

INTERVIEW WITH ANITA MUHIMPUNDU

**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 bahungiyeye muri Canada Jenocide n'itotezwa ryayibanjirije**

Status of the interview: X public (1A)

Interviewee: Anita Muhimpundu (A.M.)

Interviewers: Sandra Isimbi (S.I.) (Q); Annie Fréchette (A.F.) (R)

Videographer:

Number of interview sessions: 1 (held on February 4, 2010)

Length of the interview: 1 hour 12 minutes

Place of the interview:

Date of the interview: February 4, 2010

Language: French

Transcribed by: Gisèle Simbi

Date of transcription: March 7, 2017

Software used to view the DVD: VLC Media Player

Editorial note: N/A

Biographical note: Anita Muhimpundu is a young Rwandan woman who lives in Montreal. She and her family—two parents and six children—survived the genocide. She’s lived in Burundi and Kenya before settling in Montreal. She talks about the period from the 1990s until the present day from her point of view.

S.I.: Hello!

A.M.: Hello!

S.I.: So, to begin, can you tell us about yourself? Your name, age, and tell us a little bit about your family.

A.M.: My name is Anita Muhimpundu, I am 27 years old, I am Rwandan, and I come from a big family of six children, and with Dad and Mom that makes eight of us. And we are all here in Quebec.

S.I.: What is your marital status?

A.M.: I’m single.

S.I.: Single, okay. You said that your parents are here. Are your grandparents still alive?

A.M.: One of my grandmothers is still alive. My mother’s parents—my grandfather died when my mother was young, so she didn’t know him very well either. We, the kids, we didn’t really know him. Grandma, my mother’s mom, is still alive and I’ve known her all my life. Just recently, she was in Canada to visit us, she just left for Rwanda. On my dad’s side, I didn’t know much of...I knew his parents for maybe about a year—when we lived in Rwanda we went to visit them. His mother passed away when I was young, I was maybe 7 years old, I didn’t know her very well. But I knew his dad very well. I still remember some of the activities we did together. He died during the genocide.

S.I.: Okay. So, if I understand correctly, your maternal grandmother is still alive.

A.M.: Yes, that’s right.

S.I.: What would you say is the relationship like between your grandmother and your parents? What do you remember of the interaction between your grandparents and your parents?

A.M.: My grandmother on my mother’s side...well, she had four children: a boy, the eldest, and three girls. She is very protective, she’s like a man. Given that she lost her husband when she was very young, she’s really showing a great sense of leadership in keeping the family

organized. When I think of my grandmother, I think of her strength and I see her as the head of the family. So, with my mother...she is very close with her children, very close. And she always has the last word—even in her relationship with my mother, she always has the last word... She tries to keep the family together. She's very strong, and she inspires me to be strong too.

S.I.: Can you also talk about your parents now? What kind of people are they? What do they do for a living?

A.M.: Okay. So, my parents... My dad's name is Joseph. He has always worked in construction. He was an architect in Rwanda and here he's always worked in construction. He's also a pastor. You can find him as much on the construction site as in the church—he's very active. He's very close to his community, and to his children as well. I think he's very close to us, he's open. Mom, she was an educator in Rwanda, I'd say more like a kindergarten teacher, and she continued working in a daycare here, working with children again. And...what can I say... [chuckle] We are close to our parents, but, for sure, our culture is not...

S.I.: Not very expressive?

A.M.: That's how it is. We are close to our parents, but it's not...there are certain things you don't say...there's a barrier between parents and children, like with most parents in our community.

S.I.: Can you also tell us about your brothers and sisters? You said you have...

A.M.: We are six children.

S.I.: Six children, I understand, okay.

A.M.: We are six children: a big brother who is the eldest, four girls, and the last one, the little brother. Richard, Jeannette, myself—I'm the third child—my little sister Anne-Lise, Nelly, and David. We are very, very close, although there was a period of three years when we were separated due to the circumstances in Rwanda. But I think we have a good relationship, we are very close. We encourage each other and help each other a lot. And we are like best friends to each other—I find that amazing.

00:05:18

S.I.: Would you say that one of your siblings has influenced you in any particular way? Or is there one, maybe, with whom you have a closer, special relationship?

A.M.: I think I have a special connection with my little sister Anne-Lise. We all complement each other in some ways, in the sense that at some point in time and in some circumstances my big brother may be the one to inspire me, at another point, it could be my big sister or my little sister—it depends. We are close. Sometimes it is simply the people who are around us and available that inspire us or give us strength. But I have a special connection with my little sister who was born after me, Anne-Lise, because it was just me, her and Dad during the period of separation from Mom and the other brothers and sisters. Maybe I feel a little bit like a mother to her. At the same time, her and I, we complement each other in some ways: sometimes she would say something and I will complete her sentence, at other times I would think about something and she completes my thought. Something was created between us during that period, I can't explain what it is, but I'd say it's a good relationship.

S.I.: Has this always been the case, since you were young, or do you think it is due to this time when it was just the two of you and your father who were together, separated from your other siblings? In fact, this is more of a question about your childhood. Where did you grow up? What was it like, for you and your siblings, when you were growing up?

A.M.: If I have to talk about my childhood—I was born in Burundi in 1982 and when I was little, we moved to Rwanda. Dad was working in Burundi and he got a promotion in Rwanda, he went to work in Rwanda, I was one year old when we arrived in Rwanda. I'm not going to lie, I don't remember much from when I was little, because I think I was too young. The only memory I have of Rwanda...of course, I played with the neighbours, with friends, with other kids, and so on. I remember the smells, the fences of the houses, the colours the doors were painted, things like that. And at the age of seven, I started school in first grade. When I was seven, I remember the road we had to walk to school; I remember my teacher who was very severe, he was old, old, old, but he was very, very severe. I have very few memories of Rwanda, because I left Rwanda at the age of eight to return to Burundi. But I can say that my childhood was like that of the other children: I had many toys... Most of my memories are from Burundi, not from Rwanda.

S.I.: Can you tell me about your memories from Burundi then? I guess your memories from Burundi are from the time when you came back from Rwanda. So, can you tell me about yourself, about your studies, about...

