

Story Eight

Chaos in Congo

July 1994 to July 1999

In the weeks that followed the hundred days of genocide, approximately two million refugees fled from Rwanda into the neighboring countries of Burundi, Tanzania, Uganda, and especially Zaire (later re-named the *Democratic Republic of Congo*). This mass exodus has been termed the *Great Lakes Crisis*.

As Zaire's chief of state, the aged Mubutu Sese Seko showed himself to be as inept as he was corrupt. His government—sometimes termed a *kleptocracy*—proved helpless to deal with the border crisis.

The stampede consisted mostly of panicked Hutus who were fleeing the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front. In just a five-day span, about 600,000 displaced persons crossed into the Zairean border cities of Bukavu and Goma. New arrivals survived in squalor, camping out on doorsteps, in fields, at schools, and in cemeteries. Most had crossed the frontier with only the possessions they could carry on their back.

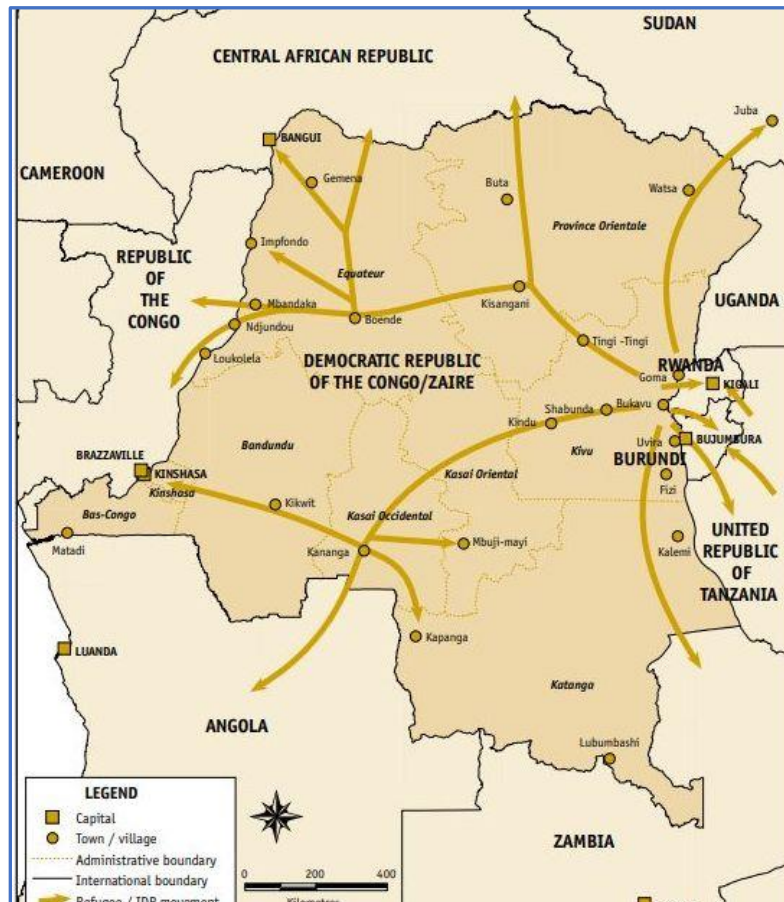
Families were separated and children abandoned in the midst of dense crowds. The makeshift encampments were strewn with human waste, rotted trash heaps, and fetid water holes. Outbreaks of disease—especially cholera—began killing refugees at the rate of one thousand per day.

Media coverage of the human catastrophe brought the issue to international attention. U. S. President Bill Clinton called the Rwandan situation “the worst humanitarian crisis in a generation.” More than two hundred relief organizations rushed aid to the suffering masses. The United States military coordinated an international operation to airlift supplies and personnel into settlements along Lake Kivu.

As the Hutu camps organized, perpetrators of the Tutsi genocide began to commandeer aid resources. Former soldiers of the Forces Armees Rwandaises (ex-FAR) used the camps to launch cross-border attacks against their RPF enemy. Many relief organizations, including *Doctors Without Borders*, began to remove workers, stating they could not ethically continue to provide aid that was being funneled to Hutu fighters.

In the same timeframe—as massive aid was surging into chaotic Kivu province—the World Bank chose to withhold development funds from the provisional government in Kigali. This UN agency insisted the new administration first repatriate its millions of refugees—a daunting task.

In this cyclone of circumstance, Eastern Congo devolved into a state of utter lawlessness.



~ Across the First Bridge ~

A gang of three killers fled south from Kayove, joining a crush of desperate humanity. Were these thousands of Hutus “refugees from violence” or “fugitives from justice”? On that July evening, every person tramping down dusty Highway 11 was one, the other, or a mixture of the twain.

The *Sergeant* strode at the head of the trio. This Interahamwe leader sported a military beret of green, black, and red. His ample belly bulged from under his tasseled tunic. The big man personified the swagger of Hutu power.

Trailing the leader trudged his *Body Guard*, a slight juvenile with bright clothes and wild eyes. He carried a jerry can of water in one hand and a bloodied machete in the other. Whatever mayhem Sergeant ordered; his henchman executed without question.

The two militiamen affixed the name *Gamin* to little Felix Ndizeye. The twelve-year-old “street urchin” staggered with two heavy sacks attached to either end of a neck pole. The burden equaled his thirty-kilo frame. Felix had retained his tin whistle on a neck string now tucked under a tee shirt.

As daylight dimmed, the three stepped off the crowded highway and trudged up a grassy path until the echoes of traffic faded. “We’ll stop here for the night,” Sergeant barked with authority.

Body Guard shrank in obedience to the big man’s diktat while Felix groaned in fatigue as he stumbled to the base of an acacia tree.

“And what do you think you’re doing, Gamin?” Sergeant smacked the boy’s face with an open palm. “Open that sack and serve us those mangos.”

The whimpering boy complied.

The big man was about to bark further orders when gunshots rang out. He put a finger to his lips, signaling silence. The three shimmied down the hillside, deeper into the bush.

