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THE TRIUMPH OF EVIL

Genocide in Rwanda and the Fight for Justice

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with Spike Zephaniah Stephenson



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PART ONE

BEGINNINGS

Who am I? I was born into a comfortable life. My father was a British diplomat committed to the European project, a position possibly nurtured by my mother, a French art restorer of mixed European lineage. As a result, I grew up feeling neither particularly British nor French. I guess I was what one would call a global kid, one without any clear attachments to a single country.

I have always been subject to intense passions, and my first, from the moment at age nine when I discovered his writings, was Saint Francis of Assisi. I was convinced that my calling was to be a Franciscan missionary. So, while others of my age were struggling to deal with the mental and physical confusion of their early adolescence, I floated over those same years living moments of elation and rapture that accompanied the dream of what I was convinced would be my future.

Midway through my adolescence, when visiting the Abbaye des Hommes in Caen with my mother, I approached a young priest and asked him to guide me on the path to priesthood. We talked and corresponded for almost two years. Finally, one day, it was agreed that I would be interviewed by the former rector of a Franciscan seminary, an interview that was expected to launch me onto the path of acceptance into that order.

To my utter dismay, I was rejected. The elderly priest, with little patience for immature adolescents, asked one simple question: Why had I come? Unable to express the fervour that had led me to this moment, I panicked. My mind went completely blank. I felt abandoned. And whatever chance there could have been was lost.

From that moment I began a long and frustrating search for a commitment that would give meaning to my life. I felt bereft. All my certitudes were gone. I tried to reignite the passion that I had been unable to draw on during that fateful interview, travelling to Jerusalem to witness Easter, and undertaking a lone pilgrimage to Lourdes, tracing part of the

route to Santiago de Compostela, having late night discussions with priests in old abbeys along the way. I worked alongside religious groups who aimed to assist juvenile delinquents in the suburbs of Paris. All to no avail.

My search for meaning continued at university, and after. Even more unsure than my peers of who I was or what I wanted, I allowed myself to be distracted. I entered university when I was sixteen, and it took me almost six years to finish my undergraduate studies in international relations and art history. In between those years, I undertook military service as an officer in a French infantry regiment. I went off to India for six months to teach English and maths in a leper colony. On graduation, I took up a job with an investment bank in Paris, preparing credit arrangements to finance government-subsidized contracts to poorer countries in Africa. It wasn't particularly exciting work, but it had the merit of involving me in a continent that already then had captured my imagination. The part of the job I really liked was the commute. My 500 cc trail bike with its front fender well above the wheel, and its gas tank painted with the logo of the Paris-Dakar Rally, represented escape from drudgery. It represented adventure. If I wanted, I told myself, I could ride on it to the ends of the earth.

It was in this phase of my life that I met France, a woman whose traditional upbringing echoed my own. After a period of time, we married. My naïve hope was that making the commitment would give purpose to my life. The fact that it didn't made me feel even more adrift.*

I stuck it out in the bank for three years in order to get into a good business school, INSEAD. I thought that doing so would launch me

* As regards my personal trajectory, and specifically the part involving my ex-wife and our three sons, I have attempted to be as respectful for the feelings of those I have hurt as possible. Actions of mine that have caused anguish and pain have been purposefully truncated to ensure that they do not detract from the core of the story, i.e. Rumbashi's alleged involvement in killings and the UN's inaction. Thus, for those I love and have hurt, who will be seeking answers to questions they have, I fear they will not find them in the pages that follow.

professionally, and that I would be able to provide a comfortable life for my wife and children, but I found the subject-matters taught there very uninspiring. A friend said to me, 'You don't go to business school to be inspired, Charles, you go to learn to make money.' I understood the point he was making, but the longing to commit myself to something more meaningful didn't go away.

I vividly remember a morning when bright sunlight struck through the window of the bathroom. I was shaving before heading off to INSEAD for a statistics exam for which I had done little to prepare. Getting married and attending a top business school was meant to have set me up for life, I thought. I should feel satisfied – maybe not overjoyed, given my lack of preparation for the test, but at least content. But I wasn't. Life had no flavour, and it wasn't anybody's fault but my own.

All of a sudden, I was struck by a solution – the only solution, it seemed to me. At the age of forty-two I would commit suicide. Why forty-two? I don't know. At that time, I hadn't read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. But forty-two it was, and this decision brought relief. I only needed to hang on in there for eighteen more years and it would all be over.

I finished shaving. In much better spirits, I dashed off to take an exam that I masterfully failed.

