

INTERVIEW WITH RADEGONDE NDEJURU

**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
ryayibanjirirje**

Status of the interview:

Interviewee: Radegonde NDEJURU (R.N.)

Interviewer: Sandra GASANA (S.G.)

Videographer: Sandra GASANA (S.G.)

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Biography of the interviewee:

Born in Rwanda, Radegonde Ndejuru arrived in Canada in September 1972. She has four older brothers and a younger sister. In this interview, she tells her life story, from her early childhood to the present day. It's a beautiful story, which teaches us how, after all that she has lived through in her native country and in the other countries where she has resided, she now brings this experience in service of society's most vulnerable people so that they may integrate well into their communities, for the greater happiness of all.

S.G.: Hello, Radegonde Ndejuru!

R.N.: Hello.

S.G.: First of all, thank you for taking the time to share your life story with us. Before we begin, I would like to ask you to introduce yourself with a few words, after which we will begin the interview.

R.N.: Okay, my name is Radegonde Ndejuru, I am Rwandan, I currently work in Rwanda as the Executive Director of an organization called Imbutu Foundation.

S.G.: Okay, very good. Now, we will try to reach your most distant memories, and I'm going to ask if you knew your grandparents?

R.N.: I knew...I knew well my maternal grandmother, I only remember her. I think...I've seen my grandfather, but I don't really remember him.

S.G.: Okay, your maternal grandmother: what are your memories of her?

R.N.: She spoiled us a lot, during school vacations we went to her house, we drank milk there...yes, she spoiled us, that's what I remember. And then, after 1959 her house was burned down and she was forced to flee. She came to live with us...so, until I left Rwanda in 1973, she lived with us. She was a dynamic person, she protected us, and she continued spoiling us rotten.

S.G.: What was her relationship with your parents? You all lived together?

R.N.: We lived together, but my father...she didn't live with us for long because this was during those troubled times, between 1959 and the death of my father. She came to live in my father's house in Nyanza, but at first she was there all by herself, she lived with her daughter, while my father and my mother...my father worked for the government and they didn't live at home all the time...so I don't really remember her being there while my dad was also there, but I remember well her being there after my father was killed and when my mother came back. So we always

lived with my mother, my grandmother, my aunt...I saw them when I went back home to visit the family. They had very good relations, they worked together, they were very respectful of each other, they lived in the same room and we sometimes had dinner in that room. They had very good relations, very cordial, very respectful.

S.G.: So tell us about your parents. What are your memories of your parents?

R.N.: Oh, my. That brings so many emotions since they are both dead. What do I remember? Memories from when I was little... First of all, when I talk about my father...my father died...I was 11-years-old and I think the best gift in my life was to be reassured that I was loved completely. You know, in Rwandan culture, no one says “I love you,” no one comes to you and...well, that’s not how it is said. But my father’s love was unconditional, everyone knew that. And I think it has been very helpful in my life, the feeling that you matter for someone. And so my father was...I was born...I was a girl born after four boys, I had another older sister but she had died, and so for my father it was...I grew up thinking that my name was My Daughter because my father always called me “my daughter” and my father’s friends also called me “my daughter.”

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So it really was...I felt I mattered for someone and I knew he was always going to protect me, no one could harm me, no one could...I was spoiled and loved, and I knew it, I was aware of it, everybody knew it, all the people around us. So, the memory I keep...I remember how different my father was with the boys and with me: he was very strict with the boys, very stern, while with me he was very sweet. So I felt super protected and he really was someone who protected me, and I also felt his unconditional love. And...those are the memories I keep. When he died, I think...I didn’t accept it, I didn’t understand it, and I didn’t cry. I’d say that, for me, the period of mourning for my father was when I was preparing for my wedding and that’s when I cried and cried. People talked to me about...when Pierre and I went to see a priest in preparation for the wedding and he asked me, “Are your parents still alive?” I said, “Yes, yes, my mother is,” and he said, “What about your father? What happened to your father?” And I couldn’t tell him. I cried during the whole meeting and Pierre couldn’t understand because I usually told people how my father had died, how he had been killed, but it was a story that...but at that moment, right before

the marriage, when you are about to commit to someone... anyway, I don't know... at that moment when I was grieving his loss, when I was crying for my father, I really felt his absence. So that's it about my father. My mother... she's a woman I admire a great deal for how she raised us. She was widowed very young, she wasn't 40 yet, she had six children: four big boys, me, I was 11, and my sister who was one or two years old—I don't remember exactly. And she raised us, she educated us, she continued giving us everything we had while my father was alive, education. For sure, the older boys were helping her, but she was a very, very, very disciplined person, you know, she was very much like “that's how it must be done,” so you had to follow the rules. She was very strict, very strict, especially with me, I thought. What she was thinking, I believe, was: “She's a girl, she must be well-educated so that she may find a good husband”—or I don't know. I thought she was very, very strict with me. And when she... I always remember what she told us—in Kinyarwanda we say “the children of a single woman, *abana b'umugore*,” which means that “you are lacking discipline, you are lacking the presence of a father.” I remember very well her saying, “I don't want people to think that you are the children of a single mother.” So she was both a dad and a mom. And even though when I was young I thought she was very strict, I am... I was very proud of her and I had the chance to tell her that before she died—

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—she was in Montreal—that had she not been so hard on us, maybe we wouldn't have... we wouldn't be where we are now, we wouldn't have worked as hard as we did. So that's it. She always told me, “You know, you'll have your own children one day and we'll see how you'll deal with it.” And I did understand that with children... having children is not easy. I understood it, even if I thought she was strict with us when I was young. But I think that I have taken many qualities from her, I think I am strict too. That's it. We don't necessarily like to see ourselves... when I think about how I thought she was strict and I didn't like that, and now I say to myself, “Oops, I am strict as well and my kids probably think that way about me too.” Sometimes it's like... well, anyways. So those are my memories of them: they were people who worked a lot, who left us too soon, that's all.

S.G.: You mentioned your brothers and sisters. Tell me about your brothers and sisters and the relationship you have with each of them?