Screams and wails pierced their ears. Hugging the ground, they observed the ankles of a dozen gunmen amble past in the twilight. After a period of quiet, they heard the moans of victims; then silence again.

Sergeant whispered, “No talking, no lights. We’ll sit still until daylight.”

Punctuated by distant horn honks, gunshots, and shouts, the nine hours of darkness passed slowly. Felix recognized his position of servitude and was inwardly relieved the curfew kept his companions invisible and silent.

When daylight finally filtered through the foliage, the three arose and stepped onto the footpath. After a hundred downhill steps they reached a small clearing. The corpses of a dozen men, women, and children sprawled near the tree line. Sergeant glanced in all directions, then spoke, “You two search these bodies for valuables. I’ll keep watch.”

Body Guard relished the task, removing outer and under garments; groping for booty. Felix proved reluctant until Sergeant waved a fist in his face. Looking through a meager pile of debris, the boss set aside paper money, sunglasses, sneakers, and five sets of *ubwoko*—ID cards. He studied the IDs, finally saying, “Bosco, you have a new identity. Study this *ubwoko*. The face looks a little like yours. Until we reach Kibuye, I will call you *Kyihura* and you will respond. Got it?”

He examined another ID and grinned. “And you will call me *Fabrice*. Of course we are still Hutu, but now simple farmers like these dead ones.” Unexpectedly, the boss

smiled and handed to Felix a folded paper. “Listen up, Gamin. You may be useful to me. I want you to stay with us. Just learn to obey orders and you’ll survive. This is an official document stating your ubwoko was lost in the war. Keep it with you.”

The three fugitives soon joined the mass of humanity, mostly women and children, as they trekked down the roadway. At three checkpoints, the gang showed their false IDs and were waved along.

Finally, about noon, the trio reached the Nyabahango Bridge. The crossing queue ran deep with ten thousand dusty, dirty, displaced people. French gendarmes checked the bags and IDs of every person crossing into their UN Turquoise Zone. No weapons were permitted.

Felix faced a choice. In the presence of foreign troops and surrounded by a throng of people, he could easily flee his two companions. But what were these men—protectors or oppressors? He finally concluded the two devils he did know were safer than potential devils he did not.

Body Guard was giddy to learn his machete was deemed a farm implement and not a killing tool. Sergeant pulled out his prize beret from a pantleg and returned it to the top of his stylish coiffure. For one night, the three slept on the south bank of the Nyabahango River, beyond the reach of the Inkotani.

Once in the city of Kibuye, the militiamen resumed their military identities. In a roadside cabaret, Sergeant ran across several Interahamwe buddies. They ushered him to a table, pouring him a beer. One slapped him on the back and shouted, “I’m glad you made it out of Kayove!”

Sergeant replied, “Yes, it was a close call,” quickly adding, “Do you know how I can resume the battle? I’m more thirsty for revenge than for this Primus.”

“Perhaps I can help,” another comrade spoke up. “Do you have a plan for your vengeance?”

Sergeant responded, “The French won’t occupy their zone much longer and I want to establish myself in Kivu before the RPF hunts me down.”

A third comrade entered the conversation. “I’ll introduce you to our boss, Commander Laurent. He has an army hidden in the forest. As soldiers of a righteous cause, we can defeat the RPF.”

Sergeant thumped his chest in a rage. “Look what they did to me. These traitors ran away to Uganda, built up a strong army, and attacked our homeland from the north. We loyal Hutu can do the exact same thing; escape to Zaire, rebuild our army, and reconquer our beloved Rwanda.”

All those listening to the conversation cheered these words. Gamin was sucked in by the rhetoric. He too aspired to become a Hutu fighter and liberate his homeland. The lowly street urchin longed to return to Kayove as a conquering hero. He caught the attention of militiamen by shouting out the lyrics of Simon Bikindi:

*I am a boy who protects the army during the days of troubles.
I am the one who brings out the arrows stopping injustice.
I announce myself ready for war.*

The militiamen embraced the boy and he fell into their orbit.

~ Across the Second Bridge ~

As the newly-forming militia passed into Cyangugu Prefecture, they accrued a company of about twenty Interahamwe and FAR fighters. The presence of French checkpoints kept the Kivu byway relatively safe from violence. At the crossroads of Buhinga, the men plunged east into the Nyungwe Jungle, Gamin now pushing a cart of supplies.

After a three-hour uphill struggle, they joined a guerrilla army headed by Commander Laurent. His headquarters were located at a highpoint called Eagle Nest, beyond the reach of French interference. A motley residue of three hundred fighters encamped under the jungle canopy, augmented by a hundred women who served as porters, cooks, and comfort wives. Gamin was startled to see a dozen boys his own age, each shouldering a Kalashnikov rifle.

Body Guard followed his gaze. “Yes, those are our *kadogo*—child soldiers. If you’re brave and follow orders, you can carry a rifle like them.”

After a satisfying meal of skewered goat meat, cassava, and banana beer, the entire crowd gathered on an open lawn to receive instruction from Laurent Umimana. The warlord was arrayed in battle dress, belts of ammo crisscrossing his chest; grenades attached to his waist. He looked every part the bush warrior. With staccato voice and forceful gesture, he addressed his assembly in Kinyarwanda.

“My friends, my countrymen, do not despair. Look around you at these seasoned fighters. Observe their weapons. We will crush the invaders, these *inyenzi* from Uganda who have infested our homeland.”

Cheers broke out among the listeners.

The warlord continued. “We will never give up. We will rescue our Hutu people from our oppressors. We are yet the majority and therefore can never be overcome! We will never return to the days when Hutu peasants served Tutsi kings.”

He lowered his voice. "In consultation with our great general Paul Rwarakabije, we have formed the *Army for the Liberation of Rwanda*, uniting all armies, militias, police, and Interahamwe into a single fist of power. Tomorrow, we begin to prepare this great force. Our exile will be a continuation of war by another means."

