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**INTERVIEW WITH YVETTE ISHIMWE**

**Archives vivantes des Rwandais exilés au Canada suite au Génocide et aux violences antérieures/**

**The Living Archives of Rwandan Exiles and Genocide Survivors in Canada/**

**Ubuhamya bw’Abanyarwanda bahungiye muri Canada Jenoside n’itotezwa ryayibanjirije**

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**Interviewee**: Yvette Ishimwe

**Interviewer**: Monique Mukabalisa

**Interviewer**: Sandra Gasana (S.G.)

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**Editorial note:**

The beginning of the interview has not been clearly recorded.

**Biographical note on the interviewee:**

Yvette is a survivor of the genocide during which she lost her father. She is the eldest of four children. She arrived in Quebec in 2001, at the age of 17, she has studied accounting and has worked at the Bank of Montreal. She feels well integrated in Canada, but she often thinks about Rwanda and would like to spend a month there, in April, to reflect on her lived experience of the genocide.

**00:00:09**

**Interviewer (I): Thank you again for agreeing to tell your life story. Before we begin, I’d like to ask you to introduce yourself to those who will have the chance to watch or listen to your life story.**

Yvette (Y): Okay. My name is Yvette Ishimwe, I was born in Kigali in a family of four children and I'm the eldest, I have two younger brothers and one younger sister and… That's it.

**I: So you were born in Kigali and you are the eldest child in your family…**

Y: Yes, that’s right.

**I: Before I ask about your parents, I would like to know more about your grandparents on both sides. Do you remember your grandparents?**

Y: I remember really well my maternal grandparents. I didn’t know my paternal grandfather, because, as far as I know, he died when I was a little child, or even before I was born. But I knew my maternal grandmother who also died when I was—if I remember correctly—10 years old. So I remember her vaguely, yeah.

**I: When you think about your grandparents—sometimes when we remember someone, we have specific [inaudible] memories. What can you tell us about your maternal grandparents?**

Y: Whether I think about my maternal grandparents or my paternal grandmother, I remember the summer vacations, because we went there every summer. I remember how impatiently they waited for us and I remember especially the traditional dishes that they would make for us, even if we didn’t like eating that food very much. But they would prepare them with so much love… That's the memory I have engraved in my mind—how they wanted to make us happy, even though I— [laughs] I didn’t like the food very much, but it’s something that I remember, yeah.

**I: Do you also remember the relationship—since we're mostly talking about your maternal grandparents—what kind of relationship did they have with your parents?**

Y: I know that Mom was her dad's favourite. [laughs] Other than that—well, it was a pretty normal relationship.

**I: Did you have a special relationship with your grandmother or grandfather? Or was it a more distant kind of relationship—just visiting the grandparents and then returning home?**

Y: As I mentioned, we visited them every year and every time someone I knew was going to their house, I always took the time to write each one of them a letter, telling them how I was doing, how my life was going, asking them for news about themselves. I know I took the time to do this at least three times a year.

**I: Going back to your parents now [inaudible] work—what did your parents do for a living?**

Y: My father was a doctor and my mother always worked for an NGO, a non-governmental organization that helped orphaned children or children who came from families—who couldn’t take care of themselves. She was project coordinator there.

**I: So you come from a family where both parents worked?**

Y: Yes.

**I: And how did they manage to look after you, the children, and work at the same time?**

Y: My mother worked during the day, while we were at school, so when we came home after school she was always there. Sometimes, my dad worked at night because he was a doctor, but that wasn’t his regular schedule, it didn’t happen often… So almost every night we were at home with our parents.

**I: Would you say that both of them, equally, were looking after the children, or was one of them more involved in the children’s upbringing than the other?**

Y: It depends on the activity. I remember that my mother taught me how to do “girls’ stuff”—how to sew, how to make the bed, how to fold clothes, how to sweep, how to clean, how to… These are things that my father never taught me, it was my mom who showed me that. While my dad—he was telling me about history, he was showing me some technical stuff—that was more his domain. In terms of school work, my father was helping me with math and related subjects and my mother, with language and other related subjects. So I knew that for math homework, I could ask my father for help and when it was something in French or Kinyarwanda, I could ask my mother.

**00:06:00**

**I: Would you tell us how did you perceive your parents’ relationship, how—what can you tell us about their life as Mom and Dad, as told from the perspective of their child?**

Y: As parents?

**I: …**

Y: I would say that as parents they were very strict. [laughs] I don’t know how you say that in French—the kind of parents who would look at you from the corner of their eye and, without them having to say anything, you would know what mistake you’ve made and you would correct the mistake at the same time. It was—in any case, I think—not that I regret it, but I think we had a very strict upbringing.

**I: But they would also show affection, love, tenderness…**

Y: Yes, we were spoiled as children, but that didn’t mean that we weren’t punished when we made mistakes. But when we weren’t causing any trouble, we were pampered. We ate out at the restaurant at least once a week, on Saturday nights. We rented movies—not during the week because those were school nights. And we went to the park on Saturday evenings. We went on airplane tours. We were more than spoiled, I would say.

**I: Turning now to your studies—when did you start elementary school and then what did you study in high school?**

Y: I started kindergarten when I was three years old and when I was five, I think, I started elementary school. I finished it at 12. I started high school at the age of 13. So, the first four years of school was the common core education, without specialization. Later, when I started fifth grade—since I was in a high school in Benin—we had to choose a specialization in fifth, sixth and seventh grade, and I continued in accounting.

**I: The choice, or the fact that you went into accounting—was that your choice or was it the choice of the family? How did you choose…?**

Y: When the time came to make a choice, I didn’t know what [laughs] to choose, but I was—because I was quite good at math, I went into accounting. At first, I wanted to study medicine, but I didn’t like—for that I had to take physics and I hated physics. So I decided to study something that was easy for me and I didn’t have to deal with physics, so I went into accounting, and that’s how it happened. [laughs]

**I: [laughs] Before we turn to Benin, what are your memories of your neighbourhood in Kigali? When you look back on that time, how do you see your life with those around you, with the children in your neighbourhood or your classmates? You come from, if I may say, a well-to-do family, both of your parents worked. Was this common in your neighbourhood or were there differences? How would you describe the people in your neighbourhood, compared to your family?**

Y: In the neighbourhood, I would say that what “well-to-do” meant was relative, but we were—some families were richer, others poorer, so I would say ours was maybe in the middle. At school we were—I went to school with the children of ministers and so on, so I would say that my classmates’ families were much better-off than us.