*

On graduating from INSEAD, my yearning for travel and adventure, and my deep wish to be part of something meaningful, drove me to seek work with a humanitarian organization in Africa. I contacted a number of aid organizations, but my business school credentials held no sway with the personnel officers of the NGOs. Instead I found work in a management-consulting firm based in London offering support to African countries

struggling to reform their civil service. The work allowed me to travel to Africa, but it still gave me no real sense of purpose. I had almost given up on the aid world when fate intervened and, almost by accident, I acquired my first United Nations posting.

It was 1989. I was in Khartoum, seconded to the Ministry of Finance to work on a less-than-effective World Bank project, when General al-Bashir overthrew the elected government, and the World Bank closed its programme down. I had developed a constructive and pleasant working relationship with my Sudanese colleagues in the Ministry of Finance, and was surprised by how unaffected they were by the sudden political change. One of my colleagues mentioned that the 'democratic' government the military had overthrown had not necessarily been that great for the people. Rather, it had allowed corruption and political in-fighting to paralyze the country. I wanted to stay on to see how much of a fundamental change the coup d'etat would provoke, so I spoke to the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Khartoum. He had nothing to offer me, but he mentioned me to the UN Representative in Sudan who, fortuitously, needed a deputy leader for the newly established UN Emergency Unit. After some financial juggling in which the French Embassy was involved, I was offered the position.

Though the UN Emergency Unit was responsible for providing support to UN relief operations throughout the country, the core of its activity was actually focused on government-controlled garrison towns in southern Sudan. The Khartoum authorities held a few isolated pockets in the south, while different factions of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) controlled the rest.*

* The humanitarian needs in the rebel-held portions of the country were being served by a UN-led operation called Lifeline Sudan based in Lokichokio, in northern Kenya.

Six months after my appointment, the first Gulf War began. Many of the UN international staff were evacuated back to their home countries. The Emergency Unit on the other hand was considered essential, and all the staff were asked to stay.

For those of us who remained in Khartoum, the impact of the Gulf War was limited to hostile gestures directed at us as we drove through the city. But the unit chief, my immediate boss, was a US national who was on his Christmas break when the war started. It was considered prudent for him to extend his absence, and by the time he was able to return, he had been re-assigned to New York. Per Janvid, who was the UN Representative in Sudan, then asked me to take on the post of Chief of the UN Emergency Unit.

Thus, at the age of thirty-one I found myself in the midst of a crisis with overall responsibility for support of the UN presence in eight besieged government-held towns in southern Sudan and the management of two planes. I was also charged with obtaining Sudanese government authorization for the relief flights from Kenya into the rebel-controlled south.

My life all of a sudden had purpose. My blue UN laissez-passer represented a direct link with an organization born out of massive tragedy, and an obligation to play a part in ending human suffering.

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PART TWO

SUDAN AND SOMALIA

The core of this story is Rwanda, the horrific events of 1994, and my battles with the UN afterwards. I have hesitated to include my prior experiences with the United Nations in Sudan and Somalia, fearing that it would confuse the core narrative. But my experiences there do provide essential context for an understanding of the workings of the UN bureaucracy, and will to some extent help to explain the almost obsessive nature of my 'quest for justice' following the horrors of Rwanda.

Most importantly, Sudan presents the 'before', as much as Somalia does the 'after', of the UN's approach to addressing human tragedy. In the Sudan a national government could deny any of its violations and get away with it. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the symbolic end to the Cold War, separates the two periods. The protection that the paralysis of the East-West divide offered was to be no more, and a new world order based on respect for universal principles seemed achievable. Somalia was the first such attempt, and the international community failed. Rwanda paid the price of this failure. One cannot understand the international community's inaction in Rwanda without taking into account what happened in Somalia.

1***Sudan: Embarking upon the Steep UN Learning Curve***

If I had to pinpoint the moment in time when my career with the UN really took off, it would be the morning of 22 December 1990. I was having a late leisurely breakfast, when I was suddenly summoned by Per Janvid, the UN representative, to accompany him on an unexpected trip outside Khartoum.

That is how I found myself sitting next to Colonel Osman Nuri, a senior officer from Sudan's state security, in the third car of a four-car convoy driving through the desert. In the car in front were seated Per Janvid and Sharaf Bannaga, the Sudanese minister of housing and urban planning. The minister was taking us to a desolate site one hour out of Khartoum – a place where more than one and a half million displaced southerners were destined to be dumped. The location was thought to be close enough for the international community to provide assistance, but far enough away to