R.N.: Oh, my. I have four brothers. The oldest is Aimable. It's hard to talk about that relationship because...well, the relationship evolves too. So Aimable...when my father died, he really took over, he paid for our studies, he was helping Mom, he finished his studies, he started working to be able to raise us. Aimable was a father figure. We don't have a big age difference, 9 years, I think, but to me he was like a father. He was the one who helped me look for a school to go to, he was the one who gave me rides to school when I was studying in Kigali—he was like a father to me. I think I feared him more than I feared my father because I knew that my father would accept anything I said, but Aimable—he was a father figure, but a strict father. It took a very long time, I think, for him to accept...even after, even after I got married...I wasn't his equal with whom he could talk...he kept a great deal of...and now...no, he's my big brother with whom I can talk about anything, about anything and everything, about my worries—and he would talk to me too. So that's that. He was like a stern father to us. Now we've adapted to the situation and we get along very well. I was very close to his wife, to his children, we were very, very close. This year was, I think, the first time I wrote to him on Father's Day. I wrote him a little note saying, "You know, you were like a father to us." I think that made him happy. As we get older, we reconsider the story of our lives. He's really nice. Then there's Émile, the second son. I didn't know him very well...of the four [brothers], he was...in fact, André and Émile were friends and Aimable and Bello, they looked alike and everything...and I was hanging out more with André and Émile's group, but I don't really have memories of Émile, the second son. And when Dad died, Émile went to Congo to study in Kinshasa, so we weren't really close for a long time. No, I don't have many memories of him. I know he was nice, but no more than that.

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Bello, he was a little mischievous, when he was young, he [?] [A query to the author from the translator: Is "rapporтер" used here in the sense of "report," "announce," "communicate"? Or in the sense of "tell on other people"?]. But I felt he was someone worth having on your side, though. I remember many things from that time. I remember when my father would bring us someplace...my father would sometimes pick us up in the car and we would go for a drive; he

would take us to my grandmother's house, and she would say, "Leave the children here with me," and my father would say, "Yes, you can stay." André and I always stayed, but Bello never did, because he hadn't asked for permission. He knew that if he went back, he would be scolded, and so on. He was very wise, anxious, he had to do everything right; if he didn't do it well, he would [?] when he wasn't doing something correctly. We were cautious around him. And then there is André, I was born right after him. André is my favorite. He's protected me ever since I was a little girl. He really was a great protector until we left Rwanda in 1973; we were always together. He was my role model a little bit, except that I imitated him even when he was doing something not right: when he smoked, I wanted to smoke; when he drank, I wanted to drink too. [laughter] But he's an amazing guy, to this day. And André...he could see that being a girl was difficult: I had to sweep the floors, I was the one to serve tea to everyone, before I myself have had something to eat, to drink, before I've had breakfast, I had to prepare everything, to clean everything and I couldn't just sit and read...I loved reading, but I couldn't read on the weekends, during the school holidays. So André would read a book and then he would tell me what the book was about. Novels, *The Three Musketeers*, stuff like that...boys had the right to read, but not the girls, so he was reading and then he would tell me [about what he's read]. We would sit outside and he would tell me, "And then Athos did this..." So I knew the whole story, but I hadn't read it, it was him who read. We had fun together, André and I. When I wanted to go out dancing...when I started going out...it was André who took me out dancing. So it's really a beautiful story of affection between a brother and a sister. And it continued that way. Maybe less so now, we see each other more as adults, we have more discussions and all that, but before he was my great protector. And...about my brothers...we were all at boarding school, so we would only see each other during the school holidays...Christmas, Easter and the summer holidays.

S.G.: Did you all go to the same boarding school?

R.N.: No, the boys were at Groupe scolaire in Butare and I was in Nyanza. I changed schools many times, but we always saw each other during the school holidays.

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What I remember from my youth is, I think, how angry I was when I was young until I understood feminism. I was really outraged because I realized how unequal we were. As the

youngest one, I had to serve those who were older. I was angry when I was young, every morning I was furious. I was angry because I didn't like waiting on the boys. For them it was like, "Yes, bring us tea, brings us this and that." I made their beds, I swept the floors, I cleaned the house, while my brothers had the right to sit and read. I was lucky that André was there, but in general I didn't like them very much. But it wasn't even them who made demands, it was my mother, and if I refused, she would say, "If you don't want to do this, I will." I couldn't let my mother waiting on my brothers. My sister and I, we don't have a close relationship. We have an age difference of 9-10 years. I was at the boarding school...it was nice to have...I remember when she was born, I was already grown. It was cute: you have a little doll, you dance for her, I liked taking care of her like that. But then we were separated because I went to boarding school in Butare, Nyanza, and I'm not sure where she was, I don't remember. She left shortly before 1973, because she really...us, we could study without...they were preventing the Tutsis from continuing [their studies], but that didn't affect us or at least not as much at the time, but my sister, when she finished primary school, she couldn't continue studying, so she had to go to a private school. It really was the...you know that the Tutsis didn't have the right to go to school...she left school, she stopped going to school here, she was too young when she left, and she went to high school in Congo. But then we all left. I was in Canada, she was in Germany. Actually, we reconnected when they came to Canada and I was already married by then, I had my children. With my sister, I would say that we are closer now, but I didn't really know her before. I felt closer to the boys than to her and she isn't someone I understand easily. She was sick the last time I was in Montreal, and I think that brought us closer together, and she saw that I was there for her, I spent a lot of time with her and we talked about all kinds of things. But otherwise I would say that our relationship before was rather superficial. I remained the big sister in the family, as the eldest girl, after my mother's death, I think, at one point I was the link between my brothers, the family and all that. I was bringing them all together, it was me who invited them often, so it was maybe around that time that she and I grew closer together. Otherwise, it was still...I can't say that I know well who she is or that we're good friends; we laugh together, but we haven't spent much time together, so [I can't say that] she is a good friend.

S.G.: What are your memories of your childhood—so, primary school, what was that like for you? You went to different boarding schools, I guess?