**I: After school, could you go to the school yard and play with everyone?**

Y: No. [laughs] No. So the way we were taught was that our parents would come to pick us up after school and we went straight home. We weren’t allowed to go anywhere unless our parents came with us or unless we were going to visit cousins or family friends with our parents. The only friends we had in the neighbourhood were our neighbours with whom we could talk over the fence.

**00:11:15**

**I: I don’t know if you’ve ever asked yourself this question, but I'll take this opportunity to ask you: Do you think there was a particular reason for that? The fact that after school the children went straight home? As far back as you can remember or if you think about it now, what would the reason for that be?**

Y: I’ll express my personal opinion about this. I’d say that it wasn’t only a question of education in the sense that parents didn’t want their children to socialize with—I’d say, with just anyone… I think they were also concerned about the children’s safety. These are the two reasons that come to mind.

**I: You said that you went to high school in Benin. Tell me, how did you find yourself in Benin?**

Y: Actually, after the genocide, the NGO where my mother worked opened a branch in Benin. I don’t know how it happened and my mom had to—in any case, she was transferred from Rwanda to Benin and we had to leave with her.

**I: Do you remember how you prepared for this move from one country to another?**

Y: The moment that always comes to my mind is when my mother told us we were leaving. She told us—because we were going to school at the time, I think it had been a few weeks since the beginning of the school year—she told us, “You’ll have to study French harder, because in your new school you’ll be studying in French only.” The idea of leaving was exciting to me, but the fact that I was going to be in a school, in an environment where we only spoke French and that maybe I wouldn’t be able to express myself correctly was scaring me. Apart from that, the other [?] was leaving the people I’ve grown up with, my cousins, and knowing that I wouldn’t be able to see them anytime I wanted, that was also bothering me a little. But I was delighted by the idea of ​​change and exploring something new.

**I: And so you left Rwanda and you went to Benin. How did you adapt to life in the new country? How did you experience this as a family and personally?**

Y: For sure, the beginning was difficult for me and my brothers and sister precisely on account of the language because we were in a place where we didn’t speak the language, so it wasn’t easy. We arrived in January, so right in the middle of the school year, and we had to adapt, stay on track, learn French, adapt and at the same time not fall behind, which was much more difficult. It was also a cultural shock, because these are two completely different cultures, and settling down was difficult too. But I don’t know if it was because we were young or because I myself was young, but I’d say that it didn’t take too long before I felt almost at home there.

**I: Were you welcomed in that country?**

Y: Yes, I remember that when I arrived in the school I was introduced to the students in my class, and everyone was trying hard to help me, to explain things, to give me their notes to copy, and this felt good because when you go someplace new, you feel quite—you think to yourself, “Will everything be okay?” and all that. But when people would come up to me at recess and say, “Don’t worry, you can copy my notes”—the teachers would also come up to me and say, “Come to see me if you need explanations”—that was reassuring. But the fact that we were far from our family, far away, and that we didn’t know almost anyone there, that part wasn’t easy.

**I: How old were you when you left for Benin?**

Y: Thirteen years old. I celebrated my 13th birthday—it is in January—so I celebrated my 13th birthday there.

**I: And so you started high school there?**

Y: Yes, I started high school there.

**00:16:00**

**I: How did your mom balance work with taking care of the children?**

Y: [laughs] I still wonder to this day. Because not only she was working and taking care of the children, I think it also fell on her to do the greatest share of the work of finding out how things functioned in the new place. To this day, I don’t understand how she did it, with four children. If I were in her place, I don’t think I would have succeeded. I’m still asking myself this. I think she is the right person to ask this question to.

**I: I’m curious to know—when you look at your life now, how your life is going, and when you think about your mom, do you see any character traits that you can say, “I get that from my mom”?**

Y: Yes, many.

**I: Like what?**

Y: Not just from my mom [?]. But from her I think I have that go-getter attitude, I must have inherited that from her. The resourcefulness, always wanting to go forward despite the obstacles on the way—this comes, I’m sure, from my mother. Another trait is the love for Rwandan culture—that, I think, one hundred percent is from her, one hundred percent. That little bit of calm disposition that I have, I think it’s from my mom too… [laughs] Reading—I don’t remember if my dad liked to read much, but I know my mom loves it, so I have that from her as well.

**I: And what traits have you inherited from your dad?**

Y: From Dad? First, him being a doctor, he was more interested in mathematics, chemistry, things like that and so I must have gotten that from my dad. Apparently, my dad also had a strong character, so that too must come from him… What else? The side of me that wants success not only for myself but for the people around me as well, the side that likes to help others, the generous side—that, I think, I also carry from my dad.

**I: While we're on this subject, if I understood your story well, your family lost your dad in 1994?**

Y: That’s correct.

**I: How did you live through the 1994 period?**

Y: I’d say that when experiencing such atrocities I don’t think you make the effort to think about what will happen tomorrow, you live day-by-day. Actually, not even day-by-day, you live in the present moment, really, and you wait to see what happens next.

**I: Did you at all see it coming?**

Y: I think that even me, even though I was young, I saw some signs, but I could have never, ever imagined that such a thing would happen.

**I: What were some of the signs that you remember now?**

Y: For two or three years before 1994 the national security in the country wasn’t good, there were always demonstrations. The fact that at school the Hutus were asked to stand up and people from the other ethnicity were also asked to stand up and both were counted—that was one of the signs. And the fact that we had already been attacked once at home before 1994 also had to be a sign that something was wrong, yeah.