After an hour of bombast, he concluded his remarks. "The following twenty men have been chosen as ALIR squad leaders. I will meet with you in one hour at the Eagle Nest."

An assistant read off the list of subordinate leaders. Sergeant was delighted to hear his name sounding from the loud speaker.

The ALIR army stayed in place for three more weeks, scouring the countryside for weapons and provisions. Laurant had directed squads to cross into Kivu before the exit of French troops.

Sergeant used the days to assemble his squad of eight men and four *kadogo*; Gamin was one of the boy soldiers and carried a rifle. The squad would fight its way to the village of Kabera located on a hillside near Bukavu. There it would organize the camp into a Hutu strong point.

On August 20, Sergeant Squad approached the Rusizi River, the border between Rwanda and Zaire. As a tsunami refugees poured across the dam spillway, the French were nowhere to be seen. A dozen feeble border guards could not hope to stem the tide. Most of the trampling Hutus possessed only what they could carry: ragged clothes, handbags of food, and perhaps a ground cover. A catastrophe was in the making.

~ Kabera Camp ~

Sergeant laughed to Body Guard. "Ha! Commander Laurent was so concerned about resistance! Look, no French, no RPF, no Zarian soldiers or police. The land is ours for the taking. We possess the guns and can do whatever we want."

He then pointed his Kalashnikov at a woman carrying a basket on her head. She trembled as he hand-signaled to lower the wicker container. "What's in there?" he growled.

Sergeant plucked out three avocados and casually tossed them to his buddies. "As I said, 'We can do whatever we want.'"

The heartbroken woman sank into the dust, her two children whimpering in fright.

The Zairian village of Kabera had exploded into an encampment of ten thousand souls—mostly Rwandan Hutus, mostly non-combatants. They had fled their homeland because they feared Tutsi-directed retaliation. Was this fear justified or imaginary? The distinction didn't matter. The terror they felt to their bones was one-hundred-percent genuine.

Gamin noted foreign vans creeping down crowded streets, marked with red crosses or stenciled with the letters UNHCR. Dozens of people trotted behind the vehicles with begging hands. Broken bodies crowded into tight spaces and the stench of human waste offended even Gamin's goat-acclimated nose.

Sergeant whispered to a bulky militiaman directing traffic at a crossroads. An underaged assistant led the Sergeant Squad to a school building where the ALIR had established a headquarters. The local captain assigned the fighters to an abandoned classroom, "You'll find some food and weapons stacked against the wall. That's your initial provision. It's up to you and your own guns to keep yourself supplied."

On their initial patrol around the camp, the Sargeant Squad helped other militiamen establish a barrier of sharpened logs and razor wire. In his stammering manner of speech, Gamin asked Sargeant, "What's this for? Is it t-to keep people in or t-to keep p-people out?"

The Sargent smiled, "Yes. Both."

As the weeks passed, Gamin came to understand these words. The boy—now thirteen-years-old—proved to be both observant and intelligent. As he looked on as the wretched inhabitants of Kabera, he could discern the purposes of the ALIR.

First, the civilian population provided a recruiting ground for the fighters. Dozens of able-bodied young men joined the resistance as armed combatants. Second, women and children inside the wire acted as human shields whenever an outside force tried to penetrate the town's perimeter. The innocents were often herded to the front of the rifles. Third, the population served as a conduit for NGO provision. All charitable foodstuffs which entered the town—clearly marked *UNHCR*—were redirected to the school compound. ALIR leaders kept a portion for themselves, exchanged a portion for weapons, and returned a meager ration to those in their charge.

~ Finding a Friend ~

One morning as Gamin was tending a fire, Body Guard led a captive into the schoolyard. His face was bloodied and his hands roped behind his back. The prisoner appeared to be a few years older than himself, tall, and rail thin. Gamin overheard the interrogation conducted by Body Guard.

“So, you want to be a freedom fighter. Is that right?”

“Do I have a choice?” rasped the captive.

“Don’t get cheeky with me.” The interrogator slapped his face.

The captive bit his lip. “If my choice is to fight or die, I choose to fight and live.”

Body Guard smacked his knee with a wooden rod. “What are you anyway? Your face looks Hutu but your body like a Tutsi cockroach.”

The captive replied in a calm voice, “My mother was Banyamulenge, but my father from a local tribe. They are all killed, so I can be a fighter now if that will save me.”

Body Guard shoved him to the ground, then spoke to Gamin, “Look after this misbegotten until I come back. Here, keep this rifle pointed at him.” He then left the two alone.

The captive slumped against a wall, mumbling to himself. He then began singing in low tones.

Gamin listened to the words, almost his native Kinyarwanda, but not quite. He thought he heard repeated use of the word *hallelujah*. After several minutes, curiosity got the better of the boy. “What are you singing?”

The captive looked up. “It’s a church hymn my mother taught me.”

After a long pause, Gamin continued, “And what kind of language are you speaking? I can understand most of it, but it’s strange.”

The captive smiled, “No, it’s your Kinyarwanda that has the accent, my language is correct.”

They both grinned at the remark.

The captive continued, “Do you know the meaning of *Banyamulenge*?”

Gamin had a vague notion, but he enjoyed the conversation. “Who are they?”

Our blood is Rwandan like yours, but mostly Tutsi. My people settled in Kivu, in the Mulenge Mountains, a long time ago, before the Muzungu colonists. We are Zarian citizens by birthright, but more like Rwandans in custom. My mother tells me my father stuck around long enough to leave her pregnant with a child—that’s me. He was from the Tembo tribe. I never knew him.”

Gamin was intrigued by the story and asked him to speak on.

“I will do that”, he croaked, “But may I have a drink of water first?”

Gamin unloosed the rope restraints and handed him a Pepsi bottle of murky water. After along drink, he continued. “First, my name is Gaston. What’s yours?”

