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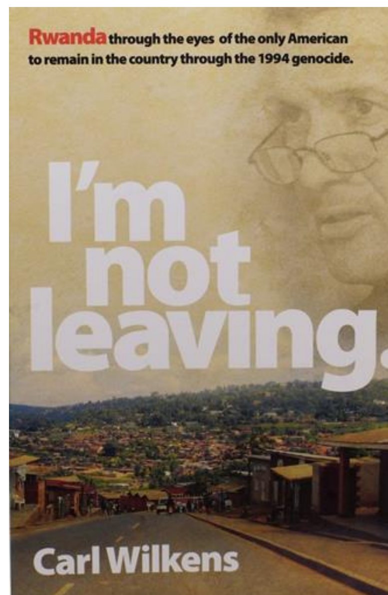
BOOK REVIEW

CARL WILKENS AND RWANDA: LEARNING AND GROWTH



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Carl Wilkens was an American missionary working as the head of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency International in Rwanda in 1994, when the tragic genocide pitting the two peoples, the Hutus and Tutsis, broke out to worldwide shock and dismay. While virtually all foreigners fled the country, Mr. Wilkens announced, "I'm not leaving" and stayed behind, offering help to many different people, notably orphanages that needed supplies, water and protection. Mr. Wilkens stayed in Rwanda for the entire length of the brutality and slaughter, dodging marauding bands of military and civilians, before finding his way back to his wife and children, who had left to a nearby country at the beginning.

Mr. Wilkens spoke in my Global Issues class, by Skype, in 2020 and again in 2022. He explained all that had happened to him, and all that he had learned. We also watched Mr. Wilkens' film, "I'm not leaving," (also the title of his book). In it, he says, "Of course, with the killing going on [in Rwanda] the smart thing to do was get out." But he chose not to.

When all was said and done, Mr. Wilkens found that we could and must "inspire and equip people to respectfully enter the world of the other." He sought a community filled with educators, advocates, and supporters who share this mission— striving to build an environment of respect, where we can learn other's stories, and where empathy leads to new levels of inclusion. This became the founding philosophy of his "World Outside my Shoes" educational foundation, with the aim of spreading the word about the Rwanda catastrophe, and how the country had recovered, rebuilt, and

sought transitional justice—"Rwanda's pathway back to trust" as Wilkens says. The country has even embarked on what Wilken's calls a "reverse state of the union" in which citizens and governors work together to provide "Increased transparency, accountability, and a deeper sense of responsibility to others."

Although Wilkens and his wife say that they were living above the unrest brewing between the Hutu and Tutsi peoples in the early 1990s, "we could tell there was tension." In spite of this pressure, the Hutu and Tutsi people he worked with "worked together in a way that wouldn't indicate that there was a problem." Not long after, however, with the downing of a jet containing the Hutu president of Rwanda resulting in his death, the extremist Hutu government launched the genocide against the Tutsis. His wife says of this time, "I remember looking across, seeing groups of mostly young guys, they'd be carrying sticks or machetes…going from one house to another," and with that the massacre was underway, a "twisted, collective insanity" as one UN commander said. Wilkens found himself "venturing out each day into streets crackling with mortars and gunfire," and he "worked his way through roadblocks of angry, bloodstained soldiers and civilians armed with machetes and assault rifles in order to bring food, water, and medicine to groups of orphans trapped around the city." Working with Rwandan colleagues, he and his aides helped save the lives of hundreds. "You did what you had to do with each threat, each challenge that came," says Wilkens. After reuniting, Wilkens and his family lived in Rwanda for another 1.5 years before returning to the U.S. and launching their educational and restorative justice program. For him, "a whole new world, a whole new life" came upon them. "Surviving is more than just staying alive," he says; "surviving is learning how to live again." A U.S. State Department spokeswoman later said of Wilkens's stay in Rwanda, "if he believed he kept a presence there, if he kept that mission open, he could make a difference." Carl Wilkens certainly did this, in ways that few other people could ever imagine.

Thirty years after the genocide against Rwanda's Tutsi, many battle to reconcile with the country's grim past, despite its government's attempts to bridge ethnic divisions.

The diggers' hoes scrape the brown soil, looking for — and often finding — human bone fragments. Women then wipe the bone pieces with their hands as others watch in solemn silence. The digging goes on, a scene that has become all too familiar in a verdant area of rural southern Rwanda, where the discovery in October last year of human remains at the site of a house under construction triggered another search

for new mass graves believed to hold victims of the 1994 genocide against Rwanda's Tutsi.

In the months since, Rwandan authorities say the remains of at least 1,000 people have been found in the farming community in the district of Huye, a surprisingly high number after three decades of government efforts to give genocide victims dignified burials. Rwanda commemorated the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the genocide on Sunday, but continuing discoveries of mass graves are a stark reminder not only of the country's determination to reconcile with its grim past, but also of the challenges it faces in aiming for lasting peace.