A.M.: Okay. When I returned to Burundi...well, as I told you, I was in Rwanda, I did first grade there. During the school holidays, my mother sent me to Burundi to join my little sister, who had

left a year before, on the occasion of my aunt's wedding, but who had stayed in Burundi, because she wasn't going to school yet. So, two of my mother's little sisters and her mom were in Burundi: my aunts and my grandmother lived in Burundi. And on Dad's side there were two aunts, sisters—*shangazi*, as they are called—my dad's two aunts. I was in Burundi...and some of our relatives were also living in Burundi. When I left Rwanda at the age of seven and when I arrived in Burundi, I...well, the grandmothers were spoiling us so much...it was like...we didn't feel the time passing by. There were many activities to occupy our time, and we got a lot of little treats. I was the darling of my grandmothers, I remember that very well. This was also the time when I reunited with my little sister because I hadn't seen her in a long time, and since we both weren't going to school...I went to school for only a year and it had been a year since I had last seen her. I remember the games we played, the activities we did together; we spent a lot of time together at home. Reuniting with her was special. The thing that was maybe a bit difficult was the long separation from our parents. I arrived in Burundi, I think it was in 1990, and at that time some things were starting to happen in Rwanda. Dad told us to stay in Burundi in the meantime because [the situation in Rwanda] wasn't safe—he lost his job, there were many small threats like that, but we were young and we didn't fully understand these things.

00:10:06

We stayed there, at the house of our two aunts. This separation and not understanding why you're far away from your parents affected me a little bit, and I was always looking forward to reuniting with my parents. Time was going by so fast that I...this period lasted for a long time, but time was going fast, in the sense that I was a child, it was different, I was spoiled, but I wasn't with my Mom and Dad. So, me and my sister, we automatically clung to each other and gave each other strength, encouraged one another, and so on. Fortunately, my aunts had children. Aunt Goretti—who was the one that got married and whose wedding my little sister went to—had a little boy, [Amand?], and her older sister had two daughters who were my sister's age. So, I became a big sister to these three little girls and a little cousin. We lived harmoniously—a small house filled with many children. I started school. I went to a school in Cibitoke, that's what it was called, Cibitoke, the Cibitoke neighbourhood. I went there from second to fifth grade. I wasn't at the same school as my sister because my sister, she...since she was younger, we didn't

want her to go to a school far from home. She was at Libre, where my aunt was teaching. So I was more like [inaudible]. And my aunt's two daughters were also at that school. What are my memories from school? I was young; children are carefree at that age; I played games, I was having fun, it was really nice. I don't think that my childhood was traumatic, with the exception of the time when my aunt came to teach at my school. By the way, both of my mother's sisters were teachers. [smiles] So, the youngest one, who had a little boy, came to my school to teach, and she was my teacher in Grade 5. My classmates could not stop teasing me. She wasn't a harsh teacher, she lacked a sense of leadership, and the students were kidding around. I joined in the fun too, just to give her a little bit of a hard time. I remember, she was so gentle and the students loved her. Some of the students were saying things like, "Madame, can I carry your briefcase to your house?" There were always little girls or little boys who loved her very much and who carried her bag with our assignments to her house. I remember that during recess we used to play outside, and she would call me into the teachers' office. She gave me some yogurt to drink, *ikivuguto*. I was young, I would drink and drink, and drink and eat the *amandazi*, small doughnuts. Then, I would go back outside, still chewing, and the children would see that I had been given a snack in the teachers' office. And then I got beat up a little bit, the other kids were laughing, they were pushing me around. Sometimes I tried to sneak out snacks to give to my friends, but she would say, "No, wipe your mouth, it's not allowed." It was a small expression of favoritism—she was my aunt—but I know that the other kids...my friends didn't like that at all. And I was, like, innocent—I would go back to the yard with milk on my face. [laughter] The children were teasing me. It was in Grade 5, I wasn't a little girl anymore, but it's...spoiling me rotten and we weren't thinking that it could affect others who were less fortunate than us. Otherwise, what I specifically remember from that time was my role as big sister. At home, I wasn't a princess anymore; it was more, like, "Okay, I'll look after things, I'll help grandma a little bit, I'll help my two aunts with their children." At that time, I quickly developed a sense of protectiveness towards the younger ones. And when I didn't feel like doing that and wanted to behave like a child, I would remind myself that I was the big sister and would go back to being disciplined. But these moments weren't too serious, it was just me thinking, "I want my mom!" Mom wasn't there. That was a difficult time, but it allowed me to become who I am today. And to me they are still my little sisters, not my little cousins; and in some way this strengthened the bond I had with my own sister.

00:14:40

S.I.: Okay, so, this was during the three years you mentioned when it was just you, your sister, and, as you said, your father?

A.M.: My dad arrived after that, shortly after.

S.I.: Okay. Did your brothers and sisters also join you or did they remain in Rwanda?

A.M.: Actually, I went to Burundi to join my sister, my aunts and my grandparents, but my older brother and sister, who were still going to school, remained with my parents in Rwanda. My mother had just had a fifth child, little Nelly. Surely, my parents weren't going to move [to Burundi] because their lives were in Rwanda. We felt like we were on vacation, but since the situation [in Rwanda] wasn't good, my dad wanted us to stay in Burundi. I think that things got much worse in 1992, especially in the area where we lived. Dad received threats, things like that. Once, he was even imprisoned for, like, 24 hours. And that was enough for Dad to want to protect our family. Some people had their houses attacked, some of the houses in our neighbourhood were burned down, it was...I remember that time rather well...we lived in Rwanda, in the Kicukiro neighbourhood, I think, I'm not sure...yeah, Kicukiro was where we lived. I remember there was a cemetery nearby and the [attackers] would hide in the cemetery during the night and would then attack the houses while people were asleep. It was quite dangerous. And my father was clearly a wanted man, to be killed during that time. So, in 1992, when...in hindsight, I think, "1992—that's quite early." But things were underway. What happened was that Dad...my mom's big brother had been living here, in Canada, for a few years—he had been here for over five years at that point—and he was doing everything possible to bring Mom and the children here so that they can escape any further violence. So, Mom came here with the children in February 1992. And Dad found a way to join us in Burundi and then travel here. So, between 1990 and 1995...in fact, we were separated from Mom for five years, but Dad was with us from 1992 to 1995, while Mom was here.

S.I.: Okay. So, after fifth grade, you spent two more years in Burundi with your father and your sister, and then you came here?