R.N.: Yes, I went to many boarding schools. I think I was very happy as a child. Apparently, I was a rowdy child, everyone remembers me, even here, when I return to Rwanda, all the people I was in primary school with. I ask them, “But how come you remember me?” And they say, “You were rambunctious, you were always laughing.” I think I had a lot of fun in school because all I did at home was to work. I remember I laughed a lot, I liked to... actually, I don’t remember much... I seem to have a serious case of not remembering too much. But I do remember the nuns. The nuns weren’t nice; I remember they would hit us every Wednesday afternoon, I don’t know why, to warn us or to... I don’t know. I don’t know, I didn’t like it, I was afraid of people who hit me, and yet we were hit often. Those are some of my memories. I went to Mass... we were obliged to go, but it was a kind of an outing. Those were my years in primary school. I had good friends, I remember two or three good friends who now... I also remember when we would talk about Hutus, Tutsis, I remember we were in Nyanza, and every Wednesday afternoon—or very often, anyway, I don’t remember if it was every Wednesday—we went to Rukari where the King lived and we saw the Queen, and we danced for her. We were little girls, so we went... she liked children and I remember that we danced for her. I don’t remember if it was around that time that when I would hear the word “Tutsi,” I thought of the Queen. She was always sitting down, very quiet, her hair in the Rwandan style, she always stood like that, she would look at us, very dignified and very beautiful, and for me being a Tutsi was that, it was her, Queen Rosalie Gicanda. That’s what being a Tutsi meant to me. So when they started telling us that we were Tutsi, I would say, “No, we’re not.” I went to my mother and said, “They asked us if we were Hutu or Tutsi. But we are not Tutsi!” She said, “Why do you say that?” “Because I know the Tutsi, they’re like Queen Rosalie Gicanda.” To this, my mother didn’t say anything, she didn’t say yes or no. But to me, that’s what the image of the Tutsis was—it was that lady. I don’t think I had seen the King, maybe he had already died by then... in any case, I didn’t see him. But that’s what being a Tutsi meant to me. So when we were told “You are Tutsi”—how can we be Tutsi? That’s what I remember from primary school. Then, in high school—I went to Save, to Byimana and I graduated from the Lycée in Kigali—the memories, those were good years. Of course, I started high school after my father’s death, but... when I was in primary school I had seen houses burning, so we knew that those weren’t peaceful times we lived in, but I wasn’t really interested in that, I wasn’t asking myself too many questions. The last time I saw my father... he had come during his vacation to the house in Nyanza, which he had finished working on, and then they

attacked them. My mother, my grandmother, my aunt and him came to my school, they took refuge there. In the morning, my father greeted me and then he left—that was the last time I saw him. But my mother and my grandmother stayed at the school for a week. I thought that was a good thing, I didn't realize that our house had been destroyed, that they were there as refugees. I was glad that I was with my mother, my grandmother and my aunt and that I had seen my father. And that was all.

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S.G.: Were there many others whose parents were also at the school, or was it just you?

R.N.: No, they took refuge there because they lived not very far, about eight kilometers away, so they came from our house on foot, they sought refuge there. There weren't other parents there, I was the only one whose whole family was there. And I remember...it's funny—actually, it's not funny—but I remember that the day my father died—he was killed on March 27—that day, after school, we were told to go sweep outside in the yard—I was there that day and I took a piece of wood, I remember very well, I dug a hole, I drew a cross next to it and I wrote “Pierre Claver,” that was my father's name. And that's the day he died. It was only after that I realized this, but back then everyone asked me, “But what are you doing!?” It was a joke, but it was a hole, a cross and my father's name written around it. And since he was killed in Byumba, the nuns learned about it, I think, two or three days later, and all the children were shocked because the nuns were saying, “Do you remember that she dug a hole and wrote her father's name?” And the nuns came to see me and told me, “Your father is dead,” “That's not possible”—I didn't want to understand, and they also said, “Go to the church and pray.” I got scared when they said that. It was six o'clock in the evening, the night was falling, and I was afraid of the dark. And they told me to go to a dark chapel, they had just told me that my father had died—I wasn't thinking about my father at all—I thought they had made that up, I was just scared, I was thinking, “My God, make them take me out of this pitch-black chapel.” They really showed a lack of sensitivity to tell...to say...to announce a person's death like that. I lived in denial after that. And when I went to high school I was liked by the older students, they took care of me... I was very happy at the boarding school, and after that I graduated in Kigali. Those were great years, the teenage years, when you have your first crushes and you love the very idea of love... So I finished school in Kigali in

1969 and the next step was going to university. I wanted to go to university, I wanted to study economics. My brother Aimable absolutely wanted me to study physiotherapy—I didn't even know what that was, it didn't exist in Rwanda, so there was little chance of me going into that [field]. A nursing school, created by Canadians, had just opened at the time and nobody had applied. So they sent us there, I think there were six of us, and that's how... I never dreamed of becoming or liked being a nurse, a doctor, it wasn't tempting to me at all, but they said, "You're going to nursing school." It had just opened, it was the first such school at a university level and I said, "No, I can't look at blood, I can't." So Aimable came to see me and said, "You are 18, you can choose: either you start teaching—but do you really see yourself teaching at 18?—or you go into nursing. It's an opportunity, you'll be in school, you never know." So I again listened to him, I did the program and I graduated in 1972, it was... at that point, I was an adult, I was 21 years old. André was going out a lot with [the people from] Volontaires du progress [Association] and I was going out too. I was going out even if it was an unusual thing to do, but I was going out, because my brothers were there.

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S.G.: So they were all in Kigali at that time?