The boy-soldier set his empty rifle aside and replied, “My name is Felix, but everybody here calls me Gamin.”

Gaston replied, “Gamin means *street urchin*, doesn’t it? That’s not who you are. I will call you ‘Felix’. That means *lucky*.”

Gamin was impressed, “And how do you know these things?”

“I was studying with a missionary when our village was overrun. Until that time, I spent every waking moment reading his French books. Last week, your FDLR burned my house to the ground. Most of my family is dead or a prisoner like me. I hid in the forest for a while, but I was captured this morning and here I am. Die or fight. This is my choice.”

Gamin grew introspective. “That’s my choice too. To be honest, sometimes I want to be a Hutu fighter; to avenge the oppression of my own people. Still at other times, I understand that killing is wrong and I want no part of it. I enjoy being around animals, especially my goats.”

Gaston laughed, “Sometimes I enjoy the company of dogs more than my fellow human beings.” A tear appeared in the corner of his eye. “I think they killed all my dogs.”

An unseen bond formed between the two animal lovers and for a long hour they exchanged stories. Gamin chortled at the tale of his dogs guarding a plantation of banana beer.

Then Gamin heard a door creak open and grabbed his rifle. Two figures appeared. “Why are his hands loosed,” shouted Body Guard.

Gamin stammered back, “I had to g-give him water. He might have d-died.”

Sergeant kicked the captive, looking him over. “Too skinny and you say he’s Banyamulenge?” He snickered, “Maybe we could use him for target practice, but he’s so thin the bullets might miss.”

The two militiamen were startled when Gamin interrupted. “But he can help us. He told me a secret.” Measuring his words, the boy-soldier went on, “He knows how to get banana beer and plenty of it. He speaks the local language and knows the local farmers.”

The two looked at each other, stepped into a corner, and discussed in private.

Sergeant spoke to the captive and his advocate, “We don’t believe you, but beer is difficult to procure. Here, take this half-kilo of rice and empty jerry can. Come back with beer and we believe you. If you don’t return by nightfall, we promise to hunt you down and kill you both without mercy. Do you understand?”

Gamin nodded, thinking to himself, “They like beer even more than blood.”

Body Guard escorted them to a sentinel at the wire gate then ran a finger across his throat as they scrambled out. “You better come back with my beer,” he screamed at the pair.

Felix and Gaston became so successful at running liquor, their sole occupation became providing beer to the entire army at Kabera Camp. By the time the new year of 1995 rolled around, the pair were supplying the encampment with ten barrels of liquor per day. The two were trusted because they themselves did not drink a drop of the fiery liquid.

Nearly every day, Hutu fighters crossed into Rwanda to kill, rape, and loot. Elements of the RPF, allied with Banyamulenge militias, retaliated in kind. Shoot-outs often took place in encampments with women and children as victims. Atrocities took place on all sides. No hand was clean from innocent blood.

Felix had fired his rifle a few times, but the ALIR leadership depended upon him and Gaston for their beer supply. One day he noted Body Guard’s bunk was empty. Sergeant shook his head as he informed the boy that a fellow militiaman had stabbed his henchman in a dispute over alcohol. Felix washed the blanket and took possession of the cot.

The situation in Kabera remained static for several months. The muzzle of a gun was the only authority. In the midst of such lawlessness, three categories of humanity emerged: the protectors, the terrorists, and the terrorized. Often, the first group collapsed into the second.

In mid-1995, the situation in Kabera Camp grew intolerable. The UNHCR withdrew its personnel; foodstuff vanished; the RPF re-patriated thousands of displaced Hutus; and disgruntled locals harassed the Hutu usurpers. It was time to move on.

~ *Expedition to Goma* ~

Perimeter wire came down in the middle of the night as a contingent of liberation fighters headed north toward Goma. Felix and Gaston tailed the convoy of three-hundred men, protecting supplies from multiple threats.

The entire region broiled in anarchy. Vagabond youth roamed the byways. Armed and ruthless, these *Mayibobo* were opportunists in search of booty. In response to marauding gangs, every able-bodied male was armed and expected to protect his own household. These village defense groups were termed *Mai Mai*; their competence and allegiance varying from town to town. Complicating an already deadly mix were multiple ethnic tribes with distinct languages and shifting loyalties: Hunde, Nande, and certain Twa.

As the contingent snaked up Highway N2, they hugged the west coast of Lake Kivu. Along the route, militiamen foraged liberally, clashing with mayibobo, mai mai, and local tribes. The fighters rested in lakeside settlements like Kidumbi, Bulera, and Minova, gathering numbers along the way. Turning east at Sake, the Virunga Mountains loomed in view. The twin peaks of Nyiragongo and Nyamuragira rose above the clouds. These active volcanos gurgled lava just seven kilometers from central Goma.

“Do you see that?” shouted Felix to Gaston. “Plastic tarp, wooden huts, and wire fence as far as my eye can see.”

His friend replied, “I was here a few years ago and Goma looked nothing like what I view now.”

Indeed, the capital of North Kivu Prefecture had ballooned from a pre-war population of eighty thousand to nearly two million. Up jagged volcanic slopes, tent cities sprang up like mushrooms after a rain. One could not imagine a less hospitable environment. Solidified lava made digging latrine pits impossible and jagged cinders cut into bare feet. Sanitation was appalling; food and water meager.

Most of the recent refugees inhabited makeshift shelters called *blindé*. These dwellings consisted of a UNHCR tarp roof supported by rope and wood. In these cramped quarters, six or seven persons huddled shoulder-to-shoulder. Several NGOs provided assistance as best they could, but security proved impossible. Gangs terrorized inhabitants, especially women, especially after dark. Rape, murder, and robbery became the norm.

Adjacent to Goma lay the Rwandan city of Gisenyi. There was no bridge to cross or mountain to climb. The two cities melded into a single metropolis. This circumstance made it simple for genocide perpetrators to move entire agencies from one side of the frontier to the other.