**I: So at school people from the different ethnic groups were asked to stand up?**

Y: Yes, they would ask the students from one ethnic group to get up, they would count them and tell them to sit back down and then ask the students from the other ethnic group to get up, and so on. And there was a form we had to fill in and we had to indicate our ethnicity, our names, our parents’ names, where we were born and so on and the question about ethnicity was also on there…

**00:20:50**

**I: How does a child of a school age know what ethnic group they belong to? Did you know that?**

Y: I don’t know how I came to know it, but I did [laughs], I knew it. It's a form that we’ve had to fill in since we were young, when we were in kindergarten, I think, we were given that form to fill in at home and bring back. And when we were in elementary school we would fill it in ourselves, and if we didn’t know how to fill in certain parts, we had to ask our parents and the next day we would bring the missing information to our teacher.

**I: And did you find that your teachers—once they knew to which ethnicity their students belonged—did you observe any difference in the way the teachers took care of, or helped, or in general treated the students?**

Y: Personally, I was too young, I didn’t notice that. It’s possible that was the case, but personally I didn’t realize it.

**I: So going back now to the period of 1994, during the genocide—you saw it coming, but how did you live through that time?**

Y: How do you mean?

**I: How did it all happen in your family? You made it through, but other members of your family didn’t. I don’t know if you could…**

Y: So, how it happened… I remember, it started in the evening, we were having dinner, it was around 8 o’clock in the evening, my paternal uncle was there with us, on his vacation. We were at the table, having dinner, and then we heard the sound of the plane. I didn’t realize it was the sound of the plane because we were always hearing that kind of noise, grenades, here and there, and I thought that it was just the usual. Then my father asked us to go to bed—actually, not to bed but to go under the beds, because every time this happened, we were told to hide under the bed until my parents would come and tell us to… And then, a few minutes later, we were told: “Come out from under the bed and go to sleep.” Then they woke us up only the next day—because I was getting ready—I remember, I was preparing to write the final exam at the end of high school [Translator’s note: or elementary school?] and I was taking classes—it was Easter vacation, but I was taking extra classes to prepare for my exam. So when they came to wake us up, I got up quickly to go take a shower, because I thought I was late for school. And my dad followed me and said “No, you’re not going to school today.” Then I saw that they were laying down mattresses in the corridor, and my father told us, “Sit down, we'll explain what's going on.” So they laid the mattresses down, they arranged all that and said, “In fact, the president's plane has been shot down and things are not going well at all for the moment, we're going to stay here until the situation improves.” I was so young that I didn’t understand how great the danger was. I said, “So I'm not going to school?” My father said, “No, you’re not going to school until things get better.” I said, “Okay, no problem.” And so we stayed in the house. The plane was shot down on the 6th at night and we stayed there until the 11th. It was on the 11th that we were attacked in the house. I remember that when it happened my father went out, we stayed behind—no—yes, we stayed behind—my mom and my brothers, my sister and uncle. Just before he went out, my father said, “Let’s sit together and pray.” We took a few minutes to pray and then my father went out of the house. My mother told me to get my brothers and sister and go hide under my parents’ bed, then she closed the door and said, “I'll come to get you soon.”

**00:25:00**

We stayed there, but I could hear noises, there were noises. I remember I came out from under the bed and I went to the window. I saw my father being struck, and I went back under the bed. But I didn’t say anything to my brothers, I was speechless. A few minutes later, someone entered the room. My sister said, “Daddy is back.” But it wasn’t our dad, it was someone else. He started searching, rummaging around the room… And when he looked under the bed—there we were. He told us to come out, and so we did, he told us to go outside, and we followed. So we were there and I didn’t know what had happened to my mother, I didn’t know how my father was doing, and all that. I didn’t know what had happened to my uncle or to the servants either. We were standing in front and then the man asked me, “Are you the eldest child in the family?” I said, “Yes, I'm the eldest.” He said, “Where do your parents keep the money, the guns, and all that?” I said I didn’t know, I said that I had never seen any guns in the house. I said that I really didn’t know. I told him, “You can ask Mom or Dad, I don’t know.” Then he began to tease me: “Oh, those rich kids, it’s always the same thing.” He told many stories and then he said: “Anyway, it doesn’t matter if you know or not. We’ll kill all of you and then we’ll search the house and we’ll find it.” I said, “I can’t tell you anything because I don’t know.” Then he told me, “Before we kill you, you’ll take this gun and you will kill your brothers.” I told him, “I don’t know how to use a gun,” that's what I said. And he said, “Oh yes, you do know. You, the *inkotanyi* children, you all know how to use guns.” So he handed the gun over to me, I remember that it was very heavy. He said, “So, there, you’re going to kill them quickly, then we’ll kill you, then we'll get on with what we need to do, and then we’ll leave.” I remember that he gave me the gun and I gave it back and said, “Look, do what you want, I can’t kill my brothers.” The man said, “Oh no? In any case, if you don’t kill them, we’ll kill you all.” And I said, “Do what you want, I’m not going to kill my brothers.” So he stayed there and a few minutes later, my mom came out of the house accompanied by somebody else, I think he was the leader of the whole gang. They came out and he said to the guy who was with us, “Leave them alone, I made an arrangement with the lady, let them go. I don’t think they’ll go far, anyway…” So my mother said to me, “We’re going to the neighbours’.” We passed through the fence and we went to the neighbours’ house. Of course, when they had heard that we were being attacked, they had fled, so when we got there, the house was empty. Meanwhile, I think they had told my mother that my father was dead and my mother could not stop crying, and we didn’t understand why… We kept asking her, “Mom, what is it? What's wrong?” And she kept saying, “It's going to be all right, it's going to be all right.”

[Tears]

[Temporary break in the recording]

Afterwards, when my mother—my mom calmed down later and she told us, “Your father is dead.” In the meantime, while my mother was out, my uncle had also left. They had tried to cut off his arm and he was bleeding; we tried to stop the blood with a cloth. We stayed in the house, we waited for the neighbours to come back, we just stayed there, and then, much later, they returned. So the man—in the house where we were—he said, “You can’t stay here because they know you’re here, and if they know it, we’re next.” And then even I said, “Where do you think I can go with the kids?” He begged us to leave and then he said, “Okay, no problem, you can sleep here tonight, but tomorrow morning you’ll have to start making arrangements and see where you can go.” So, we went to bed and I think that during the night, my mother and my uncle went to the neighbours’ to see if there was a place for us to stay, but—and I found that out the next day—that plan didn’t work.