R.N.: Yes, André and Bello were in Kigali, they were working in Kigali; Émile had gone to Kinshasa and after he left Kinshasa, he went to Belgium, he hadn't come back yet, he came back much later, when we left; Aimable was in Germany, so there was... and Assumpta was in Congo. There was me and my two brothers, they came to see me in Butare, at the university, and we would go out together. Those were good years, years of freedom. At the same time, I knew how to be a good girl in front of my mother. I was wearing mini-skirts, but before going home, I would put on a *pagne* so that Mom wouldn't see me. And I was studying, I wasn't very interested in it, it wasn't really something I liked, I was scared a little bit watching women giving birth, stuff like that, but I did it, I studied, I graduated and after I graduated, I immediately got a job at the Butare University Hospital—except that I never got paid. So I had a job, I graduated in, I think, July and I had to start working in August. We could feel—because events were happening in Burundi—we could feel that Rwanda wasn't very safe, but we were young, we continued having fun. And then in February, that's when it all really began in Rwanda. We were

told, “We don’t want any Tutsi,” and the young people were the ones targeted. So, you would be going to work...I was on my way to the hospital and there, on a tree trunk, a list of names [was posted]: “You are no longer wanted here”—and I saw my name. I went home after that. The same thing had happened to my brothers. In Butare, my brother André was working for Phillips, a private firm, and they had sent him away. My brother Bello was working at the ministry, and he had been sent away too. I wasn’t far from my house, so I went straight home and Mom was extremely worried. She was saying, “No, no, they already killed my husband, I saw it, they killed him before my eyes, I don’t want my children to be killed too. If you can leave, do it.” And we were saying, “Mom, we can’t leave you.” She was saying, “No, no, go, I can’t...I don’t want to witness...” I don’t remember if I went to Kigali...yes, she must have told me to go join my brothers...so I went to Kigali. We tried to flee Kigali, we went to Gisenyi to try crossing the border over to Goma, but someone was following us...we realized that we really were...the man who was following us was Hutu, and so we turned back...our friends from France were with us—we turned back and that same night, we decided to try our luck again, this time crossing over from Bukavu. One of the Frenchmen drove us there, and we made a stop on the way. André and I were in the car, Bello had decided to stay in Kigali; he had said, “You go ahead, I want to see what’s going on and I will join you later.” So we stopped in Nyanza to say goodbye to Mom, and then we continued to Butare, we passed through Nyungwe. André knew people...I remember we arrived at 4 o’clock in the morning at the house of this man—whom I knew, by the way, I even saw him again when I came back here—so that’s what I remember, we arrived at 4 o’clock in the morning, we stayed at this house and we weren’t supposed to go out because we didn’t want others to see us there, to see that people were starting to flee towards Congo. We parked our car at a good distance, we were locked in this house, and the man went to look for smugglers who could bring us to the other side the following night.

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So we stayed in the house, they brought a bucket and we peed in the bucket inside the house because we couldn’t let people see us trying to flee. We stayed there all day, all night and I think it was in the middle of the night, around three in the morning, when they came to pick us up. They brought us to the river and there were canoes there to help us cross. When we crossed to

the other side, André had money and he had given me money—a little bit of money, we had to share it—he had given me a little bit of money to put in my bra, in my underwear so that it wouldn't be found, and he started to negotiate with the smugglers, he said, "I'm bringing my sister to Zaire for her studies, we must leave right away because a car is waiting for us on the other side." And they were negotiating with him: "How much will you give us?" There was this one person there—I remember, I stood behind—he came up to us and said, "Hey, what is it that you're saying?" And André said, "Oh, damn..." and the guy took out a whistle [she whistles] and people started descending towards us from the hills. André said to me, "Hide!"—this was happening during the night—"Hide, because they can catch us and hurt us." I said, "But André, where do you want me to hide?" We were at the water's edge. "*Jya mubyatsi, mu gihuru*: Go into the bushes." I said, "I can't go because I'm afraid of snakes." He said, "Don't be stupid." But that was my biggest phobia. "All these people are coming at us with machetes and you're scared of snakes?" Until that moment, I had never thought that someone might be killed. We were told to leave and we left, but I wasn't understanding the situation very well. But at that moment I understood, because they approached us and said, "No, no, you are Tutsi, you want to escape." André was saying, "No, I'm taking my sister there for her studies." He started to negotiate: "How much do you want?" And he gave the money—I don't know how much—and after that they said, "Okay, you can go." I hadn't gone to hide in the forest and the worst was yet to come. I was shaking, I was really afraid, I felt that our lives were in danger, I was trembling. I got into one of the canoes—it was really a canoe, it was awful, I had never been in a canoe before and now I was in one, I was trembling and I didn't know how to swim. André told me, "Stop trembling, we're going to drown." "But André, do you think I'm doing it on purpose?" "Stop!" And he was holding me like this. We got into the canoe, we crossed the river and we arrived on the other side. There was a hill there that we had to climb to go to Congo. We were almost there, but...and then we saw another canoe approaching with soldiers on board, and we kept climbing. I guess we were saying our prayers because we thought, "If they shoot at us..." we were unprotected, we were climbing like that—but we were on the other side. By the way, other people who arrived after us were stopped, so these canoes were actually being surveilled to catch people who were running away and to bring them back. We had time to cross over and we were already in Zaire and I don't know if that's where we heard a whistle or if it was coming from them...no, I heard the whistle before, and I saw the people coming down the hill. We arrived in

Bukavu, and, I don't know why, but I realized then why we were hearing whistles. I would hear the whistle and I would freeze. Even to this day, if I hear a whistle, I stop what I'm doing because I know that whistle means danger.

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So we went to Bukavu and André...in fact, we were very lucky because André had friends from Canada who, in 1972, wanted to go on a tour of Africa before returning to Canada. They were good friends of André's and they had told him, "André, if you want, we can do the tour together, but we want you to put money aside, we won't pay for everything, you have to put money aside." So when we left...in fact, these friends, Albert and Paulette Lévesque, right before they left, they could see that it was the beginning of a period of instability. They dropped their world tour plan and decided to go straight back to Canada. But we were lucky that André had put money aside, otherwise we wouldn't have had the money to do everything that we did.