As part of an extended group of ex-FAR fighters, Felix and Gaston remained in Goma for over a year. Their friendship deepened as they shared their space, their meals,

and their souls. Gaston showed Felix how he could leap into the air, circle twice and land on his feet. Felix demonstrated to Gaston his aptitude for math. “Give me two three-digit numbers, I’ll add them in my head, and give you a correct answer before you count to three.” And so, he did.

To escape the cramped quarters, the buddies would often climb up the steep slope of Nyiragongo Volcano. The Sargeant thought the two were crazy, but was indulgent when they returned with booty retrieved from hidden nooks and crannies. The times were hard, but hardship intensified friendship.

Ex-Far fighters sustained their presence by expropriating goods from NGOs, robbing helpless refugees, and invading villages across the Rwandan frontier. The frequent attacks evolved into a game of “cat and mouse” whereby squads of Hutu fighters would raid into Gisenyi to destabilize the Tutsi government. The RPF *cats* would chase the ex-FAR *mice* until they returned to their ratholes hidden in the bowels of encampments.

Officials in Kigali complained about these cross-border incursions to the uncooperative government of Zaire, but President Mububu would not permit Rwandan troops to set foot on his nation’s soil.

By mid-1996, two powerful figures set up shop in Goma. One was Paul Rwarakabije, senior commander of ex-FAR forces. This Hutu colonel was orchestrating attacks into Rwanda.

The second strongman was Laurent Kabila, political leader of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL). He headed a network of Congolese insurrectionists intent on overthrowing Mubutu.

In August of 1997, the Zairean autocrat sought to suppress the on-going rebellion. He ordered five-thousand Kinshasa troops into the Goma region. But rather than restoring order, a greater disorder resulted. His undisciplined security force wreaked havoc; killing, extorting, and abusing those they were sent to protect.

Two foreign leaders noted the continuing cross-border attacks and the incompetence of Zairian troops. Paul Kagame of Rwanda set up a strategy comprised of four elements: First, to destroy the refugee camps; second, to destroy ex-FAR and Interahamwe based in the camps; third, to re-patriate as many Rwandans to their homeland as possible; and fourth, to overthrow the Mobutu regime.

President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda joined forces with Rwanda in support of the AFDL civil war. The stage was set for major blood-letting.

~ *The Congo War* ~

On October 18, 1996, Laurent Kabila launched a fierce campaign to drive President Mubutu Sese Seko from power. Soldiers from Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi entered Zaire en masse and set about occupying the provinces of North and South Kivu.

The coalition armies targeted the densely populated refugee camps situated along the Zaire-Rwanda border. During the lightning offensive, the attackers destroyed all Hutu camps in the vicinities of Bukavu and Goma.

Tens of thousands of refugees and militants perished in these onslaughts. Approximately 800,000 refugees repatriated to Rwanda, but thousands more fled into the depths of Zaire. For many, the fear of returning home outweighed whatever hardship may lay ahead.

For the next several months, the AFDL would pursue terrified refugees while on their rampage to the Zairian capital of Kinshasa. Along the route, coalition armies systematically destroyed makeshift refugee camps and persecuted anyone who came to their aid. In years to come, Amnesty International would report large-scale massacres in eastern Congo perpetrated by members of the AFDL and its allies.

Felix and Gaston had just finished breakfast when they perceived the rumble of artillery. Immediately they realized this was no small-scale raid. They soon heard the thunder and spotted the lightning of an approaching army. They looked on as men stampeded and children were trampled underfoot.

Earlier, in one of their late-night bull sessions, Felix and Gaston had hit upon an escape plan. Rather than join a panicked multitude west on Highway M2, Gaston proposed they move straight to the refuge of Nyiragongo. "We know those hidden places. It will be like exiting through a side door when a house is in flame."

The two tied on hard-soled shoes, grabbing rifles, backpacks, and water canteens. As Felix exited his quarters to dash uphill, he was astonished to see Hutu comrades stumbling toward the highway, wide-eyed in terror. Some would pause long enough to turn and fire a burst of rounds at the advancing enemy, but most ran in full retreat. After several steps, Felix glanced over his shoulder to see Sergeant firing his rifle from behind a large bolder. On a second glance, he saw the top of his head blown off by a mortar blast. As bullets whizzed by his own head, he muttered to himself, "At least the boss died with bravery."

Gaston had once remarked the name *Felix* meant "lucky" and on that October day their luck held. Somehow, they managed to climb to the rim of the volcano. The cinders were sharp and the air sulfuric. Only a handful of frightened survivors shivered with them through one hellish night.

At dawn Gaston suggested the two work their way south to Bukavu. He guaranteed they could find safety in the stronghold of his people. “Yes, my mother and sisters are dead, but we Banyamulenge—all of us—are like one big family. You will see. When I talk about you, they’ll embrace you as one of us.” He joked, “You can practice your dialect on them. They will laugh as you speak.”

The two traveled by night in the forest. Gaston seemed to have a sixth sense of his whereabouts, evading *mayibobo* and locating fruit trees. They ran across occasional travelers and numerous corpses. Felix told his big brother it was permissible to search the bodies for valuables. “The dead will not mind,” he pontificated.

The two could only keep what they could carry; a blanket, a rifle, and pockets of food. Gaston removed a pair of new sneakers from a bullet-ridden body. They were too small for his own feet so he handed them over to Felix. With this gift of footwear, he trudged south along the road to Bukavu.

~ *Massacre at Chimanga Camp* ~

As the two walked through the jungle, Gaston shared his thoughts about the afterlife. “That dead boy whose shoes you’re wearing, did he have a soul? What do you think?”

“I don’t know,” came the reply. “I’d like to think so. It would make me feel better.”

“Then where is his soul now?” Gaston probed. “It was you who said he wouldn’t mind if I took his shoes.”

Felix looked to the sky. “Maybe he’s with Imana,” he shrugged.

Gaston countered, “Do you think you’ll go to see Imana if you die?”