**00:30:19**

And I know that in the house where we were, the whole family was about to leave and go to Butare. So Mom asked them, “Can you take us with you?” But the man said, “Listen, we can’t,” and so on. My mother then asked if they could at least drop us off at the house of my mother’s older brother who lived in Kiyovu. Then suddenly it started to rain. It was raining heavily. Now that it was raining, the man said, it was certain that the guards at the roadblocks would leave their posts and so we could go, but he would only drive us to my uncle’s. So we got to my uncle’s house, we knocked on the door, we knocked, we knocked and there was no one… Fortunately, there was a small opening at the bottom of the fence. My mom said to me: “Go and see if there’s anyone in the house.” I passed through and I went upstairs. My uncle and his family weren’t there, only the guard whom I knew and who said: “Listen, unfortunately, you can’t stay here because there is someone watching the neighbourhood and he knows that there are two of us here in the house, if they find you here, they’ll kill us all.” So I went back and told that to my mom and the others. In the meantime, my mother had an idea—my uncle’s family had a friend who worked at the Belgian Red Cross, which was not too far away. So Mom said, “You’re going to drop us off there and the Red Cross probably—they will shelter us.” So, they dropped us off there and they left. Once we arrived, we asked for the friend of my uncle’s family, he came out, saw us—he knew us—and he said: “Unfortunately, they don’t shelter refugees here.” He said, “There’s another branch of the Belgian Red Cross further down, we will send you there.” My mom said: “With all the roadblocks, we won’t be able to pass through.” And he said, “Okay.” He took one of the cars of the Red Cross, we got in, and he said, “Listen, we're going to pass through as if we”—we were hidden at the back of the car—“we're going to pretend that it’s a Red Cross vehicle passing… If they stop us, unfortunately there is nothing we can do, but if they don’t stop us, great.” But it was still raining so every time we came up to a roadblock, it was empty, so we passed through and they left us there.

**00:32:30**

They dropped us off at the Red Cross and there were other refugees living there, about sixty or so people, families, and so on. So they left us there and that’s where we stayed. In the beginning, everything went well, we had food to eat, but sometimes there wasn’t any food left and they told us that we would divide the work by family. Each family—they said that we were going to have a schedule of people who would do the cleaning, people who would do the dishes, people who would cook—who would go get food, people who would go get water. Because I was the eldest in the family, I was told, no problem, I can help with the cooking, but for those going out—my mom couldn’t go out, and so they said, “Look, you're the eldest, you have no choice.” I said, “Okay.” Anyway, I was young—getting water? No problem! But we had to get water for bathing, for washing the dishes, for cooking. So I said, “Listen, I don’t mind going, but how will I manage?” They said, “No problem, we’ll think of something.” Then they said, “We'll do two rounds because not everyone can go out at the same time.” And since they designated only one family member per activity, I said: “I’ll go out in the first round and will come back in the second, it’s not a problem.” Someone was surveilling the neighbourhood. Apparently, they were going to kill us at the very end, after they had finished killing everyone else, we were to be the dessert, that's why—because no one was protecting us at the Red Cross, and there was this man who told us that they were going to kill us in the end.

**00:34:00**

There was a roadblock right at the entrance of the Red Cross; so every time we went out to get water, this man accompanied us, we would get water and come back. So I would leave with the first group, give the water to my mom and come back with the second group, and so on. One day we went out and they started shooting at us. When shots are fired, everyone starts running here and there. I remember I ran, I went into a house, I didn’t know where I was, I climbed a tree and sat there and waited. They were shooting, shooting, shooting... At one point, I don’t know what happened, but the shooting stopped. Quietly, I climbed back down from where I was, in the tree, and I was looking for the man because I knew that he was going to protect me—and I had been tracking his movements with my eyes. So when everything calmed down, I climbed down and followed the man. Everybody came out of their hiding places except one guy who was shot and we took him back to the Red Cross. After that, we just continued on our way to get water and then we returned to the house. I think my mother was scared and she said: “I don’t think you’ll be going alone next time.” So from then on, my brother went with me. And we continued going as usual. One morning, apparently someone from the Red Cross had fired bullets at the roadblock at the entrance. So the *interahamwe* came and said: “We won’t wait until the end, after all.” We were all taken out of the house, we were taken outside and they said: “Say your prayers now, we will kill you.” We were all sitting in a row, I remember I was with my mom and I don’t know where my sister and my brothers were, but in any event, we were the last ones in the row. I don’t remember where my brothers were. We started praying, and then they killed the first person in the line, I think it was a mother with her baby, then the second, and then the man who was surveilling the neighbourhood showed up. He said, “But why are you killing these people?” And they said, “Wasn’t it them who shot at us?” The man said, “No, no, no, I know this house, I’ve searched it, there are no guns here,” and stuff like that. Anyway, he said, “I told you, we’ll kill these people towards the end.” And so they let us go, we went back into the house. This happened, I think, twice. The first time, they killed people, but the second time one person was wounded, but no one died. So we stayed there and I continued going out as if that was my normal. I said to Mom, “Don’t worry, I'm not going to die.” I don’t know why, but I was sure I wasn’t going to die. All three [Translator’s note: or five?] of us stayed there. I went out every day to fetch water, to get some food with the others. Even when my brothers didn’t come with me, I would still go, because I was sure that nothing was going to happen to me. I went out every day. I saw the killings in some places, but I had gotten to a point where it didn’t shock me anymore, they could shoot someone and I could pass nearby without a problem. As long as they didn’t touch me—that’s what was scaring me. My mother would ask me, “Have you seen the dead people?” And I would say, “They are everywhere.” It has become just a normal thing for me that one person would kill another; I saw a woman being raped and it seemed normal to me. All I was doing was to go out, get water and bring it back, because I didn’t want my family to starve. Then finally, one morning we woke up and the roadblock was gone. Someone looked out the door and the people who were guarding the roadblock were no longer there. Then I think someone turned on the radio—the radio wasn’t working. We wondered what was going on, and, I think as a reflex from the war, we said, “Let’s get ready, something is happening, we should leave.” We got dressed, we started packing a few small things, because we thought we were going to change locations, and while we were getting ready a soldier arrived. I remember my mother cried out, “It’s the *inkotanyi*.” [laughs] And my mom said, “Don’t take too many things with you because they [the soldiers] have arrived.” I remember I was packing and I was asking, “Mom, should we take this?” She was saying, “No, no, no, don’t worry, we’re safe.” [laughs and tears of joy] And then she said to me and my brothers, “Don’t worry, everything is fine.” I remember we were the second ones to go out, there was one guy in front of us and then me and my mom, and she said, “Go where this gentleman tells you to go, because it’s fine, we’re safe.” [laughs] Then they took us to a place called [inaudible]. Everyone from Kiyovu was there, well, from the neighbourhood anyways. They took us there, they gathered us to tell us that the war was over and that we were going to stay there until they found a safe place for us to go because there were grenades everywhere and it wasn’t safe. I remember that they brought us food, they gave us to eat, and told us that the next morning we were going to Kicukiro. We were to walk from Kiyovu to Kicukiro. I said, “Mom, how are we going to walk?” [laughs] Mom said, “Now that we’ve gotten this far, we’ll do whatever it takes, if we have to walk, you’ll walk.” Mom said, “In any case, don’t take too many things with you because we’re safe and these people will feed us at the place where we’re going.”