So he had money and he was able to pass it on to someone who was to bring this money to us in Congo. I remember how anxious we were for having left all his money with that person. We were saying, "What if he doesn't show up?" The guy had told him...so we crossed early in the morning and the guy had told him, "We'll meet you at 4 o'clock, we'll bring you the money at 4 o'clock." From 3 o'clock on, we kept thinking: "What are we going to do if he doesn't show up?" And then at 4 o'clock, the guy arrived, he gave André his money and that's how we were able to...so we stayed for a very short time in Bukavu, we didn't know many people. I was so...everything I told you about how we left...I had a small bag with some spare underwear, a toothbrush, and that's all I had. I think André was carrying pretty much the same things, he didn't even have a bag. We arrived in Bukavu, we felt safe, we said, "We're going out to dance." I went out dancing, and on the first day my bag got stolen with everything I had. So I was left with nothing and we didn't stay long in Bukavu. He rented a car with other people, we drove through...we bypassed Rwanda...we drove through to Burundi. We felt all right in Burundi, because the people André was working for at Phillips were Belgians and one of his former bosses was in Bujumbura. So when we arrived in Bujumbura, we didn't have to look for...finding homes or staying with families...we had maybe...in any case, we went right away to that Belgian man's house and we lived there. We stayed there for 3-4 months; we lived very

well and we were helping other refugees who were arriving and didn't have a place to go. Us, we had food, we were doing very well. There were many refugees in Burundi, and for us life was easy there, during the whole time we stayed. Our goal was to go to Europe, to join Aimable in Germany or Émile in Belgium, and Assumpta was in Belgium too. In the meantime, I don't remember how, Bello left Rwanda after us, he left in July after the fall of Kayibanda; he went to Congo to get Assumpta, and they left together, I don't remember how, we didn't hear from them. Anyway, I was with André, Bello was with Assumpta, and we thought, "We'll see what happens, we will all meet at some point." Many people helped us in Burundi and we were able to get our documents as refugees, our travel documents, we got travel documents and once we had them, we tried to...it was very complicated, but fortunately André was there, so we were able to obtain a visa to Germany. And from Germany...in fact, we wanted to go to France, because the white man who had accompanied us was from France, he was a very good friend of ours, and we thought that we could live in France, we spoke French—what were we going to do in Germany? We wanted to live in France. But France didn't want to give us visas and Belgium didn't either, so we went to Germany for a German visa and we got it. I don't know how it happened then, but we left Burundi because André had put money aside and could buy plane tickets. We went to Congo, to Kinshasa...I think André had fallen in love with someone there, so he didn't want to leave anymore, but I continued. I went to Germany. I remember, I arrived in Germany alone without speaking...it was the first time we took a plane and everything...but André joined me two weeks later. Our older brother was in Germany, at least, and Rosalie and the two girls were already there, they were already born. So we stayed in Germany, but we absolutely wanted to go to a place where people spoke French. We didn't want to stay in Germany. While in Germany we got visas to France and we left. We went to Belgium to see how Émile was doing and then we went to France. After we arrived in France, we applied for refugee status there. But when you asked for refugee status, they took all your papers and they were the ones deciding when to call you. During that period of my life, ever since we spent time in Burundi, I realized that I couldn't stay idle doing nothing. In Burundi I was telling André, "It's good, we have a good life here, but I can't live like this, I can't continue living as though I'm on vacation. No, I completed my education as a nurse, I'm going to the hospital, I want to work. We can't continue sitting around, drinking, going out, going to visit...that's not a life." So I was already fed up when I left Burundi, and now the same situation was happening again in France. Our papers were taken

from us and we were told, “Yes, you’ve applied, but it will take time.” Fortunately, thanks to our friend Jean-Pierre, we went to Dijon, we lived with his parents. He got a car, he drove us around. We knew many French people who had gone to Rwanda to teach or work as doctors, so we went everywhere, we visited...it was good, but when you’ve done this for three-four months, you begin to think, “Damn! How are we going to live?” We depended on others, we didn’t have money. We were in touch with the people from Canada, André’s friends, who knew that we had fled, that we had gone to all these different places and that we were now in France. They told me, “Listen, you’ve done your nursing training and since you’ve studied with Canadian nurses we’ll see if we can push for you to immigrate here, because we need nurses.” And that’s how I...they had contacted Canadian nuns to ask for a job for me and they sent me a piece of paper saying that if I came to Canada, I was going to have a job. We had been in France for six months at that point. The Canadian embassy called me, they said, “Come to submit your application, you have a job in Canada.” André also tried, but he had studied sociology and he wasn’t as fortunate. So that’s how I was...I got my papers and my immigrant visa and I told France, “You can keep my documents, I don’t need them...” So I left and came to Canada in September, almost seven months later...it had been seven-eight months since I had left Rwanda.

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I came to Canada in September or October with an immigrant visa, except that the paper they had given me saying that I was going to get a job was a fake, it was just to make the process easier for me. So I got there, I had \$100 in my pocket and I didn’t know anyone. André’s friends, who were in Rwanda before, had moved to Moncton. Fortunately, they had asked their family to pick me up at the airport. So I arrived and started my Canadian life in September 1973. I came to Canada with \$100 in my pocket and I lived with Canadians, with some of our friends’ relatives. I don’t remember if they were medical students, they were never home, and when they spoke I didn’t understand a thing, I was constantly falling flat on my face...I thought, “I absolutely must find work.” I went to see the nuns who had given me the documents and they told me, “We can’t be hired because of the Ordre des infirmières—you have to go through the Ordre.” But it wasn’t an easy thing to do, you have to go there...they asked me to show all my diplomas and I hadn’t brought any documents with me... But I absolutely had to find work, so I said to the nuns, “But