A.M.: It was a little bit more complicated than that. When Dad arrived [in Burundi], he stayed with my two aunts who had younger children, and he was in the process of getting us to Canada

to join Mom. But it was complicated—I don't know if it was because of the documents or something else. The situation was safe in Burundi, but not in Rwanda, however, in Burundi too, the times were hard, especially for Rwandan immigrants. We weren't accepted in Burundi either, especially at school. And Dad...he had applied to come to Canada, and he was offered to go to Kenya to speed up the process. So, we separated from our two aunts, but one of the aunts came with us. We went to Kenya, and we were there for about a year and a half with Dad, me, my little sister, my aunt and her little boy. We spent some time in Kenya, a year and a half, with our suitcases ready because we could leave for Canada at any moment. It really was a peculiar time. After three months, Dad said, "Well, listen, we're not going to stay here and do nothing, you're going to school." So, for a year, we went to school in Kenya. I remember that school year: a new language, new friends, new food, and so on. It was a bit difficult, but when you're a child, I think you adapt quickly.

S.I.: Would you say that this was a difficult period for you? Or was it more like a time when you couldn't really settle because you could leave the country at any moment...in addition to being separated from part of your family and having to adapt to a new country?

A.M.: I think I'm realizing now, in hindsight, that it was difficult. When you're in the moment...it's very particular, you know, I don't know how I can explain that, in the sense that...in Burundi, we had a maid who did a little bit of everything, who helped us get everything organized. But sometimes my grandmother would give her a break so that we could do our own beds, do the house chores ourselves, and so on. We were very spoiled in Burundi, so we were...but sometimes we did...in Kenya, we didn't have a maid, which meant that we had to do everything ourselves. My dad and my aunt were busy trying to get the necessary documents, fill them in, do the interviews, and all that stuff. So, I found myself again being the big sister, but this time, we had to do everything: we cooked, we washed our clothes, we walked to school. It was [dynamic?] but...it was more difficult in Kenya than in Burundi, but, again, this situation taught us a lesson. I still remember when I was in Kenya, my little sister had—it was 1993, or around that time—we were going to school and we were preparing to come to Canada, and I remember that everyone in school had their hair shaved, even the girls, even the teachers—they had short hair, very, very short hair. And Dad asked if we could keep our braids, since we would eventually be coming to Canada, to avoid a potential shock for us. In Burundi we braided our

hair, but not in Kenya, because the school we were going to was a private and more strict school, and everyone had their heads shaved, except us. So, we became the laughing stock of our friends: “Ah, immigrants,” and so on. We made small braids—so small, lying so flat on our heads that it looked like we didn’t have any hair, but we had small flat braids. All the same, we had little pigtails [laughter] and the kids from our class were pulling our pigtails, things like that. I also remember how lazy my sister was—she was also very young—but so lazy. We had to leave early to go to school, so sometimes I would wake up, I would wash her face and put her on my back and be on my way to school. I didn’t want to be late because they hit us at that school, they would hit us if we arrived late, things like that. So, I would tell her, “No, no, I’m not going to get the cane today.” I would rather carry her on my back. We would run towards the school, on our way, and after we arrived, I would place her in her classroom and then I would go to my class. It was...in hindsight this makes me laugh, because it’s funny to imagine that scene. This lasted for a year and a half, but it was intense, it was special. I remember other little things from Kenya as well, our friends. All these things from childhood that I am telling you about happened as much in the community as in the church. So, something was giving us faith and the confidence to tell each other that it would all end soon, that we would join Mom, that it will all be okay. We had faith, we had that confidence.

S.I.: Was your father also a pastor in Rwanda?

A.M.: Yes, yes.

S.I.: And when you went to Kenya, was he able to continue being a pastor?

A.M.: He wasn’t a pastor in Kenya, but he was very active in the church, he was like a...how can I say...an officer of the church, he was called “an officer of the church.” He was involved in many activities, in prayers, in the...he was in charge of prayer meetings, things like that. This meant that we were still involved in the church, we grew up in the church, with the choir and with the activities related to the choir. I remember that sometimes the choir held rehearsals at our house. It was so beautiful. They sang in a language I didn’t understand—their mother tongue, spoken in Kenya. I can still hear in my mind small bits of the songs—I can sing them, but I don’t know what they mean in Kikuyu. I think it was the church, really, that allowed us at that time to have the faith that we would soon reunite with Mom, and all that.

S.I.: Was it your father who sang in the choir or was it you?

A.M.: My father was in the choir, but since we were always around when they came over to our house, we ended up joining the choir too. [laughter] We didn't know how [it happened], we only knew a few songs, and they said, "Do you want to do a solo?" Our voices were young voices, and sometimes we sang small solos in the church. Slowly, I was beginning to love singing. This didn't last for long and I can't say that we were part of the choir, but we had a place in the choir. We performed maybe three times a year, but we always practiced with them.

S.I.: So, with a father who was a pastor, I understand that religion had a big place in your life. How would you say it has influenced your life and yourself as the person you have become?

A.M.: Religion has had a very...it has influenced me positively. Well, I am religious, I grew up in the Adventist church, I'm a Seventh-Day Adventist, we pray on Saturdays. We follow [the rules] a little bit like the Jewish people, if I can say it that way: we are supposed to observe Sabbath from sunset on Friday night to sunset on Saturday night, so it really is a day of complete rest. We don't watch TV, no cleaning—we would read, make jokes. The choir came over on those days, so we would sing, we would praise the Lord, and all that.

00:25:00

Dad never forced us to go to church—it came naturally to me, it was like a feeling of national belonging. How can I say that? It is innate. I can't say that I became Christian, I was born in it, and I identify as Christian. It [teaches you] important values, personally I am guided by these values: respect, patience, love, helping others, service, and all that. These are things that motivate me as a person, they are things that I have seen, that I have lived with and that, I think, allow me to be who I am, in a certain sense. Besides, I think that if we didn't have religion, it would have been very difficult for us, the children, to understand why we weren't with our mom, to understand why...there are many small acts of injustice when you're a child; there is also favoritism when you're younger...and sometimes my aunt was too busy to give us a hug. You know, as a child, you experience small frustrations like that. I think that going through that period in our lives helped us a lot. We weren't little girls who prayed every night saying "Oh, thank you, Lord!" Our faith was a bit...we believed in God, we knew that everything was fine. Even if something was hurting us, we would say that it was going to be okay: "I think it'll be

okay.” That’s how we would encourage each other, but it wasn’t forced, it wasn’t something that we were forcing ourselves to do. And the other special thing was that our two aunts who lived with us in Burundi were Catholic, and they took us to church on Sundays. Then on Dad’s side, who was an Adventist, we went to church on Saturdays. So, we spent our weekends in church. We could compare the two and have an open mind about other religions too. I remember, the second time I went to the Catholic church, I saw that every Sunday they received the Host. I thought, “But for us, it’s once every three months—you can’t waste the body of Christ!” At the same time, I was asking questions, trying to understand. And at one point she said to me, “But if you want, you can take one too.” I did and I said, “But your Host doesn’t taste like anything!”—as children, we liked to compare things like that. This allowed me to grow up with religion despite the fact that we were going through a difficult time. And now, when I look back at that time, I think that’s one of the things that helped us stay strong.