**00:39:40**

The next day they told us, “It’s time to go.” We gathered our things, yes, and we set off for Kicukiro. And everyone—each family was assigned to a house. We were told, “This is a safe place, you’ll stay here a few days until we secure the rest of the city.” I think we stayed there for at least—I think a week, the equivalent of a week. After that they said, “You can now go back to your homes.” When we returned to the house—I wasn’t—my mother was accompanied by someone, I don’t know who—apparently, we couldn’t live in our house because it wasn’t a pretty sight—in any case, I didn’t know what it looked like. We were told to go sleep at my aunt’s house. When they had brought us all together in that place, we reunited with one of my aunts. She had lost her children. She was my godmother. She [Yvette’s mother] told us, “You, your sister and your brothers are going to stay with your godmother and I will stay with your other uncle” with whom we had also reunited. “We’ll clean the house and once it’s ready you’ll come too.” I think I stayed with my aunt for two days, the time it took to put the house in order a little bit, and then we returned home.

**I: How was the return to everyday life after all this? How was life in Kigali and how does one go on after something like that?**

Y: Speaking for myself, I think that it was like the two sides of a mirror: I was a spoiled child who had suddenly become an adult. I realized that life would never be the same. I don’t know how I understood that, but it was like a mirror, yes. We stayed there, we tried to clean the house—the places where there was blood, all the books that were on the floor because they had ransacked everything. We cleaned the house and, fortunately, not long after, the NGO where my mom worked restarted—they opened for business again and Mom had to go back to work. Since I was the eldest in the family, I had to take over the responsibilities of the house, I had to make sure that we had something to eat, I cooked, I cleaned the house… I had to get my brothers organized—I knew that this brother had to get up and clean this room or that brother had to get up and do something else. I knew when we had to go get water and I learned to clean and cook by myself. I was trying to remember what our servants did when I was little and when I was watching them work. I was improvising. In any case, I know that when Mom would come home from work, everything was in order. How did I do it? I don’t know. But I knew that it had to be done, because Mom was working, she couldn’t be in two places at the same time, so I learned all of this by myself. Of course, when Mom was home, I would sit next to her, ask her questions: “How do I do that? How is this done? What do you think I should do tomorrow?” She would tell me, but I knew that I had to take on responsibility for everything to be in order when she came home from work.

**I: So Mom went back to work, and when did you, the kids, go back to school?**

Y: I think we went back to school—if I remember correctly, it was two months later, I think in October? Yes, I think it was October when we went back to school. Two months later.

**I: Did you go back to the same school?**

Y: Yes, I went back to the same school. Of course, I didn’t know 90% of the faces there. I remember there was a girl I went to elementary school with. When I saw her after the war—she was the first one I saw—I think we hugged and we stayed in each other’s arms for a long time because she was the only one I knew from school from before. And to see her alive, it felt good. And I remember there was a teacher who came up to me and said, “No, no, no, you can’t be alive.” I said, “Yes, I'm here.” There was also a boy who was back—I remember we were in fifth grade together before the war. I didn’t recognize him because they had cut him all over his body. I didn’t recognize him, and the girl asked me, “Did you recognize Ange?” I said, “That’s Ange? No, I didn’t recognize him.” I felt so bad for not having recognized him, someone who had been part of my life from before, who felt much closer to me after the war than the others, especially those returning from outside of the country—he was like [part of?] my family. Not recognizing him really affected me deeply. But, for sure, when school started, those of us who were in Rwanda after the war, we stuck together.

**00:45:00**

The people who came back from Burundi, they kept their distance. And so did the people who came back from Uganda. That’s how it always was. And I remember our conversations: “How did you survive? What happened? How are you doing? Are your parents still alive? Are your sisters still alive?” That was it, at least for the first two weeks we only talked about that. About nothing else.

**I: When you went back to school, did you continue in fifth or sixth grade?**

Y: Sixth.

**I: Sixth grade. And the teachers, were they still there? Had they died or had they left?** **You said that most of your fellow students weren’t there.**

Y: Yes.

**I: And what about the teachers?**

Y: I think, from the teachers who had taught me before, there was only one at the school after the war. Only one was there. There were five sixth grade classes and we had about five teachers, and I knew only one of them from before.

**I: How was the relationship between—well, you said they were keeping their distance, depending on whether they had stayed in Rwanda or returned from elsewhere. And the teachers, how did they treat the children, in your view, when you look back, what was the teachers’ attitude towards the children after the war?**

Y: I imagine—I think that it wasn’t easy not only for the students but also for the teachers, because not only—I’m looking for the word in French—*guhahamuka*—

**I: Traumatized.**

Y: The trauma, that’s it. It was a recurrent thing. You would be studying and all of a sudden you would hear someone scream—things like that. It affected us, but I think it affected the teachers more. They not only had to ensure the well-being of the students, to teach them in class, the class material and all that, the knowledge they had to transmit, but also take care of these children who were not doing very well. So it was a combination of these three things, and I imagine they themselves were not feeling—anyway, I think that, psychologically, they weren’t able to combine these three roles. I guess they had to do it, they had no choice.