what am I going to do? I have to live, I need to work.” They said, “Well, we can attest that you’re indeed a nurse, and until your file is processed, you can work as a nursing assistant—in this way, you’ll get used to the work and everything.” I started working as a nursing assistant and right away I was...I started without much difficulty...I don’t think more than three weeks had passed before I started working. And since I knew I was going to be paid, I immediately rented an apartment. I was in a...it’s a kind of a residence, it still exists, the Maria Goretti Centre, on the corner of Côte-Sainte-Catherine and Decelles—I think its name has been changed now. I lived there. You could have a room there and if you wanted to have a phone in your room at the time I think it cost \$90. So even with my salary I could live at the Maria Goretti Centre. I started working at the Sainte-Jeanne-d’Arc hospital, near Hôtel-Dieu. When I started, I was working from midnight to 8 in the morning, and then I was working from 8 am to 8 pm. At first, I was sleeping and eating very little because, on the one hand, I had no money in the beginning, but also I was so tired that all I wanted was to get to my bed. Working the night shift with my colleagues was not...we didn’t have much interaction with people, and with the clients, I didn’t understand at all what they were asking me. I was looking at what the others were doing and I was imitating them because I was bad and incompetent at this job, but there weren’t many techniques to learn at night, so it was okay. Ever since I studied nursing, all I was interested in, the only thing that interested me was psychiatry. Psychiatry was what fascinated me a little bit during the three years of studies. But in Rwanda at the time, there wasn’t even a psychiatric hospital, what we were learning was very theoretical, so I didn’t even have...but I found it fascinating to work with the raving mad...and in Rwanda the crazy people that we could see were all raving mad and they were walking out in the street, they were all naked with their hair on one side...but that’s what I was interested in. And that interest persisted. When I came to Canada, I said to myself, “Why not work at a psychiatric hospital?” So while I was waiting for the equivalency of my diplomas to be recognized as a nurse, I worked there. Yes, those who didn’t know anything about Black people or Africa would ask me, “Is it in South America?” I wasn’t talking to them about Rwanda, I spoke about Africa—they didn’t know about it. I met Haitians, but I hadn’t read much about Haiti either...it’s Africans...between the Whites who didn’t know about Africa, the Blacks who didn’t know about Africa... I was living...in fact, I had no life, no friends, I worked, I put money aside, I read—I love to read—and all I was thinking was, “In six months or when I have time off for vacation, I’m going to Belgium or

Germany to see my family”—that’s all I was interested in. Making friends with the Canadians wasn’t possible: we didn’t understand each other, they found me silly, maybe, and I found them impossible to understand. When I arrived at the Maria Goretti Centre...it was a centre for women, but I was working at night, I only went there to sleep, I didn’t even know where I could have breakfast. Finally, someone told that I had to go through the pharmacy next door, there was a cafeteria at the far end of the pharmacy, and that’s where...so, I would go there for a meal and then I would go to bed, then I would wake up in the evening, the cafeteria was closed, by the time I got ready, I had to go back to work. The first three months were...eventually, I met a woman who was working there, her name was Diane, a Quebecker who worked at the Sainte-Justine Hospital right next door. She had spent some time in Africa, in Gabon, she had just come back from Africa, so here was, finally, someone who knew about Africa. We talked a lot, we became friends. She asked me where I worked, she gave me tips on how to...: “If you want to do that, you can check for job postings, you can ask for an evening shift, the work is harder during the day, but you can have an evening position.” She was the one who...she was a very good friend. And I told her, “I’ve always wanted to work in psychiatry.” She said, “There is a big psychiatric hospital in Montreal’s East End, you can apply there, they’re always looking for nurses.” I applied. Back then, it was called Saint-Jean-de-Dieu, and now it’s Louis-Hyppolyte-Lafontaine. So, I applied...she taught me how to take the bus and all that, and then I applied and I was hired. And she said, “My parents work near there, they have a house nearby and if you want, you can rent a room at my parents’ house.” So I started working...I left downtown and I was in the East End, I worked at the hospital and I lived with this Quebec family and I integrated very quickly, both professionally and socially.

01:05:00

I was with that family, they were like my family. Their house was at the lower banks of the St. Lawrence River. During the holidays we went down to the river...they really adopted me. They adopted me, but nevertheless, I thought the relationship was a bit cold. At least they had daughters who were my age and it was okay. I was living with a Quebec family, I was learning, I had a strong Quebec accent—I became more Quebecker than the Quebeckers. Once I had settled, I had my job, I had my small room and in the meantime I got a boyfriend who came to join me in

Canada. The French man who had saved us had become my boyfriend, he joined me in Canada. And that's it. It was, however, a difficult time in the sense that...I was free, I had everything I wanted, but at the same time I could sense my mother's eyes on me, watching me, my older brothers watching me too: having a boyfriend—this was in 1974—and deciding to live with him without being married...I wasn't comfortable with that, so I was living...I think I had internalized deeply our culture through my education and I didn't want to hurt my mother. I thought, "My God, I'm living with a guy." We weren't married, but it was nice to have someone I knew and who knew Rwanda. It helped me get through those first years and my work and everything. But I said to him, "Jean-Pierre, we can't live together without being married, it's impossible." Since he had lived in Rwanda, he knew that. We had to do *gusaba*, we had to. I said, "No, we have to do that, my mother lives in Rwanda." So he arranged everything, he had friends, one of whom was still in Rwanda and he asked him to buy a cow, to do *gusaba* and all that. Things were getting in order, I thought. We had decided to get married in May, end of May, a civil marriage in Canada and then a religious marriage in France with his parents and my relatives who would come from Germany and Belgium. They did the engagement ceremony in Rwanda, they did the *gusaba* ceremony in Rwanda, and then in May, I think two weeks before we were to marry...I always had a gut feeling...I felt unhappy. I thought, "Am I making a mistake?" He asked me, "But why do you think that?" "I'm getting married to please people, to please my mother who's not here, my brothers who are not here, but I don't feel that I really love you and that I want to live with you. We would be unhappy living together." He dreamed of having a farm, raising chickens and I'm a city girl—don't talk to me about chickens, I can't even touch a chicken! But he was amazing. He's still a great friend, to this day, he's our best friend, we stay with him when we go to Canada. He told me, "If you don't want to get married, don't. You shouldn't feel obliged to get married." And so even though we had invited people—we didn't know many people in Canada, there were maybe twenty people who were coming to our wedding—we canceled. We had sent invitations to France too and we wrote them a letter, saying: "We are not getting married anymore, but we still love each other. We'll be coming to France for the holidays. All is well," signed... When they received that, it was the biggest shock of my brothers' lives. But what I mean to say is that you're doing things in life...in Rwanda...I want to get married...at the same time, there's a problem...you're going out, you're meeting people, you're thinking, "What am I doing?" That's what Canada has taught me, one of the