Felix shrugged again, not wanting to stammer a reply.

Gaston continued. “You know I studied with a Jesuit missionary named Francis. He taught me all humans have souls, a part of them that’s eternal. He said that is why we bear the image of God. I haven’t told you this, but my mentor-priest died in the massacre of my village.”

“Father Francis was a good man; generous with his time and his books. He told me God was good and saw God’s goodness shining through my eyes.” Gaston paused and put one hand on Felix’s shoulder. “When I saw the priest’s mangled body at the altar, I ran into the woods. I vowed never to talk about God again. I questioned myself.

How could Imana allow the killing of such a righteous man—as well as my mother and my sisters?”

Felix could only shake his head in silence.

Gaston talked on. “But I see life differently now. Francis told me once, ‘There are two types of people in this world. The same harsh sun beats on both. Some are composed of soft wax and melt away in times of trouble. Others begin like soft clay, but harden—become stronger—when the oppressive sun beats down. Gaston, you are strong, you will survive the difficult times. You must put your trust in God.’”

Gaston embraced Felix. “My young friend, I pass this word on to you because you too need to put your trust in God. You need to become strong to survive this time of tribulation.”

The young man was in tears. “Help me do this, g-Gaston. I don’t want to be like the cruel fighters. I want to be like you; g-goodness shining in my eyes.”

The two ex-fighters flung their rifles into the bush. Together they vowed to place their trust in God and not in bullets.

Within one hundred steps, the two found themselves near a small stream. While they were filling their bottles, they became aware of painted faces to their front and to their rear. A dozen warriors surrounded them; some with spears some with pistols. The fiercest of them spoke in Swahili, “Who are you? Why are you in our forest?”

The thought flashed through the mind of Felix, “Why was I so foolish as to throw away my rifle?”

Gaston noted something in the tenor of the voice and in the craft of the spear. He responded in his Kinyamulenge dialect, “We are your family.”

A puzzled look, then a smile appeared on the leader’s face. “Can you be Gaston Sebagbo?”

Rather than answer, Gaston sprang vertically off his feet, twisting 360 degrees in the air.

A second warrior shouted, “Yes, that’s Gaston. No one could manage that twirl but him.”

The leader spoke, “You better thank Imana you weren’t carrying rifles. We would have killed you on the spot thinking you were those two *mayibobo* who’ve been harassing our women.”

Felix exhaled a thank-you to God; the first prayer ever of his life.

With relief and celebration, the two followed the Banyamulenge warriors up a winding path into the deep foliage. Behind a wall of stone outcroppings, Felix spotted wooden huts half-hidden under the jungle canopy. A settlement had been carved out of the jungle. He was startled to see a hundred women and children emerge to greet the visitors. As Felix stood by, Gaston greeted a dozen of his people by name. “And where are the men?” he asked.

A grandmother answered, “Most are dead and the remainder are out on patrol; to forage and protect.”

Gaston introduced Felix as an honorary Banyamulenge. “We’ve been talking about the situation and my friend here wants to return to Rwanda. He wants to reunite with his kinfolk in Kayove.”

One of the young warriors spoke up. “On my last foray into town, I heard talk that the army of Kabila is in Chimanga camp, not far from here. The RPF has joined forces with them. They are seeking out refugees who want to voluntarily return to their home country.

One of those with a painted face interjected, “Please enjoy our hospitality. Stay a while, rest and refresh, then we will lead you to the camp. But we must be careful. Danger is around every corner and can pounce without warning.”

Gaston replied, “I know. I didn’t see your paint until your spear was at my throat.”

After ten days of recovery in the hidden stronghold, the two were ready to walk into Chimanga camp about ten kilometers to the west. Gaston insisted on escorting his young friend into the camp. He wanted to remain for a good-bye then return to his own people.

Felix became friends with the youngest warrior—a boy about his own age. Upon parting, Felix gave him his tin whistle. “Use this for good,” he said. “I’ve used it for evil causing the death of many innocent people.”

On November 20, flanked by several warriors, Felix and Gaston walked down the mountain side toward the refugee camp. When elements of the AFDL appeared at a roadblock, the warriors faded back into the jungle.

The two walked on. Felix showed his ID as a Rwandan refugee and Gaston was accepted as a Banyamulenge ally.

When they arrived at the camp, Felix noted RPF troops intermingling with Congolese. The place appeared in confusion. A colonel with the AFDL asked the Hutu refugees to assemble in the center court. He promised them the army would slaughter a

cow and give them meat so they could build their strength before their return to Rwanda.

A dozen RPF troops then began to register the refugees, grouping them according to their prefecture of origin. Gaston stood next to Felix as he filled out a card requesting transport to the town of Kayove in Gisenyi Prefecture.

At the shrill sound of a whistle all the RPF rushed to the walls of the compound. The next moment, AFDL soldiers positioned around the camp opened fire on the refugees. At the first crack of gunfire, Gaston pushed Felix to the ground and laid on top of him. "Stay down and play dead," he shouted into his ear.

After thirty seconds of rata-tat-tat, the gunfire ceased.

With his head twisted toward the wall, Felix opened one eye. He could see two RPF officers in a shouting match. The senior one was berating the younger, striking him with a baton.

Soon, the same soldiers who had been registering the living Hutus were now stacking their corpses into piles of ten. Although a few survived the slaughter, about five-hundred lay dead. Felix was lucky; Gaston was not.

In the midst of such chaos, Felix crept from the camp. He walked past the distracted sentries, and stumbled toward the Banyamulenge stronghold. He was met along the way by his new friend with the tin whistle. Felix collapsed into shock and tears.

~ A New Name ~

Felix told the Banyamulenge what had happened at Chimanga. The chief mourned the death of Gaston, but voiced indifference at the massacre of Hutus. "They got what they deserved. They killed people in Rwanda, then came into Kivu to kill some more."

Felix protested, "But I'm Hutu and I'm peaceful."