**I: I wonder if, as the 12-year-old children that you were, you trusted the teachers.**

Y: Trust—my thinking was, “I have to go to school” and “Life goes on, you have no choice.” Whether you trusted others or not, you had to fight, you had to go forward. Whether you liked it or not, you thought to yourself, “Yes, what happened, happened.” Now I understand: whether we like it or not, life continues, we had to fight to survive and continue to live.

**I: Since we’re talking about school, when you reflect on that time, was there a teacher that influenced you, that you appreciated, or who appreciated you? Is there a teacher in particular that you remember?**

Y: In elementary school, this teacher—the fact that after the war, he came up to me and said, “You are alive? I'm glad you're here.” That touched me. It felt like there was at school, besides my friends, an adult that I knew or at least someone I could talk to, someone who knew me from before. And what he said was reassuring: “If there is anything I can do, I’m here for you, I can help you.” It affected me, but it didn’t—it touched me, but not so deeply. For me, at the time, that wasn’t essential. I told myself that I had to live and the rest was not that important.

**I: What motivated you to go to school at that time?**

**00:50:00**

Y: I could see how my mom was fighting and I was thinking, “If she’s fighting like that, me, as the eldest in the family, I have—,” I thought I had the duty not only to continue going to school in order to succeed, but also in order to help my mom. I was thinking that she couldn’t continue going it alone. That’s what motivated me. And I was also thinking, “I am lucky to still have my mom, there are people who have lost their mothers.” So if I still have her and she is taking care of us, I thought “I have to do the impossible to move forward, to succeed and to lighten her load.” That’s what motivated me, because I remember that before the war, I went to school for the sake of going to school. I remember that if I placed 19th or lower in my class, that was a perfect score for me. As long as I wasn’t 20th, because I thought that being in 20th place was low, but up to 19 was perfect. I had never wanted to be first, second, all that. I wasn’t concerned with this because what mattered for me at school was to see my friends. And since I knew I was going to be scolded at the end of the semester [if I had bad grades], I would do everything I could so as not to be 20th in my class. But after the war, right after the war, I was first in my class because I understood better than before the use of school. That's why I said that before and after was like the two sides of a mirror.

**I: Do you think you have achieved your goal?**

Y: No. No, not yet. [laughs] I hope to, someday, but no, I haven’t reached it yet.

**I: I understand that life resumed, Mom returned to work, the children returned to school. Up until that time, what did you learn about your dad? Were you able to find his body? Were you able to bury him?**

Y: No, we never found his body, we were not able to bury him. [People say?] that he’s in either Nyanza or Kicukiro[?], but we really don’t have any confirmation about that. We tried—we know that the person who killed my father is still in Kigali. Apparently, during the *gacaca*—I wasn’t there—he was presumed innocent. The trial is still going on, it’s not over yet. But to date, unless he accepts his wrongdoing and tells us what happened—where he [the body of Yvette’s father] is now, so far we don’t know.

**I: Do you think you’ll keep trying to get the truth from that person, or?**

Y: Speaking for myself? I don’t think I would have the strength to pursue this, I don’t think I have the energy. I appreciate the people in Kigali who follow up on this, it’s good if they do it, but personally, I don’t think I have that energy. The only motivation that would make me do it is to find out where the body of my father is, but the rest—attending the *gacaca* and all that—it’s good, but I don’t think I have enough energy to do that. Even if I were there, in Rwanda, I don’t think I would have the energy to do it.

**I: I don’t want to push you too much, but you say that the thing that interests you the most would be to find out where the body of your father is. How would you go about finding that out?**

Y: Ideally, the killer would admit it and he would tell us exactly what happened after we left the house, so that we know. That would be the only way. Or, if all of a sudden people who were there at the time and who know what happened—if they tell us… That would be the only way. But if the only way, really, is to find out through that person, I doubt that I would be able to do it. Not me.

**I: You never went back to Rwanda since you left?**

Y: I did, I went back in 1997.

**I: Did you meet these people?**

Y: No.

**I: Do you think that one day you may want to meet them?**

Y: It's a good question. I don’t know. We think we’d meet them, but meeting someone who says “No, I didn’t do that,” yet we know they have, it’s also—in any case, I am reluctant. I am not so sure. But sometimes I think to myself: “I would like to meet this person and look at him.” To be face-to-face with him, to at least ask him a few questions. But I think it would anger me more, it would make me even more—if he says, “No, I didn’t do that,” I don’t know if I could handle it. Knowing that he’s done it and that he says no, that’s what I doubt very much. I find it’s too—I think it's the highest level of viciousness. We’re not asking for much, we want to know at least where the body is so we can bury it. But to meet with someone who might know where the body is and would not say, I'm not sure that I could handle it.

**00:56:16**

**I: You went back in 1997? I think you were 17 years old at the time? What was it like for you to go back?**

Y: I lived there for a few months before going to Benin, but I think I was more—I didn’t really think about what had happened. I was trying hard to look on the bright side, to see my family that I hadn’t seen, my uncles, my aunts, my cousins… I don’t think that—I was trying not to mention it. And to this day, I’m still not sure if I would go back, I don’t know what it would be like.

**I: Are you considering going back?**

Y: Yes. But when, I don’t know.

**I: What is the motivation for you to return, what motivates you to go there again?**

Y: Whether I like it or not, Rwanda will always remain my country. That's one thing. Two, I still have relatives there. But the other thing that I really want to do one day—and to have the courage to do—is to go, but not only to be there, but to be there in April, that would be ideal. I would like to relive that month as I lived through it in 1994. Maybe it would be a kind of therapy for me, I don’t know, but that's what I'm going to do, try to live through—to remember what I was doing every day—or at least live for a few days there during that month.

**I: Revisit places?**

Y: Visit the places, go to the memorials, return to the neighbourhood, yes. All of this is what I would like to do. When? I don’t know.