S.I.: If we go back to your journey—we were at the point where you are in Kenya, you are going to school—so what happened next?

A.M.: After I finished school in Kenya or...?

S.I.: Yes. So, you spent a year and a half in Kenya. Then you left Kenya and where did you go?

A.M.: We left Kenya to come here because it was, indeed...the process was faster. Dad started the process in Rwanda, then continued in Burundi for a year and then in Kenya for another year. The wheels really got in motion in Kenya and we were able to—if I can describe it this way—travel across Africa in order to arrive in North America. We arrived in 1995, in March 1995, I remember very well. It was so cold! But our time in Kenya passed by very fast because the adults were working and us, the children, we would come home late and we played on the weekends, after Mass, after we’ve been to church, and all that. In Kenya we only went to the Adventist church because our aunts and grandmother weren’t with us there. I learned Swahili in Kenya and English, among others, I learned it there.

S.I.: So, just to clarify, your mother and your other brothers and sisters left Rwanda before 1994?

A.M.: Yes.

S.I.: And your father was in Burundi in 1994?

A.M.: Yes. He was in Burundi in 1994.

S.I.: Okay, so he wasn't in Rwanda?

A.M.: He wasn't in Rwanda, but we arrived in Kenya in mid-1993.

S.I.: So, you were in Kenya.

A.M.: We were in Kenya.

S.I.: And so, if we turn now to your arrival in Canada, what were your impressions when, as you say, you travelled from Africa to North America, how did that...what was that experience like for you?

A.M.: When we were in Africa and people spoke to us about Canada, it sounded so beautiful, and everything. My mother was telling me, "Oh, the milk is free [here]." My little brothers and sisters...my big brother and my big sister were saying, "Oh, you open up one tap and you get milk, you open up another and you get water. There are soldiers everywhere!" So, it sounded a bit like an unreal place. And they kept dazzling us so much that we thought it was heaven.

00:30:17

But I think my big brother was doing that on purpose, to make us want to get here faster. My big brother has always been a bit of a comedian, he has always had a sense of humour, really, since he was young, he'd say things that were pretty out there, thank you very much. But when we arrived in Canada in 1995, Dad had dressed us all up like pretty dolls—with little ponytails, little dresses, little sandals. We arrived at the airport—fortunately, there was a shuttle bus to pick us up because the plane landed super far. In the shuttle, I saw people putting on coats and everything, scarves. And then there was us in the shuttle, freezing, you know! And the shuttle drove for ten minutes from where the plane had landed to the airport, to where we were going to get off the shuttle. Once again, luckily, it was like a tunnel—you couldn't see outside, you couldn't really feel the cold, but you could sense that it was chilly. From the shuttle, we went inside the building. Mom was upstairs, she could see us, and she said, "Oh God, you're going to freeze to death." She had brought plenty of coats with her, and I was like...and so we arrived, many people were there to greet us, friends of my mom's, and they had brought apples, pears—all Canadian fruits, it was okay. We tasted the fruits, Mom gave us the coats, but we were saying, "No, no, no" because we were so excited, so...we didn't even know anymore what emotions we were feeling. We hadn't seen Mom in three years, she had become quite hefty, she had put on

weight—she was thin before—her hair was now long. I thought, “That’s not my mother.” [laughter] So, we were more focused on our reunion than on the coats. Then we got out of the airport and I felt a little bit of wind and I was, like, “What is this? What kind of a country is this? Are we in a fridge? I knew it was cold, but what happened in just a short time?” It really hits you directly in the bones, especially when you come from a sunny place, you really feel it in your bones. I remember my mother doing everything possible to cover us up, to protect us from the cold, and my dad was like, “Oh, darling...” We felt like we were in another world, with everyone around us trying to cover us up, and we were like...but, believe me, five minutes later we were shivering and if we hadn’t been careful, we would have ended up in the hospital, it was very cold. There was no snow, I think the temperature was six degrees, but it was intense. It was an intense welcome. Afterwards, we slowly integrated.

S.I.: What was it like to be with your family again? I understand your emotions at the airport, but what about in the days that followed—first, being with your family, but also discovering of a new country?

A.M.: It was...three little dots. My mother had come here in 1995 with my big brother, my big sister, my little brother and my little sister—so, when she left Rwanda she was pregnant with my little brother David, who was born here. She arrived in February, and my little brother was born in May—so, when she arrived her pregnancy was fairly advanced. When we got here, our little brother was 3 years old—and we hadn’t seen him. When we came here, we were really spoiling our little brother, I remember, he was very small, all plump. We didn’t let go of him. It was as though we wanted to catch up on the time we had missed with this newborn. We didn’t let go of him. He was 3 years old, but for us he was still a baby. We would wrest him from each other’s arms, [wanting to hold him,] each in our turn. And at the same time my big brother absolutely wanted to show us the whole city in one day. We were exhausted. My sister was explaining to us every little detail of the house: “This is a toothbrush”—that much we knew. But it was like...they were so happy to see us again that they wanted to integrate us [into their lives] right away, in one day. We felt exhausted, overwhelmed—with the big house, with this, with that. We were like [makes a face showing she’s impressed]—we were wowed by everything they showed us; we were “wow”-ing for two days. Sometimes, you can’t find the words to describe certain things because you are just listening. You are just being guided here or there by others—and you just follow and observe; you follow the direction people point you to. We spent two months with

Dad at home because the others were working or going to school, and everything; even longer than two months, in fact, because we arrived in March and we started school in May. We started school in May, in a French-language reception class, because we had forgotten our French. We spoke English and Swahili, and a little bit of our mother tongue. My little sister Anne-Lise and I were placed in a French-language reception class, in the same class. I have a special relationship with my little sister because we've almost always been together in the same class—and we were again together in the reception class, with the same teacher. We learned French, it took seven months before our French speaking skills started coming back. After that, it was the daily grind, I started...I started sixth grade, she started fifth. We've always been in the same schools, we've had more or less the same teachers, because we have almost always been placed in the same year. I was a year before her, but our teachers were the same and sometimes we almost had the same subjects. So, we would help each other...