Speaking to The Associated Press, the head of a prominent genocide survivors' group and several other Rwandans said the discoveries underscore that more needs to be done for true reconciliation.

Rwanda has made it a criminal offense to withhold information about a previously unknown mass grave. For years, perpetrators of the 1994 genocide, including those who served prison terms and were later released, have been urged to speak up and say what they know.

Yet the mass graves are still mostly found by accident, leading to new arrests and traumatizing survivors all over again. The discovery in October resulted in the arrest of Jean Baptiste Hishamunda, 87, and four of his relatives. After the remains of six people were discovered under his home, diggers started going through his entire property, finding dozens and then hundreds more remains as their search extended to other sites in Huye. An estimated 800,000 Tutsi were killed by Hutu in massacres that lasted more than 100 days in 1994. Some moderate Hutu who tried to protect members of the Tutsi minority were also targeted.

The genocide was ignited on April 6 when a plane carrying then-Rwandan president Juvenal Habyarimana, a member of the majority Hutu, was shot down in the capital, Kigali. The Tutsi were blamed for downing the plane and killing the president. Enraged, gangs of Hutu began killing Tutsi, backed by the army and police.

The government of Rwandan President Paul Kagame, whose rebel group stopped the genocide and whose party has ruled the East African country since 1994, has tried to bridge ethnic divisions. The government imposed a tough penal code to punish genocide and outlaw the ideology behind it, and Kagame has fostered a culture of

obedience among the country's 14 million people. Rwandan identification cards no longer list a person's ethnicity and lessons about the genocide are part of the curriculum in schools.

Hundreds of community projects, backed by the government or civic groups, focus on uniting Rwandans, and, every April, the nation joins hands in somber commemorations of the genocide anniversary.

Today, serious crimes fueled by ethnic hatred are rare in the small country where Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa live side by side, but signs persist of what authorities say is a genocidal ideology, citing the concealment of information about undiscovered mass graves as an example. There are also incidents of villagers asking mass-grave investigators if they are searching for valuable minerals or dumping dog carcasses at memorial sites, said Naphtal Ahishakiye, executive secretary of Ibuka, a genocide survivors' group based in Kigali.

"It's like saying: 'What we lost during the genocide are dogs,'" Ahishakiye said.

There are still those who resist coming forward to say what they witnessed, he said. "We still need to improve, to teach, to approach people, up to [when] they become able to tell us what happened," Ahishakiye said.As more mass graves are discovered, Tutsi survivors "start to doubt" the good intentions of their Hutu neighbors, he said.

Their pleas for information about relatives lost in the killings go unanswered.

In the village of Ngoma, where shacks roofed with corrugated sheets dot lush farmland, diggers come across decaying shoes and pieces of torn clothing among skulls and bones. "I have tried very hard to forget," said Beata Mujawayezu, her voice catching as she recalled the killing of her 12-year-old sister at a roadblock on April 25, 1994.

The girl pleaded for her life with militiamen, going down on her knees in front of a gang leader whom she addressed as "my father." She was hacked to death with a machete.

"She was a lovely girl," Mujawayezu said of her sister as she watched the digging at a mass grave site on a recent afternoon in her Tutsi-dominated neighborhood.

“One day, hopefully, we will get to know where she was buried,” she said.

Augustine Nsengiyumva, another survivor in Ngoma, said the new mass grave discoveries have left him disappointed in his Hutu neighbors, whom he had grown to trust.

“Imagine sleeping on top of genocide victims,” he said, referring to cases where human remains are found under people’s homes. “These are things I really don’t understand,” he said.

Young people are less troubled by the past. Some Rwandans see this as a chance for reconciliation in a country where every other citizen is under the age of 30. In the semi-rural area of Gahanga, just outside of Kigali, farmer Patrick Hakizimana said he sees a ray of hope in his children that someday Rwanda will have ethnic harmony.

A Hutu and an army corporal during the genocide, Hakizimana was imprisoned from 1996 to 2007 for his alleged role in the killings. He said he learned his lesson and is now trying to win the respect of others in his neighborhood.

“There are people who still have hatred against Tutsi,” he said. “The genocide was prepared for a long time.”

David Gakunzi wrote a poem expressing what Wilkens now feels:

We remember.
We are watching.
We will not forget their names.
We will speak of their silence to the end of the horizon.
They are no longer there but they are.
We are, they are."

The above takes in all that Carl Wilkens has lived and experienced, and his generous response. He has sought to motivate and prepare people to reverently enter the world of all other peoples and ethnicities. He has sought a community filled with teachers and activists and who share his mission to construct a living environment of reverence and esteem, wherein we can learn others’ narratives, their stories, and with compassion and inclusiveness leading to new levels of awareness and presence.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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