"Yes," he said, "You became like a brother to Gaston and as such you are always welcome among us."

Felix felt the burden of sin as he conversed. He knew in his heart he was one of those guilty Hutu who had killed in Rwanda then killed again in Zaire. He chose not to talk about his past, but to bury it deep in his soul. He wanted to make a fresh start to his life.

With the downfall of Hutu power, the fortune of the Banyamulenge transformed. Once quarry for ex-FAR fighters; they now became the hunters. Felix chose not to pick up a rifle, but remained in the camp. At fifteen-years-old he became a kind of tutor to many of the children, explaining to them the rudiments of arithmetic.

After a few months of relative quiet, the community broke up. Some single men joined the fighters moving west; most family units returned to their old villages for rebuilding; a dozen old men relocated to refugee centers in Rwanda; while a few adventurous souls stayed in place to maintain the outpost as a redoubt.

It was time for Felix to move on. He sat around a fire for a talk with the chieftain and elders. "You have become a family to me, but I need to return to Kayove.

"That's a wise choice," said one of the elders. "We will support you in that decision."

Felix paused, not knowing how to voice his request. "I think the Tutsis in my town will be looking for a certain boy named *Felix Ndizeye*. They make want to punish him for things he did during the war."

The chief clicked his tongue but did not pursue the matter.

Felix continued. "If you want to help me, perhaps you can provide me with a new name and identity card. I've been thinking a lot about it lately and it would honor me to resurrect the name of *Gaston Sebagbo*."

An elder wanted to clarify the proposition. "So, do want to assume the identity of your friend, a Banyamulenge?"

"Yes," came the reply. "I can think of no higher honor. He was the best man I ever knew."

The chief burst in, "That's not our custom. We could never do such a thing."

The oldest of the tribe spoke up, "Many things have happened in the last few years that have not occurred according to our custom. It might be a good thing, that, although the man Gaston Sebagbo is dead, his name and spirit lives on."

They asked Felix to leave the circle while they discussed the matter in private. After several minutes they summoned him back.

The chief spoke up, "The grandfather reminded me we do have an ancient custom of outside adoption. We are willing to adopt you as a Banyamulenge and since no one is alive has the name *Gaston Sebagbo*, that name will be acceptable as your tribal name.

The entire community circled the young man on the following evening. The celebration was muted due to security concerns. A calf was slaughtered and prepared for the feast. Bread, yams, fruit, squash, maize, and honey came out of hiding. Banana beer flowed into one hundred metal mugs.

Those who gathered appreciated the adopted son as he spoke to them in his best Kinyamulenge. Since such an adoption had not occurred within the lifetime of participants, the chieftain improvised. He applied a firebrand to the right arm of the adoptee. The brand took the shape of a traditional shield. “You are now part of us and I pronounce your name to be *Gaston Sebagbo*.”

On the next morning, two of the elders accompanied the young man into Bukavu. They brought with them a pouch of French and American money. The streets were in ruin. Death and decay permeated the nostrils. After several vain attempts they located a Zairian magistrate. In exchange for cash, he wrote out for them a Zairian passport with the name of *Gaston Sebagbo*. For a few coins more, a small portrait photo was attached to the document. The nationality was given a Zairian, the ethnicity Banyamulene, and the age boosted to sixteen. An official seal was affixed and Felix transformed into Gaston.

The elders walked Gaston to the Rusizi Bridge Number One where they bid him farewell. In spite of the ongoing violence, commerce was brisk across the international frontier. Rural mamas with chickens bound in twine competed for road space with boys pushing over-laden bicycles.

Gaston showed his papers to officials on the Zairian side and was waved across with no trouble. On the Rwandan side, he had to explain that his parents were deceased but he had relatives in Kayove. He planned to visit them. His passport, use of dialect, and knowledge of Kayove convinced an interrogator he was legitimate. With a stamp in his passport, he walked into Cyangugu. Gaston carried few possessions and would have to survive by his wits.

The young man held one advantage. He was now part of a tight-knit ethnic group. At a few markets and shops, he tactfully inquired if any Banyamulenge resided in the neighborhood. After several negative responses, one mama looked at his face. “Are you Banyamulenge, you sure don’t look it.”

He responded in his best Kinyamulenge and showed her his passport.

She smiled, “I think I can help you.” Then she led him down a few blocks and into a cabaret. She spotted a few men drinking at a table. “This young man needs your help.”

The men stopped their conversation and looked him up and down. One noticed the shield tattoo on his upper arm. Another spoke in heavy dialect, “Are you from our tribe?”

Gaston answered that question in the same accent, "I am indeed." He then mentioned the names of his chieftain and a few elders.

The three invited him to sit. One enquired of his business.

"My parents died in Kivu and I have distant kin in Kayove," came his reply. "I think I will be safer in this side of the lake."

"Safer for sure," one answered. "That's why we're here. In Zaire it's so dangerous. Everyone wants to be our friend. At the same time, they make us an enemy. I have to read the newspaper to find out whose side we're on this week."

The table burst into laughter.

"We can help you get to Kayove," the woman spoke up. "You can sleep behind the cabaret tonight. Every day about noon a UN transport passes this way from Cyangugu to Gisenyi. Only displaced persons can get on board. I know you have an ID, but do you have proof of destination? That's required to board the bus."

The men at the table pondered a moment. One said, "Hey, I think there's a UN camp near Byumba exclusively for us Banyamulenge. You can tell the UNHCR that's your destination but jump off the transport wherever you please."

"That should work," said the woman.

~ Return to Kayove ~

In the morning, the kind mama spoke to Gaston. "You know, I don't believe your story entirely. I don't think you have relatives in Kayove. Something's fishy, but no matter. I had a son about your age, but he died with his father in Goma. You remind me of him." She brushed away a tear.

"Look, here comes the UN transport. I'll talk with the driver. She knows me."

With that, the woman pressed Rwandan currency into his hand. "It's not much, but it may help you along the way."