00:35:55

S.I.: So, after you arrived in Canada, you were living in Montreal?

A.M.: Yes.

S.I.: Because that's where your family was living at the time?

A.M.: Yes.

S.I.: And you've been in Montreal since then, or did you at some point...

A.M.: We've been in Montreal since then. We lived in St-Léonard before, we settled in St-Léonard when we arrived. About six years ago, we moved. From 1995 to 2000, I believe, we were in St-Léonard; we lived in the same house after our arrival. And after 2000 we moved to another city, well, another Montreal neighbourhood, I should say, Parc-Extension. We get older, we grow up, we go our own ways—life goes by very fast. But we have always lived in Montreal.

S.I.: So, if I understand correctly, when you arrived in Montreal, after a few months of adaptation, you started your studies. Can we say that your main occupation after you arrived here was studying? Can you tell us a little bit about that?

A.M.: Yes, of course. I was young and studying was my main occupation: first in reception classes, then in high school. I remember that when I was younger, I wanted to work because I had a friend who was working, and he got me a job at his workplace. My mother didn't quite

agree with that, she said, “Going to school—that’s what you are cut out for, you’re not yet old enough to work.” But for me it was just fun to be like my friend. I started working when I was 17 years old—no, 16, I was in Grade 11. No, I was in Grade 10. I was thinking to myself... I was getting ready for my prom, my graduation ball and that was one of my motivations for working—I worked for my prom, I imagined it as such a big deal. So, I started working at 16. You can integrate very fast in Montreal, you know, especially when there already are people there who can help you—you can integrate very, very quickly.

S.I.: I understand that it was easier for you, especially since you were young—but did your parents find it as easy? You said before that your mother’s brother was already living in Montreal, so I guess that’s why your parents chose to come to Montreal? Do you find that the process of integration has been easy for your parents too?

A.M.: I think that it wasn’t as easy for them as it was for us, the children, because as children, we, like, grow up in society—you really do, you feel all the social [inaudible] and you adapt. For the parents it’s a different world. They come here, they already have, like, a career, they haven’t experienced all the difficulties of going to school here, and they’re looking for work, and so on. It was a bit difficult for my father. Why? Because, in Africa, since he was a pastor, he was used to visiting people. It’s different here, in Montreal, it’s a different dynamic—you can’t really visit someone without calling first, things like that. So, he had to accept that. At church we met mostly Haitians and we didn’t understand what they were saying—half of the Adventists here in Montreal are Haitians. We went to church and people would sometimes speak Creole there, while, before, we used to sing in our language and read the Bible in our language. That was a challenge for my father. He would say, “We’ve come here, but surely there must be other Rwandans here as well. We can open a Rwandan church and let them rent and worship, and all that. Because here, in this church, we don’t understand anything.” It was in French, but Creole is close to the French language. So, slowly, we started to understand Creole, to speak Creole. We started to eat Creole food and to dance to Creole music. And, following his idea, my father opened a church that was originally for Rwandans, but so many of his Haitian friends came to help us that the church became francophone, and now it’s a francophone church. Before we could do even a month of service in Kinyarwanda, other visitors started coming and we opened the church to everybody.

40:17:00

On the professional side, it was more difficult for Dad because he had good qualifications in Rwanda, he worked with the biggest companies, he worked in the largest banks, the largest churches in Rwanda. Here, he had to go back to school, to learn French... he spoke a little bit of French, but, I mean, not enough to express himself with ease. So, professionally, it was a bit more difficult for him. He signed up for courses, he wanted to stay in the same field or work, then he wanted to start his own business. Him and Mom opened a daycare. They kept it going for a few years, but it was such exhausting work, it was so big that I think they stopped a few years later, maybe four years later, but that also... it was part of our youth, our childhood here. During our school years, they had that daycare, but it wasn't [was?] at home, so we were always surrounded by children. We love having children at home—that changes the dynamic. After that, they stopped. Dad got a job in construction. They integrated—I can say that they've managed to integrate a little bit in their fields of work, but it wasn't an easy thing to do. It wasn't easy. They started from scratch, like everyone who comes here in Canada.

S.I.: So, it was easier for you because you were young, but would you say that everything was going well for you? Was there a time that was maybe more difficult for you? Keeping in mind that this was a new country and that the other children had also come from different cultures... At some point did you find it difficult?

A.M.: For sure. Of course, there are times when you wonder what you are doing here. There are times when... especially with the other kids—kids can be very mean to each other. Especially in the reception classes—when we arrived, we spoke English, we spoke very, very little French. Our friends would talk to us and we didn't understand anything, they were, maybe, at a more advanced level than us. There was a little Spanish boy who always called me “Chocolate” [says it with a Spanish pronunciation]. I asked his friends, “Why do you always call me chocolate?” You know, little expressions of racism like that, when you're young. But these things never affected me, because when he called me “chocolate,” I knew it was in Spanish and I asked someone else how I could answer in Spanish. And they told me: “leche,” it means milk. He called me “chocolate,” I called him “milk.” Every time he called me “chocolate,” I would call him “leche.” But it wasn't meant to be mean. I wanted to say to him, “I also understand your language, I can express myself too!” Little things like that. Again, maybe what we have been

through had made me stronger, in the sense of not letting others crush me. Also, and importantly, my parents were looking down on others, not in an aggressive fashion, it was more in line of “I have to protect myself” or “I can’t let other people hurt me.” On the inside, you become like a little adult. I could see that the boy didn’t understand who I was and I didn’t want to insult him because religion says that’s a mean thing to do, that it’s not nice, and everything. But on the other hand, I thought to myself, “As long as he doesn’t hit me, I don’t have a problem with it.” But we had some difficult moments like that with...when you’re young, other kids can be mean—we say words, big words, that can hurt other children, but that’s normal, I think. When we arrived here, nothing really traumatized me, except the cold weather. But now winter is my best friend, I love it! Yes, yes, yes. I love winter. I wouldn’t say it’s my favourite season, but from the two seasons, I prefer winter.