**I: We talked about your departure for Benin, then I brought your story back to Rwanda, but I didn’t ask you—also, I started off by addressing you informally and then formally… Anyways, finally, how did you end up in Montreal? When did you leave your family? And why?**

Y: I came to Montreal in 2001. It might sound crazy, but I have always loved Canada. Why? I don’t know. I was hearing Montreal French being spoken, and I had a cousin who lived here and he told me, “Listen, it's nice here, it's good, you'll enjoy it, come.” When I arrived, I came for—I said, “I'll try it for maybe a year. If I like it I'll stay, if I don’t like it, too bad.” And now, it’s been almost nine years. [laughs]

**I: You liked it here, that’s what you’re saying? [laughs]**

Y: Yes, I would say yes, I loved it.

**I: I'm curious to ask the question again—how do you feel about leaving the country for a second, if not a third, time?**

**01:00:00**

Y: It's like I say, it was the first time that—pardon me—that I was leaving my family, and I thought it was a crazy thing to do. I wasn’t even eighteen years old yet, it was an adventure. It was absolutely an adventure. I didn’t know what I was getting myself into, I didn’t have any expectations. I thought, “I’ll go and then we’ll see.” I had no expectations, I didn’t know what I was getting into and I thought, “I'll go, if it works—great, if it doesn’t work—hey, we'll try something else.”

**I: As the eldest daughter who wanted to fight and help her mother, how did you feel when you left? Did you leave in order to be able to help her better? Did you leave so that you could reach your maximum potential? How did she feel about that?**

Y: I think it was hard for her to let me go because it was the first time she was separating from one of her children. I don’t think she realized it until the last day or maybe she was hoping I would come back. But I was thinking, “Not being next to her doesn’t mean that I’m not helping her.” And I was also thinking: “I want to go there, I want to leave for—.” As the saying goes, you have to take a step backwards in order to make a better jump forward. In my mind, that’s why I did it. It was crazy, because I was young and I didn’t have a precise plan and all that, but it was really with the intention to move forward and become someone, to be able to reach my goals, that was the reason why. It was really a crazy thing to do, leave your parents while you are still under 18, go to Canada, a country, I don’t know how many thousands—from your parents, it's crazy. I don’t think that my children would do something like that. [laughs]

**I: You told me how you felt when you left, I'll ask you now how you felt when you arrived. Where does one even begin in a situation like that? What did you do? Once in Montreal, how did you know where to go and what to do?**

Y: Because I was with my cousin, I had someone who was helping me do this and that. That was helpful. Also I was still a minor and I went back to high school. That was easy. That's what made my integration easier because when you start school, you make contacts. I started school, I was at the end of high school, so I finished high school. And I remember, I started in Grade 10 and when the school year finished everyone was looking for work and so I said “Let's go! Let’s find a job.” I remember I didn’t know where to start. I remember I was buying something at Zellers and there was a line-up, a long line. And I thought, “These people are probably looking for cashiers.” [laughs] I went home, printed my CV, went back to the store, gave it to them and said, “I think you're looking to hire people.” I told this to the person there because there was a long queue. And it was true. I handed in my CV, say today, and two days later they called me, they interviewed me and I started work on Monday. So I worked there during the summer and in September I went back to school. They kept me working part-time because I was going to school. I went to school in the mornings and I was working a few evenings and on the weekend. There was a project with the Bank of Montreal [BMO] through my school, the bank wanted to integrate young students into the financial sector. So they would go into Montreal schools and select a maximum of three students per school, and they chose me. After they selected me, I did the internship once a week. I worked at the bank as an intern and I learned in this way what the job of the people at the bank entailed. And when I graduated from high school, they called me to ask if I was looking for a job. I said yes. The woman who was coordinating the internship told me, “I’ll keep your CV, if you’re ever looking for a job.” And when they had a job opening she said to me: “Listen, there are jobs that have become available, I'm going to send your CV, so expect us to call you if you are selected.” Finally, they called me and I got the job at BMO, and I worked there. So that was it, my integration.

**01:05:28**

**I: It was an easy one, we could say.**

Y: I'm not complaining. It wasn’t that difficult.

**I: Did you find that going to a new school—I don’t know which school you were at—when you arrived and you had to go to school, did you feel welcome by your new colleagues, your new classmates?**

Y: I was at École secondaire La voie and it wasn’t so difficult because I understood the language, people were speaking and I could understand very well what they were saying. It wasn’t that difficult. Except for my shyness, which always gets in the way... But it was—I was doing so well that in the second year I was president of the student council, which probably means that if they had chosen me, I must have done pretty well, I’d think. No, it wasn’t that hard. I would say it was easier than the first time, but I’d also say that the language facilitated things, because I understood the language, so I went [inaudible].

**I: I’d also assume that attending La Voie was easier than attending other schools. Was it in a multiethnic neighbourhood?**

Y: Yes, precisely.

**I: So it was easier to find your place there?**

Y: It was easier, yes. It was really multicultural, it's true. But I remember that the assistant director there also helped me a lot, because she would often stop by to ask me if everything was going okay: “Are you having any problems?” I think she came to see me every day, and I found that also reassuring… When there’s someone you can turn to if something goes wrong, I think that also reassured me, yes.

**I: Do you think she was doing the same thing for everyone or was there a particular reason why she was interested in you?**

Y: I don’t think that she did the same thing for everyone, but in any case not a day went by without me seeing her—I don’t remember. Of course there were days when she wasn’t there, when we had activities, but especially in the beginning, she would see me every day. She would stand in front of her office, you know, and when the students came out of class and when I passed by I would say hello, she would call me and ask, “Are you okay, are there any problems?”, things like that… She was my resource person, if I had any questions.

**I: I’m curious to know if you’ve had the strength or the opportunity to tell your classmates or the school administrators about what you had lived through in Rwanda?**

Y: Yes, to the assistant director—I didn’t go into too many details, but I told her that I was Rwandan. She asked me if I had lived through the genocide, I said yes, that was all. But I remember one time, it was during history class I think, we were talking about wars and all that, and they asked me to tell them what had happened in Rwanda. And again, I didn’t go into details, but I told them what had happened, and I said a few words about my own experience, so yeah, I’ve told the story at least once.