things it has taught me: to confront, to come to terms with, to discuss, to feel the freedom and at the same time to learn to use it properly. Learning how to use it was, I think, my education, it's how I was raised. Even if I didn't have much freedom in Rwanda, once I had it in Canada, I could make choices and I felt very comfortable. So, in the example of the marriage canceled a few days before it happened, I was able to ask myself, "Wait, is this really what I want? Even if they get angry, even if my mother is unhappy because she has a cow and I'm not married, that's all right." And, you see, after that I went back to France. My dream was to work, to work more hours, to have money, to pay for my trips, to go see my family during...that was it. After that my boyfriend went back to France, I started looking for, seeking out Rwandans—but where were the Rwandans? There were only a few of them at the time, but I met them, the three-four Rwandans who were there, I met them, and I felt so free. I was living a good life. I bought a car. One of my cousins was in California, and I've always dreamed of travelling, so I said to him, "Arthur, I want to come visit you in California," and I went to California. We went to San Francisco. The good life... And every year I went on holiday in Europe to see my sister, my friends, my brothers, my nieces that I love so much. To me it was clear: I was in Canada, I chose to stay there, I was a refugee, but all I wanted was to live in Africa. So I thought, "I'm in Canada now,"—at that time you had to spend five years in Canada to get citizenship—"after five years I know I can't go back to Rwanda, it's out of the question, so after five years, I'll have my papers and being a nurse..." That's what saved me...even though I don't like the nursing profession, it's a good occupation for international work. So I said to myself that I would look for nursing positions. In any case, working as a nurse doesn't necessarily mean working at the hospital, it could also mean work in education, and that's what interested me. So I thought, "When my four years here are up..." just thinking that "next year I'm going to be Canadian"...I started at the same time to look for jobs with international NGOs, like those I had known in Rwanda, NGOs, volunteers and all that, and I was thinking to myself, "I won't go back to Rwanda, but I will be somewhere else and I will be Canadian." So to me it was very clear. It was all good: in four years, I was going to be a Canadian citizen, I'd be happy with the advantages that gives me, but I was going to live in Africa. I love travelling, I love discovering new countries, I thought to myself that I would discover African countries—I didn't know any, except Burundi and Congo. So I was living my life of a 25-year-old young woman who was going out, having fun, and at the same time I was making sure my affairs were in order. And that's how when I got my

citizenship—it was in May—the same month or the month after I left for Guinea Bissau. I had contacted CECI, SUCO, the francophone organizations in Montreal, then I became a Canadian citizen, and then a month later I had my ticket to Guinea Bissau. I didn't know it was a Portuguese territory and we had to have at least a notion of Portuguese—I did all that and I left for Guinea Bissau. I was with a large team of Quebeckers and that's when I met Pierre. Pierre had arrived in Guinea Bissau six months earlier to work as a doctor. He had gone there in December and I arrived in June. I was the only nurse and there were two doctors who had to go to the hospitals outside of...and Pierre's hospital opened first; the other doctor was a woman and her hospital took a long time to open. When I arrived, I was in Bissau for a little bit and then when Pierre's hospital was ready, we were already part of the same group of friends, and when his hospital opened, I went to work with Pierre. We haven't separated since then, it was 1978. And before that—I won't tell you all my love stories—but before leaving, I was going out with a Rwandan man and he left me. I loved him passionately, but I knew very well that I could never live with a guy like that. He's a man you love because there is something about him, but you feel that it's very—it's short-lived. At the same time, I felt trapped. I was thinking, "No, that's not normal, I'm going to leave him." He was very intense, and I didn't feel good, and he wasn't being very clear either. Anyway, all this to say that when I met Pierre, he was the opposite of that guy: a calm person who lives in the moment, who...and you know what—it was the first time I found myself in a canoe again. There was a canoe there and Pierre taught me how to go into the canoe. We would go to the local bar, we would be in the little neighbourhood bar, buying beers for the locals, learning more about them—and about life. At the same time, we were working hard. I lived in Guinea Bissau for two years, I was working and at the same time I found an extraordinary guy who taught me...I had a car, but I had never learned how to ride a bike, and since we didn't have a lot of money, we bought a bike, he taught me how to ride it. I too bought a bike so we could go out, go to the countryside, do more community work, teach people about basic health, you know, just the basics. Another hospital opened and we started working there too. Then Pierre bought a motorcycle, he taught me how to ride a motorcycle, and then I bought a motorcycle, we went on many rides together and just wandered around...Those were two beautiful years. Two beautiful years when I was happy to be in Africa again, to see a different country than Rwanda. I was happy. I just wanted to live in Africa, I knew that living in Rwanda was impossible, etc. After that, we left Guinea Bissau, we decided to get married, we had our

children, we lived in Canada for four years after Guinea Bissau. We went back, we got married in Canada, we lived there and I was working, but I had a choice: to work or...I didn't really work as a nurse anymore, I worked more as a...how do you call them?...professional...I don't know what the right word is...community worker...I was working at a centre for battered women. I worked in the community sector for a long time. And since I had children, I didn't want to work full-time either. And so we lived there. On our return [from Guinea Bissau], I had a husband and I also had my husband's family who are lovely, who welcomed me with open arms. At the same time, when...in fact, we could have maybe continued living in Guinea Bissau, but my brother Émile, who in the meanwhile had returned to Rwanda, decided to leave again because in 1979 the situation had become unbearable. And he took Mom with him too, because he thought that if we left her behind, that would kill her. So Mom also went to Germany, then to Canada, then she went back to Germany. She wanted to wait for me to come back from Guinea Bissau and to go live with her in Canada. She wanted to live with me more than with my brother Émile. So when I learned that my mother had left Rwanda, I said to Pierre, "We'll finish our two years here, we won't extend our stay and we'll leave." We went to Germany, took Mom with us from there and I came back to Canada with my husband, with my mother, and with my happy in-laws. Life was very...those were good times. I was with my mom who was watching the world around her, learning how to live in another country and with Pierre's family who had strong bonds between them. We went to their house every Sunday, we always had meals together. Mom lived not far from us, close to me, so I was spending a lot of time with her. She was also helping me with the kids. It was a joyful life. But we kept saying that we were itching to leave again. We lived in Canada for four years and in the meantime Aimable came to Quebec and Bello, Assumpta, Émile had also arrived previously, so my extended family was there too. Four years later, we went to Ivory Coast. So, Guinea Bissau from 1978 to 1980, then 1980 to 1984 in Montreal, and then we decided to go work in Ivory Coast. We had two children, we decided to leave and barely—in 1984, in June—and then my mother died in September 1984. She was ill, she started to get sick just before we left. I said to Pierre, "This is very important." We went to see many doctors and when we left Montreal she was in the hospital, she was hospitalized and we were waiting to hear the diagnosis. I told Pierre, "I can't leave." Pierre said, "But if we don't leave, she would think that we're hiding something from her, it'll be okay." So we left for three months, four months. After that she got worse and then she died.