44:21:00

S.I.: Okay. So, apart from the people you met in your classes, and apart from your brothers and sisters, did you have other acquaintances, other Rwandans your age, maybe, whom you saw after school or on the week-ends and with whom it was easier to connect since you shared the same culture, more or less? Were there other people who helped you adapt?

A.M.: Yes, my older sister Jeannette was part of a Rwandan dance group and my big brother Richard was on a soccer team, and we would go and cheer for them. We met other Rwandans, we grew up around other Rwandans, but Rwandan culture wasn’t the culture of my little sister and myself, since we grew up in Burundi and Kenya. So, I didn’t want to integrate too much with the other Rwandans, I don’t know why. I never understood why, but I just wanted to watch what they were doing, help them, encourage them, but I didn’t want to get into it. I hated Rwandan dancing—personally, I hated dancing. I thought it was beautiful, so wonderful, but I didn’t feel comfortable doing that dance. We accompanied my sister to dance practice and we saw some of our friends there and other young people, and everything. My big brother played soccer—they had many fans, and all that. So, we were part of the life of the community. As for me, I joined the community later on, it was around the year 2000 that I joined that community and became involved in the community, after witnessing a scene that moved me deeply, it was

very touching, and I was like, “Wow, we have a beautiful culture! Oh, it’s beautiful!” After that I wanted to do some good, I wanted to help in the advancement of the culture, and I made an effort to integrate. I can say that, since the year 2000, I have more or less integrated in my community here in Montreal.

S.I.: So, you made some Rwandan friends and now do you have a big circle of Rwandan friends?

A.M.: Yes, it’s not a problem. It always feels good to socialize in our language, to make jokes, inside jokes, things like that, and, especially, to talk about culture and to discover things, because as I said, we didn’t grow up in Rwanda, and we lacked understanding of certain expressions—*sopecya*, if I may say that—to understand certain expressions, certain time periods and anecdotes [when told] by those who had grown up in Rwanda. We were missing that. We were in Burundi and of course there are other realities in Burundi that they aren’t familiar with, but there are also Rwandans here who grew up in Burundi and with whom we could share stories. And I think that has expanded the horizons of the community, of the culture—to fill, precisely, a small void, maybe, that we were missing—well, I speak from my own perspective—the things I’ve missed out on because I didn’t grow up in Rwanda.

47:22:00

S.I.: That’s right, speaking of the fact that you didn’t grow up in Rwanda, so the community here opened a void that you felt within yourself. Since you’ve come here, have you been back to Rwanda?

A.M.: Yes, I went back in 2007, and it was a trip that I was preparing for, like, three years. I had...as I said in the beginning of the interview, two of my dad’s aunts were also in Burundi. One of them, in particular, was like a mother to me. She really was a wise woman. She always had a lesson to teach me, no matter how much time I spent with her. She was like a mentor to me, like a godmother. I don’t know how else to describe it. She would often say to me, “You see, sharing is important. When you see a person who doesn’t have shoes and you have a pair that you’re not using, you can give those shoes to the person.” She taught me things like that, you know. And being away from her, away from this nourishment on the values of life—I was missing her a lot. And I was thinking, “I have to go back to Rwanda, whatever the cost, and see

her.” It’s like, you know, that one sweet grandmother who spoils you. There are severe grandmothers...severe grandparents or sweet grandparents, or whatever. But there’s always one that you particularly miss, and you miss especially the life lessons she’s taught you, or whatever it is. It is because of her that I matured as a person at a young age—precisely because of the life lessons she gave me. I wasn’t interested in insignificant things like “Oh, my dress is the most beautiful,” or things like that. No, it was more like, “Oh, I have a dress that doesn’t fit me anymore—would you like to have it?” And I would give it to a friend. And sometimes my aunt would tell me, “But that’s your dress! Don’t give your things to others!” But for me, it was like, “I don’t need it, I don’t wear it anymore, I don’t like it anymore or it’s too small for me now”—or whatever it was—and stuff like that. She passed on these values to me. So, when I went to Rwanda in 2007, I had been planning my trip for three years. She died in 2006. Despite that, I wanted to go to Rwanda to pay her my respects. It was a very moving moment, especially since she had raised my father and had paid for his studies. She too was like a man. She had married, but never had children, so the children of others were like her own. Even the children in the neighbourhood were like her own children. She was very generous, she was very close to people, especially the poor. She really was a...anyway. So, when I was in Rwanda...of course, Rwanda had changed a lot. I remembered some places, like the road we would take to go to school when I was in first grade, [inaudible] the small forest—actually, it wasn’t really a small forest, it was more like...there were plenty of trees there and on their way to school, the children would pass through it. We also walked though there—my memories were coming back.

50:22:00

Streets, street corners, roundabouts. Stores that were still in business, operating since I had left, around 1990, and in 2007 there were still small places like that remaining, and I rediscovered them. Food smells that all of a sudden...the place awakened so many things in me. I loved the experience of going back, but I didn’t have a chance to say goodbye to my grandmother at her grave, because it was too far and the opportunity didn’t present itself, but I will go back again and visit her grave...

S.I.: So, you’re planning to go back. Have you considered going back for good? Do you think about that sometimes?

A.M.: I think about it a lot. I think about it a lot. But does thinking about it mean actually doing it? No. Not necessarily. But if I could, I would go there every two years, spend at least a month or two months minimum. If I could, I would spend the whole summer there. If I could, I would spend six months there. If I could, I would spend a year there. There is something about Rwanda that draws me towards it, but I tell myself that in life you never know. I still think there might be, eventually, a possibility that I could work there for an indefinite period of time, that I could be of help there somehow, contribute in some way. I think about that a lot.

51:54:00

S.I.: Do you think that maybe the reason why you want to stay here is that your family is here? Do you think that, had some of your relatives remained in Rwanda, you would have already left, or that you would have had more concrete ideas about returning to Rwanda?

