her into the pit and threw a grenade on top of the bodies. She survived because she was clutching her baby to her chest, who took the brunt of the shrapnel and was killed, but the mother's arm was severed. That night someone came in the darkness and asked if anyone was still alive. She called out and this person threw the end of a rope down into the pit and she was able to climb out. Within days her severed arm was filled with maggots, and eventually she found someone to amputate it. During our interview, she motioned at the stump of her arm saying that she needed another operation because the bone was starting to poke through her skin. Although she was taking antiretroviral drugs for her AIDS, like many victims of rape in Rwanda, we don't know if she is still alive.

A second woman also volunteered to be interviewed. She had been raped but did not know that she was infected with HIV when she later remarried a survivor whose wife had been killed. Subsequently, her husband died from AIDS, being unintentionally infected by her. She was currently taking care of thirteen children, only two being her own. The others she had adopted, which is true for many of the widows who survived the genocide. During the interview she started to cry, saying that it was okay for her to die, but who would take care of her children?

THREE INTERVIEW PROJECTS

We arrived home after that first conference and assumed that this was the end of our encounter with the Rwanda genocide. Perhaps we could write a check to a charity. However, we kept in email contact with the leadership of AOCM, the officers of the association of orphan heads of household. Clearly a bond had been created. Lorna could see in these young adults her own father who, at the same age, was surely struggling to find dignity and meaning as he ventured into adulthood after losing his parents and six of his siblings. Over dinner we kept talking, just as we had when Lorna was doing the Armenian survivor interviews. At last we came up with an idea—what if we offered to assist AOCM with funding an oral history project with their own membership of several thousand orphans, all of whom were raising younger siblings?

The next morning, Don fired off an email to Naphtal, the president of the organization. We received an almost immediate affirmative response. They

would like to do the same sort of interviewing that we had done for the research on our Armenian genocide book, namely, interview one hundred of their members. So, we asked them to write a proposal and prepare a budget. Within weeks we had a full-fledged proposal that outlined the goals of the project, indicating that they would hire their own members to do the interviews, those who were social science undergraduates, and they had also secured a first-class translator, someone who had been studying in India when the genocide occurred and was now working for the local radio station. They also included funds to rent an office, hire a coordinator, and offer a small gift to each interviewee. (See appendix I for the methodology of this study and the other two projects.)

A few months later we were in Singapore on another research project and bought a number of tape recorders and other equipment necessary for the project. We flew into the Kigali airport a few days later and spent a week working with the newly appointed research team on developing an interview guide, which was approved by IBUKA,¹⁹ the umbrella organization of the various survivor groups in Rwanda. We had the team members practice interviewing one another, which proved to be interesting since several of the female interviewers spoke so softly that their voices were not discernible on the tape. We were now firmly enmeshed in a new genocide project, and very quickly we had a number of orphans who were addressing us as “mother” and “father.” In emails they would begin, “Dear Parents . . .”

Eight months later we had several thousand pages of interview transcripts, translated into perfect English. After reading through these heart-wrenching interviews, we decided to involve Jerry Berndt, a photographer who had worked with us on a project in 1993 after the Republic of Armenia became independent from the former Soviet Union.²⁰ After several trips to Rwanda with Jerry, we worked together on a photo exhibit of orphans that was seen by over twenty thousand people in Los Angeles.

With the AOCM project completed, AVEGA, an association of widows, asked if we could find funding for them to do an interview project similar to what AOCM had done, but with questions adapted for their membership of women. This project led to another sixty interviews, translated into both French and English. The coordinator for the AOCM project agreed to work with them in designing the study.

Our largest undertaking, however, was one hundred interviews that we conducted ourselves with survivors associated with Solace Ministries, a