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GENOCIDE SURVIVORS

He speaks of possibilities

MR JEAN Marie Muhire, 27, danced joyously with friends, evoking the beauty of Rwanda, Land of a Thousand Hills. Their Singaporean hosts were soon on their happy feet.

That was in April, when about 100 Rwandan trainers wrapped up their study trip here with dinner at a yacht club.

Among them were chefs, builders and Java programmers, who will train the trainers in Rwanda. They spent several weeks at institutions such as the Singapore Polytechnic and ComfortDelGro Engineering.

That night, Mr Muhire spontaneously steps over to Saturday Special and depicts the heightened purpose of his land 15 years after the genocide.

'All children will master computer skills, because they are the people of tomorrow,' says the friendly infocomm technology instructor.

There is a moment of transparency when he says: 'From losing my parents at 12, Rwanda is totally different.'

The moment passes. 'I don't like to remember and cry,' he says.

It is September when we meet again in the mountain-ringed capital of Kigali, and he softly tells his story of survival.

As the youngest child in a loving family - five uncles on his dad's side lived in the same compound - he felt special.

His parents owned a textile business. A car sent the children to school.

He was 12 when the killing started in the capital in April 1994. He was sent to his grandparents' place in a village along with his mother and young aunt. His two older brothers were dispatched elsewhere.

One day, his grandfather told him: 'Run!' Escape to the home of a family friend, he was hastily instructed.

One week passed. Then the family friend told him: 'It's very painful but you have to be strong.' His mother and young aunt had been killed by machete.

The killer was known to his mum, for his children used to get milk from her. He apparently told her: 'Feel free and calm because I am going to cut you.'

Mr Muhire left by night, walking alone to enemy territory, a Hutu village.

In the fog of war, with the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front sweeping in from Uganda - and Hutu death squads on the move and sometimes fleeing - he could pretend to be a Hutu refugee. 'I was just a child,' he says.

There he fetched water for a kind woman, earning enough to buy fried sweet potatoes three times a week.

At night, he climbed trees to pick wild avocados, and stashed them. 'There were nights when I fought with dogs for my avocados. I'm not joking,' he remembers.

When it seemed that Tutsi forces were winning, the kind Hutu woman asked him to escape to Congo with her family.

It was confusing for the child. The hate propaganda on radio that mobilised killers depicted the Tutsi rebels, who later ended the genocide, as non-human - 'killers with tails', he recalls. So he headed to the border.

But he was turned back. He found his way back to his grandparents' village but found no living family member.

'I asked a neighbour to let me walk with him to Kigali.' When he got home after a two-hour foot journey, he saw all had perished. 'I know how Mum died. But I don't know how my father died.'

Three days later, one brother arrived.

The genocide had ended, but Kigali was chaotic and broken in spirit. It was desperately short of food, so children like him cut wood for money. They formed child-led households.

After a spell in an orphanage, he went to school. He sold tomatoes. He remembers leaving them with a friend in the market, then pelting off for his Primary 6 national examination.

He was a good student and years later earned a diploma in computer studies.

This year, he is pursuing a degree in business and information technology at night and on weekends. By day, he is an instructor. Like him, half the 55,000 university students study and work.

The genocide drives him silently. 'I push myself. With all my hurts, I cannot live without working.'

But he has a sunny nature, and has shared his story with genocide orphans. 'I was showing them you can be a different person even if you have been touched by genocide. You search for a bright life.'

His brothers chide him for his light heart. 'You laugh everywhere,' they say.

He disputes that. 'I said, No, no. I'm serious but I don't have to think about the past every day. That can break me.'

He is a Christian and has found it possible to forgive. Once, he chanced upon a killer who had ended his jail term. 'I greeted him intentionally. I see him as someone who's normal.'

The rail-thin 1.9m Mr Muhire lives alone in a tiny one-bedroom house he built with money he borrowed. It stands in the same compound where he grew

up.

His abode is bare, but he has a laptop and watches television on a Singapore-bought Akira monitor. He loves to play worship music on his keyboard. He also leads his church choir, which has produced a CD.

It is a bachelor's pad with a concrete floor. He ran out of money to finish the construction of the attached bathroom. So he pops into his married brother's house, across his hut, to use the bathroom.

The compound, once filled with families, feels achingly empty when he shows Saturday Special around one weekend.

Yet he is animated. He talks about his future, which now includes Singapore.

He thinks about his Singapore Polytechnic instructor who was determined to unleash potential in Rwandans. There was also a supermarket cashier near his Clementi hostel who worked as if there was a queue though he was the only one.

Face aglow, he keeps talking as the light fades. He wants to inspire his students with Singapore's strengths. He speaks the language of possibilities.

LEE SIEW HUA