A.M.: I have no idea. I'm lucky to have my whole family here—I thank God every day for allowing us to...despite the separations and all the questions, and all that, we are still alive, we are still together. But we have relatives in Rwanda. Of my two grandmothers, the younger sister of the grandmother who died, is still alive; she is still in Rwanda. They are people who...when I was living in Burundi, I spent time with the two families: my aunts on my mother's side and my two grandmothers on my father's side, so I know them very, very well. My heart is in Rwanda, I don't know why that is. I have relatives there, but we're not very close—I have that grandmother, I have a cousin whom I met in 2007 and whom I liked, we got along very well, we really clicked. I phone people in Rwanda about once a month, just to hear from them, to ask how they're doing and if we can do anything from here, things like that. I keep in touch with some people in Rwanda.

S.I.: Apart from Rwanda, can you imagine living in Montreal for the rest of your life?

A.M.: [smiles] Montreal is home.

S.I.: So, we can also say that you've gotten to know the city and made it your own? Would you say that you feel more at home in Montreal than in Rwanda? Or [inaudible] is there always in Rwanda this void within you, which makes you want to get to know Rwanda better? How do you find a balance between these two, Montreal and Rwanda?

A.M.: This is a very good question that you're asking me. I've never really thought about it in this way, but when I see myself in ten, twenty, thirty, forty years, I see myself in Montreal. I grew up in Montreal, I encountered the first difficult moments of my life in Montreal, and bad decisions also in Montreal. Everyone who's grown up in Africa is familiar with the period of the boarding schools and those difficult moments—they have lived through that in Rwanda or in Africa. I encountered difficult moments here. In my teenage years...I arrived here at 13, so I lived my teenage years in Montreal: all my bad decisions, sad moments, my this and my that, my references, it all happened in Montreal. I have good memories from Africa, but for me, Montreal is home, I feel very comfortable in Montreal. By the way, my parents moved away two years ago, they don't live in Montreal anymore. And I can't leave, I can't bring myself to wanting to settle where they are now—not because I don't want to, but because...and it just so happened that I haven't had yet the chance to visit them. My other sisters have left. I don't see myself living anywhere else, but in Montreal. I feel good in Montreal.

S.I.: Did your parents return to Rwanda?

A.M.: No, they live in Calgary now.

55:00:00

S.I.: So, you really see your life in Montreal: having a family here, maybe children too?

A.M.: Yes.

S.I.: What would you tell them about Rwanda?

A.M.: To my children?

S.I.: Yes.

A.M.: Good things, good things. Despite the tragedy that occurred in Rwanda, Dad never taught us these things, in the sense that he never showed us the political differences. Dad never talked about politics at home. By the way, it was only after the genocide that we found out that we were Tutsi. That's really...maybe this saved our lives in Burundi—we were friends with both Hutus and Tutsis because we had no...it was completely natural. Sometimes the Tutsi children would see us with the Hutus and would insult us, and our Hutu friends defended us—but we didn't know why. We thought these were just small cliques, jealous of each other. At home, Dad never told us, "You are Tutsi, you are Hutu." When we asked him—because sometimes our friends at

school would ask us questions—Dad would say, “Well, you are Rwandan, what more is there to know? What do you want me to say? You’re Rwandan.” These are not the kind of things I would like to teach my children. It exists, and my children must know what it is, no matter what. However, it isn’t something that I want to emphasize either, and I think that I don’t like talking about politics, after all. Many questions surround this topic. My parents weren’t too involved in this and so they aren’t in the best position to shed light on this for me. I’ve looked for some answers on my own, trying to understand and everything, but it’s better not to fully understand some things in order to avoid being hurt even more, or to avoid creating ideas in your head. What happened? Why? Nobody knows why. And this has so destroyed the community that I don’t want my kids to grow up with it too. So, I will tell them about Rwanda, about peace, fraternity, sharing, culture, food, [traditional] clothing, things like that. I’ll tell them about our home, but I’m not going to tell them about...I won’t place too much emphasis on these things.

57:30:00

S.I.: Exactly, maybe we haven’t talked about that... If we go back a bit, you’re talking about the genocide—would you have wanted to know [inaudible] what happened then? Did you find out after? Or how did you experience all this?

A.M.: When it happened, we were in Burundi with my aunts, and they protected us. We didn’t listen to the radio. Especially in 1992, while Mom was arriving in Canada, we didn’t have any news from Dad for six months and my aunts were worried that Dad had died during that time. We listened to the radio anyway, secretly, during the night. We knew the situation in Rwanda was very bad, and I remember that I prayed and that I said to God, “I don’t care what you give me or don’t give me, I want my dad to be alive.” Six months later, when Dad arrived [in Burundi], he had changed so much: he had lost weight, he had a beard and everything, and I didn’t recognize my father, I had hard time recognizing him. He arrived and said, “Oh, my daughter!” and I was, like, “Who are you?” Dad spent, like, a week sleeping, maybe because he had seen things, maybe from the exhaustion of the difficult time he had had, and all that. We

didn't know under what circumstances he had arrived in Burundi—he never told us that. I think I got lost in the question, excuse me...

S.I.: You still answered the question by saying a little bit about how you lived through it all, so even if you weren't there, you still...

A.M.: Yes, we went through it somehow, yes.

S.I.: So, we were talking about the genocide in 1994, you were telling us that you were in Burundi, but you were worried about your father who was still in Rwanda, you didn't know whether he was still alive, and you prayed for him. Can you tell us about this period—what was that period like for you, even if you were in Burundi, nevertheless, it must have had a great impact on your life?

A.M.: Yes, it affected us, especially Dad, because we associated the genocide more directly with Dad. We didn't even know if it was a genocide or not. Of all of us—Dad, Mom and the kids—Dad was the only one who remained in Rwanda. So, we were very worried when Dad arrived. I remember he was so exhausted, but he didn't want to talk about it, he didn't want to talk about it at all. We were too young, and he didn't want to traumatize us, but I think he had seen some quite disturbing things, even if it was 1992, he had seen some quite traumatic things. And I remember that when we were living in Burundi with the aunts on my mother's side, my mom's sisters, and before Dad arrived, the same thing happened in Burundi. And when the same thing happened, we had to flee, because our house was in Kigwati. We had a house there, and I remember that it was the Hutus who traumatized the Tutsis. Well, it was the Hutus, the Tutsis, but also the Rwandans. The Burundian Hutus and Tutsis traumatized the Rwandan immigrants. And I remember when my aunt had...we were in the house where my father had lived in Burundi, before I was born. It was a really large house, very imposing, you could see it from a distance. There was like a path that led to the house, but over time, the Burundians had built and built around it, narrowing the street, leaving just a small space that you had to go through almost by turning sideways—they did it maybe because they wanted us to leave. And I remember that during that time we were forced to flee, because they said that they were going to burn down the house that night, in Burundi. A neighbour and an uncle—or, rather, one of my mom's cousins—came to pick us up in a big truck, like an army truck, which at the time served for moving and transporting goods. They came to pick us up and we had to wear green clothes, because that was the colour of the ruling party, so we had to dress in green. It was late at night—it really was a