Gaston took the last open seat and was soon bouncing north up Highway 11 toward Gisenyi. The bus stopped at several points along the way. Soon the driver counted twice as many passengers as seats. That was the absolute limit, so she locked the doors.

As Gason looked out his window, he saw his life pass by, but in reverse. He noted the crossroads of Buhinga where a twelve-year-old boy pushed a cart to the Eagle Nest.

The bus paused for a comfort break at Kibuye, the place where the same boy swore to allegiance to Hutu power. A short time later, the bus rumbled across the Nyabahango Bridge, a location that once marked the boundary of the French Turquoise Zone.

Just before dark, the transport turned a corner and entered into the lakeside town of Kayove. Gaston struggled to the front and told the driver he was sick and about to vomit. She stopped the bus, Gaston hopped out, but never re-boarded. The driver waited an extra moment and continued her travel to Gisenyi.

Gaston was hungry, thirsty, and exhausted. He was surprised at the generosity of the mama in Cyangu. He was able to buy a few bananas and a box of cold yoghurt. He walked a few blocks to the sandy shore of Lake Kivu, stretched out, and quickly fell asleep.

Visions of his final flight from Kayove haunted his dreams—the blood, the sergeant, the whistle, the capture of an old man. He could not imagine who that twelve-year-old might be. He was glad Felix Ndizeye had vanished from the earth.

When the sun shone through the clouds, Gaston arose and shook his clothes. Would he be recognized in Kayove? Probably not. He was a full head taller than the pre-teen and now held a Zairian passport in his pocket. Yet he could not take chances. He determined to make one walk through his old home town and move on. But to where? A montage of memories then flooded his soul.

Gaston strolled down the shoreline, nostalgic images invading his mind. There was the house of headmaster Muhoza. A few houses further he saw the wall of kind-hearted Paula, who helped him as a street urchin, allowing him to care for her goats. Why did he abuse her so?

He strolled past a collection of ramshackle huts that his gang of street urchins once called home. He shook his head in disgust and he recalled their evil exploits.

He walked the full length of town, all the way to Serpent Creek, so much the same, yet so different. He reversed course at mid-span ambling down a path lined with eucalyptus trees. As he looked back at the bridge, his mind flashed to July 1994 when RPF marksmen were shooting at him and two militiamen.

Gaston paused at the base of the largest eucalyptus. He shivered in remembrance. “Yes, that was the exact spot where helpless André Muhoza lay quaking in fear. Why did he blow his whistle? Why did he insist on swinging that blade? Who was that lost boy anyway?”

He returned to the big house on the corner. He sat and paced across the street from the front door. He stepped back when he saw the gate swing open. His thoughts raced. “Was that Clemie? So tall, so beautiful! And to think I wanted to slash her.”

His heart ached, “Who is that with Clemintine’s mom? He looks like my old classmate, Jean-Luk. Why is she leading him by the hand? Oh, he must be blind.”

When the three had pulled away in a car, Gaston walked with stealth to the back side of the property. He shinnied to the top of the wall. Beyond a clothes line, he spotted a tombstone. Whose could it be? The name read *André Muhoza*. He could not stifle the tears and begged God for forgiveness.

~ *Trek to Butare* ~

Gaston paced up and down the beach for the remainder of the day, deciding what to do next. What might honor his old friend, an invisible ghost he called *Gaston Sebagbo the First*? Maybe he should attend Bible school? That did not sound right. Maybe he should strive to attend university? That sounded better. He knew the National University was located in Butare, and that’s where he set his course. He was only sixteen, so he understood he may need to attend high school classes for a while, but that was okay. His status as a displaced Banyamulenge might help him earn a scholarship.

He turned his back on Kayove and began his journey to Butare. He soon ran out of money and became desperate. He did not want to steal, but what option was available to him. He sat on a street corner in Gitarama for a week, but begged just enough to buy a few sweet potatoes. He was accosted by a street gang and compelled to join in their outlaw ways. He escaped when their backs were turned.

Finally, he ran across a goat market. He gazed for hours as the animals romped and butted heads. His musings were interrupted when an old man noticed his animal interest and asked, “So, do you know how to handle goats? I can always use an honest and hardworking young man. It doesn’t pay much, but you get room and board.”

Gaston took the job of assistant goat merchant and stayed for a full year. He worked hard and the old man grew to trust him. He found peace as a goatherd, reading books, and making efforts to overcome his stutter. In this endeavor his was mostly successful, although in times of stress his stammer would return.

Gaston impressed his employer with his bookkeeping ability and soon he was managing his records. He stuck around for a second year and may have found a business career in Gitarama, but he remembered a promise had made to an old friend.

Now at eighteen-years-old (according to his passport), Gaston possessed a note of recommendation, a savings of 50,000 Rwandan Francs, and a suitcase of clothes and books. He caught a bus to Butare.

Gaston found his way to the admissions department and spoke with a counselor. He learned that yes indeed scholarships were available for displaced Banyamulenge. A high-school diploma was not required, if aptitude scores were high enough. Gaston paid to take an entrance examination and returned to the counselor.

Perusing the test scores his advisor told him, "I've never seen such achievement in mathematics and logic. Outstanding. Your reading skill in Kinyarwanda is adequate, but your French is poor and your English non-existent. Young man, I understand where you come from and I sympathize, but you are only eighteen. I suggest you take off a few years to master the languages and fill in the gaps you missed by not attending high school."

Gaston was disappointed but determined. He lodged in a meager guest house for a few days. On Sunday, he decided to seek God in prayer. An Anglican Church was just next door, so he took a seat at 9:30 am. Gaston did not understand the proceedings. He stood when the congregation stood, sang along with the choir, and read the word in the pew Bible. He listened carefully as the Anglican priest delivered his message.

He had questions about the Christian religion, so he hung around in the back of the sanctuary as the rest of the people exited. The vicar of the church, Daniel Mugisha, sat down next to Gaston, and that's when his life changed.