S.G.: Did they find out what illness she had?

R.N.: Yes, they did. It's an autoimmune disease, very rare, they say there are only a few cases—it's called cryoglobulin, it attacks the red blood cells. But we couldn't have known... apparently, there were eight cases in the world. So, that's it. I started my life in Ivory Coast, I was an orphan, but at the same time I had my own family. And I knew exactly what I wanted: I wanted to create links with Africa. I thought to myself, "Well, if we know how to do"... we knew what to do in Ivory Coast, based on our experience in Guinea Bissau, we wanted to work with the Ivorians so they could do the work on their own, without us. These were very nice years, four years in Ivory Coast—I was there for four years. In 1988 we came back to Canada. At that time, I decided to do my master's degree in community health and Pierre worked hard as a doctor and as a consultant and he continued to travel often to Haiti. And, you know, we lived like people with more opportunities. For example, when Pierre went to work in Haiti for three months, I could leave for the holidays with the three boys and go live with him. I have always wanted to get to know more countries, more people. When I came back in 1988, I always kept in touch with Africa, for me that was essential. And at that time we created an organization called Solidarité femmes africaines, because I've always wanted to... I think that I wanted to cut ties with Rwanda, I knew we wouldn't be going back there. But at the same time, I always wanted to work with Africans. Working with Rwandans to improve our living conditions here—*fine*¹. But I didn't want to collaborate with Rwandans, because they are Rwandans, because we still have this division between Hutus and Tutsis, even if we don't say it out loud. Even if you don't think that way, others will think that you do, and it'll affect everything you do. So I said, "Rwanda is too small. Let's consider Africa." There is so much need on the part of immigrants and refugees. During my master's degree in community health I worked for many organizations, for NGOs, where I was doing projects with refugees. I worked on the Milieu Project during which we studied a group of immigrants who lived in the northeast part of the city, in really incredible conditions, and we wanted to see how we could make life easier for them and have health services brought closer to them. So I've always worked with refugees, immigrants. That's what I'm interested in. I thought that they were among the most vulnerable people in society and that I could do something for them. So I did that while working on my master's, and I continued to work with immigrants, to give information sessions to newcomers. It was nice doing the... we wrote grant

¹ In English in the original.

applications for HIV prevention projects in the African community using forum theater. We started that, and I was the coordinator for the project. I did things that I liked doing. And what I really liked was to be with immigrant women because I think we create a lot of...we say society is racist, society is this and that, but people judge us by our actions. Some people are racist—you are a Black person, some don't see anything wrong, but there are others who would say, "The Africans, they do this, they do that." Sometimes, however, people do things because they don't know, because they have never...like this woman...one organization approached us saying, "You have to tell them how to clean the floors." In Africa, in Haiti, you clean the floors with big swoops, you rub, and that's the way you know how to clean. But when you have hardwood floors and you pour water on them, it trickles down to the neighbours'. But you have to take the time, there must be people who know how to work with immigrants and refugees, who know these small issues and who can explain so there are less misunderstandings and therefore fewer conflicts. You are afraid of misunderstandings, you have the impression that...you know, an African could be at the bank or he could be serving someone...he'll place his paper over there and that's how it's done here, and if you don't tell him: "Here in Quebec, in the West, things are done this way"...in this way people will do things the way they should be done. When you come from a country where nobody lines up for anything and where you have to rush to get on the bus, people would say, "The Africans think they are...these Black people..." Blacks will be blamed, whereas it's one individual who is reproducing what was done before. For us, in any case, in our organization, it was important to say, "There have to be people—Africans, immigrants—there must be people who are familiar with these problems, who can talk to people and introduce them to these new ways of life so that there are fewer conflicts." Otherwise, problems start from little things, from something small that enflames everything and conflicts begin. So if we can prevent misunderstandings...I work with immigrants, I've worked with survivors too, but mostly with immigrants and refugees, and even when I had...sometimes I would think, "Well, in this circle of friends..." but sometimes I...when I left this work environment, it was because I wanted to work with young people. My children were at an age when we risked living parallel lives: they have their lives, I have an African life, I am a Canadian mother, but I need to know what's going on, I need to know about children and youth issues, I wanted to know more about drugs, because I thought that there were a lot of drugs in our community...as a Rwandan and African woman. I decided to start working in...there was a new project—I love starting projects and I don't like to

remain for long with the same project—and it was a project that we were just beginning. We wanted to reach out to young people who lived on the street, who had problems with heroin use. We wanted to see how we can help them get access...the other programs offered were for adults, and they were working well, while there were cases of young people...when you are addicted to heroin, there are very few spots...you had to call at 1 pm on a Monday to reserve a spot, but for that you have to know that it is a Monday, you have to know that it's 1 o'clock, so you have to have the, at the time, 25 cents... So they realized that youth didn't have access to those services and they decided to open a program for people on the street and I was its first coordinator. I got implicated by curiosity, to get to know the problems that young people were facing and possibly others too who didn't have access to these programs. I remember during the interview they told me, "But you don't have any experience working with drug addiction." "No, I don't have any experience with drugs, but drugs are...I don't have experience with drugs, I haven't worked with youth before, but I have experience working with people more generally, I have experience working with battered women, I have experience working with refugees, immigrants. And I...people who take drugs...and I can build on with my experience working with vulnerable people by taking courses on drug addiction, on what needs to be administered, on heroin, methadone, cocaine, and everything that goes along with it, I can learn that easily. But establishing rapport with the most vulnerable people, that experience I have—is that what you want? I have that." And that's how I got the job. And so, until I decided to come to Rwanda, I worked with young people and drug addiction, and I still work with immigrants through our pan-African project.

S.G.: And this brings us to your return to Rwanda. You see how long these things take...

R.N.: That's right.