dark period. We did it because everyone else was doing it, but we didn't know what it meant. So, we had to do this gesture through the car windows [shows a closed fist in the air], because that was their patriotic sign—we had to do that to be able to cross through the city—we were going from Kigwati to Cibitoke; it was still a good ten-minute drive. And we could see people outside throwing rocks at houses, burning houses, shouting, and they had sticks and all that. Yet the neighbourhood where we were living was still relatively calm, we didn't experience these things. Once we were on our way, many things happened—shouting, things like that. We could hear screams and noises, and there were fires everywhere we could see.

01:03:00

We arrived in Cibitoke, we stayed in a small room in my uncle's house. It was myself, my little sister, my aunt, her two daughters, and my other aunt with her boy, and my grandmother who were there. My father wasn't with us. He had gone to stay with his two aunts, because we had to separate from us to prevent anything from happening to us. Shortly after that, we moved to another place, which was a little quieter. But the situation in Burundi was still very unstable during that time. We also experienced the genocide, although in a different way; we weren't in Rwanda. Later, when we arrived in Canada, Dad returned to Rwanda—we arrived in 1995, in March, I think, and my dad returned to Rwanda in December to see if his father was still alive and to see what was left of his house. My Dad's family lived in Butare and when he got there, the house was ransacked—there was no roof, no windows, no doors. A real desert. There were dead bodies everywhere, and all that. He went to his house and where did he find his dad? He had been killed. He picked up the small bones...the other things he found, and he was able to bury his dad. I don't have many memories of my grandfather because I only saw him during a short period of time—I just remember his face and the picture we had of him at home. Dad lost almost his whole family during the genocide. They hadn't wanted to go to the city, they wanted to stay in the country because they lived on a vast plot of land—the grandparents had a lot of land. These uncles, I didn't know them very well either—I only know Dad's half-brother and his half-sister who were in Burundi with him. But the closest relatives—Dad really lost his family. And Mom lost uncles, cousins, nieces, nephews.

01:05:23

It did affect us: knowing that there are people in the photo album that you can't count among us anymore and that these people now only represent memories. It's hard, and it was especially hard to mourn the people we had seen, that we had met in person, that we had memories with.

Especially when you can't know why, when you can't understand what happened. So, I think that the genocide has affected every Rwandan in one way or another; everyone has lost someone: a friend, a colleague, a family friend, a close friend, a relative, or a whole family. I think that everyone has experienced the genocide in some way, even those who haven't lost loved ones, have nevertheless lost a relative.

S.I.: It was also harder for you because you were in Burundi and at the same time something was already underway, so...

A.M.: Yes, but fortunately we didn't see dead bodies, we didn't see mutilations, we didn't see atrocious things. Nothing happens for no reason—I can say that nothing happens without a reason. We could have been in Rwanda, we could have been killed. Later on, a neighbour told my father, “You were the first ones on the list. My house was the first on the list, yours was the second, and I was the leader who was supposed to cut people down. And you were first on the list.” Just hearing that, you don't know what to say to life. You don't know what to say to life. You just say “thank you,” because when I left for Burundi in 1990, that summer, things were beginning to happen. They arrested Dad, things like that, unfairly, and the gentleman said to Dad, “You wouldn't have survived a month in Rwanda with your family.” So, if you're a believer, you say, “Thank you, but why did you do this? But thank you anyway.” We didn't deserve to be alive more than anyone else, but we are thankful to the Lord, and we try to be grateful to others in our lives. Many close friends, many relatives that we see every day have experienced traumatic moments, and they tell us about it. That reminds us again that we almost died.

S.I.: Even if [inaudible], it's still quite moving. In conclusion, is there anything else you would like to add? Is there, maybe, an aspect [of the conversation] that you felt we could have touched on more?

A.M.: No, I think we covered it all, I think we covered it all. Thank you.

S.I.: Telling our life story is not something we do every day. Have you done this before? Do you tell your story often? And do you talk openly about it, as you did during this interview?

A.M.: This is the first time I kind of talk about it as a story, openly like that, yes, this is the first time. Sometimes we share little anecdotes, but in the family I don't think there has been much room to talk about that, because we knew that Dad had lived through some very, very, very difficult moments, and perhaps we were waiting for the moment when he himself could bring it up. We never wanted to press on about what happened, or anything like that, especially since we weren't there. Other people were telling us their stories. You know, if you weren't physically present there during the genocide—like us, we were outside of the country—you keep thinking that you haven't suffered, you keep thinking that your story is not important. And I remember that...by meeting with the people involved in this project, I am realizing that every person's story is important. I wasn't there when it happened, but our moving away was a result of these things. Talking about it allows you to understand that you have also lived through it in your own way. It allows you to express things, the unspoken things, or to just put things into words. We usually don't stop and say, "Oh, I did this, I did that." It can depend on a question that someone might ask you, and which then allows you to open up. And sometimes by telling your story, you realize that...I personally now realize things I hadn't felt before. The emotion I now feel, this emotion, I didn't know what had happened, and by telling the story, it opens up things, it becomes more clear to me. So, this is the first time I've told my story in this way and I think that this is the right setting for those of us who have experienced this situation to be able to talk about it, to verbalize our emotions.

S.I.: You have really managed to understand the emotions one feels and to understand these stories.

A.M.: Absolutely, absolutely. Thank you to the project, because it's...anyway, for me, personally, I feel that my story, no matter how big or small it may seem...every story is a story—big or small, it is still a story. Thanks to this project I realized that I too have something to say, in the sense that I think that every Rwandan has lived through this event in their own way. So, by just talking about it, you allow others to reflect on each person's story. It helps to inform people about all aspects of what happened, like a broken mirror: everyone can look into the broken

mirror, but each one of us will see a different object in each piece. So, everyone's story becomes, like, a puzzle that completes the story of what happened in Rwanda.

S.I.: Thank you.

End of the interview