**I: Do you think that when our colleagues learn about our experiences, this changes our relationship with them? Or does it stay the same? Do you think that knowing someone’s personal story changes anything or it doesn’t?**

Y: It certainly changes something when you know what someone has lived through, especially if it has been something difficult. As long as we don’t gloss over it and we don’t feel sorry the person… But for sure, it changes something.

**I: We agreed that one of the easiest ways to integrate is through school and work. I didn’t even ask if you’ve gotten help from community organizations—I believe the answer is no?**

Y: I did, I participated in one organization. I participated once. If I remember correctly, it was during the first summer, I was already working, and there was a youth centre across the street from where I worked, and I said to myself, “I’ll go and see what they’re doing there,” and I went in. They said that, yes, they do activities to help young people integrate and out of curiosity I said, “I’ll join in.” I was—we were a group of young people, yes, we did some activities, we did small jobs. I didn’t stay long, I think I stayed only for the two months in the summer. I was just curious to see what they were doing.

**I: So other than that, you didn’t need the help of community centres?**

Y: No, not at all. Not really.

**I: Are you, however, involved in or do you participate in some of the Rwandan community groups in Montreal?**

Y: Yes, I'm part of Insangano.

**I: What is it?**

Y: It's a dance group where we do traditional Rwandan dances and other activities. We have a community newspaper, we organize Christmas parties for the children, and so on. And I’ve been part of Insangano, I think, since 2003—no, 2004—I’ve been part of Insangano. I’m also part of Page-Rwanda, since 2005–2006, so those are the two community groups to which—I was also a member of the founding committee of the Rwandan Cultural Centre, and I think that’s all.

**I: Besides these, are there other Rwandan groups in Montreal?**

Y: I know there’s another dance group, Ihozo. But I don’t know much more about them. But I know they exist.

**I: To your knowledge, do you think that the same divisions between the ethnic groups that exist in Rwanda are present in Montreal too?**

Y: Absolutely. Yes.

**I: Is it obvious? Does one have to be Rwandan to notice it? Or…**

Y: Does one have to be Rwandan to notice it? Because I am Rwandan, I don’t know if people who see—but as a Rwandan, yes, I am aware of it. Does one have to absolutely be [Rwandan] to understand it? I don’t know. Maybe yes, I don’t know.

**I: Do you think there is hostility present within these groups or is it just group dynamics?**

Y: I think it’s just group dynamics. Bringing together the two ethnicities is not something that can happen in two years or five years. If it is to happen at all, it will take time and there will be a learning curve, and it will be long-lasting. I don’t think it's something that should be forced or pushed either, we really have to let time do its work.

**I: Since you’ve come to Canada, have your views about your country or community changed or have they remained the same?**

Y: No, I would say they have changed, especially when I look at the young people. The young people have the desire to make sure that our country advances. We want things to be better for the country, we really want it to move forward, we want the Rwanda of tomorrow to be a different Rwanda from the one we have known.

**I: Are there gatherings for the Rwandans in Montreal where you talk about your country, about what happened? Do you meet to talk about that?**

Y: We did this as part of Insangano, we had what we call *tuganire*, we sat down and we talked about what had happened. And not only about those events—we could address all kinds of issues. But we often talked about what had happened in Rwanda, about education today compared to the education of our parents or our grandparents, yes, we often referred to that.

**I: If I understand correctly, it is mostly young people who meet as part of Isangano. And the older community members, do you know if they also meet?**

Y: Yes, there is the Urumuri Mothers Association, I imagine that they also do this kind of gatherings, yes. But that’s all I know.

**I: In our conversation just now about your work and your studies we were at the point where you were working at BMO—are you still at BMO? Do you plan to continue your career or your studies?**

Y: I left BMO not long after 2003, and since then I have been with Bell, since 2003, and I continued my studies in accounting, management and accounting. I think I will be working more in the financial sector.

**I: When you look back, and after nine years in Montreal, do you feel a sense of accomplishment, a sense of a journey?**

Y: I don’t think it’s been a failure, but I think—I hope—that I'm on the right track. There is still a long journey ahead of me.

**I: I can’t end the interview without asking your opinion on how the media have reported, and continue to report, on what happened in Rwanda. What is your opinion on that?**

Y: What bothers me and affects me the most is the negationism, the fact that despite everything that has happened, that has been recorded on camera, the people who have lived through it, the victims who continue to testify, there are still people who dare say that there was no genocide—I don’t support that.

**I: Have you seen Rwanda's history or the events that happened there represented in the media? Like, in the movies or in the theater—have you had a chance to see that and what are your impressions of it?**

Y: When I watch movies about genocides—of course, a film can’t tell the full story of what happened during those three months and all over the country—does it represent it really or are we trying to represent reality… I think more work remains to be done on this.

**I: Would you like to be among the people to take part in this, to try to do these performances?**

Y: To be an actress?

**I: Yes, sort of...**

Y: My God, no!

**I: [laughs]**

Y: [laughs] No, the cameras—I don’t think—I don’t like cameras and they must not like me either.

**I: Cameras aside, how do you feel about being an actor or an actress of one’s own story? What is your view on that?**

Y: Personally, no. I can give ideas on a project that someone else would like to carry out, but I don’t think I have the talent for that. One never knows, but for the moment, I don’t think so.

**I: Before we end the interview, what would you like for Montrealers who are not from Rwanda to know about you?**

Y: About me?

**I: About your lived experience.**

Y: The future is based on the past. This means that, whether I like it or not, what happened is going to influence what I am doing now and what I will be doing in the future. This means that what I have seen and what I have lived through will be reflected in my every decision or every action. And I think to myself that, yes, what I’ve lived through was an atrocity, but at the same time it awoke a part of me that keeps telling me that life did not stop, life goes on and that we must not just survive, we must live. Whatever the obstacles you encounter in life, whoever you meet on your journey, don’t hesitate to move forward. And I think—as they say in English, last but not least—I think that if I am who I am, if I am where I am, it is all because of God. And I say to myself, “Everything I've lived through, everything I do, everything I know—if I didn’t have God, if I didn’t have prayer, I wouldn’t be here.” There’s no doubt about that.

**I: Thank you very much.**

Y: My pleasure.

**I: I wish you all the best.**

Y: Thank you, that's very kind. [smiles]

**01:22:05**

(End of interview session 1 of 1)