



**INTERVIEW WITH MARIE-JOSÉE GICALI**

**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 bahungiye muri Canada Jenoside n’itotezwa ryayibanjirirje**

**Status of the interview: X public (1A)**

**Interviewee:** Marie-Josée Gicali (M.-J.G.)

**Interviewer:** Sandra Gasana (S.G.)

**Interviewer:** Monique Mukabalisa (M.M.)

**Videographer:**

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**Transcribed by:** Angélique Nduwumwe

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**Editorial note:**

Mrs. Gicali is sitting in her living room in the presence of the two interviewers. While speaking, she often gestures with her hands. At one point during the interview, two or three people were talking at the same time, which made the translation [transcription?] a bit difficult.

**Biographical note on the interviewee:**

Mrs. Gicali left Rwanda in 1999 [or 1998?] and came to Canada to continue her studies. She is rebuilding her life in Montreal despite the impact left by the genocide. She is married and has two children.

**[00:00:00]**

**M.M.: Thank you for accepting to do this interview and to tell us your life story. This project is addressed to all Montrealers who have been displaced by crimes, genocide and other violent events. It will be made available to the public—[whether this interview is also public] depends on your choice. We, uh, we know each other, but not very well. [laughter] That’s why I’ll start by asking you—I’m going to address you informally, if you don’t mind—**

M.-J.G.: Yes, no problem.

**M.M.: So can you tell me about yourself, your family, your grandparents?**

M.-J.G.: My name is Marie-Josée Gicali, I come from Kibuye, which is in western Rwanda. I arrived in Canada in 1998. I am married and I am a mother of two children.

**M.M.: Okay. [laughter] I would like to know a little bit more about your parents and your grandparents—we never talked about that, we only talked about ourselves. [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: My parents—

**M.M.: Do you know your grandparents?**

M.-J.G.: My grandparents—

**M.M.: Did you know them?**

M.-J.G.: I knew my maternal grandmother, I knew her, but she died in 1998—1988—I knew her. She was the only one—the only grandparent I knew.

**M.M.: You didn’t know your mother’s side of the family?**

M.-J.G.: The side—I knew my paternal grandfather, but not my maternal one, he died a long time ago…, it was—it’s been a very long time. And my paternal grandparents died when my father was very young.

**M.M.: Okay, so the only person you knew a little was your maternal grandmother?**

M.-J.G.: Maternal, yes.

**M.M.: What do you remember of her?**

M.-J.G.: Oh my god, she was a woman of character; she was like a man, actually.

**M.M.: [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: [laughter] This woman who—she impressed me a lot, she could do anything, she was well-respected, and—oh my goodness, I was very young, but she impressed me a lot, especially her love for me, she loved me very, very much. [nods] She loved her children, her grandchildren, but because she had lost her husband when she was still relatively young, she had to shoulder all responsibilities and be the backbone of the family. And since my mother was—she was the only child to have gone to school—

**M.M.: Oh—**

M.-J.G.: —so my mother was helping out too. Being the eldest, she helped build the house and make it nice, and all.

**M.M.: Do you remember what was the relationship like between your mother and her mother? [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: Actually, they had a very close relationship. I remember once my grandmother said: “This house, it is my daughter who built it for me.” She said a lot of nice things about my mother. She would say, “Your mother was a smart, hard-working girl.” She was very proud of her daughter, maybe because my mother had studied, I don’t know… My mother had—well, during that time it was relatively difficult—she finished her studies during the time of the Revolution and all that, and then she was forced to flee her home.

**M.M.: Your grandmother?**

M.-J.G.: No, my mother. She was forced to flee, but we didn’t talk about that very much in the family. Once my grandmother said that there were people who helped my mother hide, *ku rusenge*—do you know what *urusenge* is?

**M.M.: Yes, yes, above the—**

M.-J.G.: It’s the space above the fireplace. [explains with gestures]

**M.M.: To store—**

M.-J.G.: To store pots, *ibibindi…* [shows with gestures]

**M.M.: Yes, yes.**

M.-J.G.: Apparently, one family helped her hide, because people were after them. People were saying that girls who had gone to school were pro-Kigeli, that they had written “Long Live Kigeli” on their thighs or on their buttocks [laughter] so my mother was forced to—

**M.M.: —to hide somewhere.**

M.-J.G.: —to leave the region. I always had the impression that she wasn’t very pleased to think back to that period—my mother never told me about it.

**M.M.: And this happened when she was a young girl?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, in 1959–1960.

**M.M.: And you were saying that your grandmother loved you very much?**

M.-J.G.: Yes. She loved me very much, she was very fond of me. [laughter]

**M.M.: Were you at your Grandma’s often?**

M.-J.G.: I lived there.

**M.M.: Oh.**

M.-J.G.: Yeah, I was just going to talk about that, since I am telling you about my life. I lived there for three years.

**M.M.: How old were you?**

M.-J.G.: Between the ages of 12 and 15. I was like a refugee. [laughter] I was tying to find a way to go to school—you know what the conditions were—

**M.M.: Yes, yes, yes.**

M.-J.G.: Tutsi children who—since we didn’t really have the chance to go to high school, my parents had to falsify [laughter] my identity and I became somebody else…

**M.M.: To be able to study.**

M.-J.G.: And I was sent to my grandparents’ house, and we had to hide that fact. We had to hide it from the people where my grandmother lived and at home we had to hide that I was returning from somewhere else. It was really something. [chuckles]

**M.M.: We did anything we could to be able to study.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, we did. So, for three years I lived with my grandmother.

**M.M.: Going back to your family, to Mom and Dad’s house, what can you tell us about them both?**

M.-J.G.: Both?

**M.M.: About their relationship. About their relationship with you. What are your memories of them?**

M.-J.G.: Well, my parents…, they were both teachers…

**M.M.: Had they studied a lot?**

M.-J.G.: Not a lot but they had the chance to study to become teachers. How do I remember them? My parents were very hard-working people because they had to work; nothing was given for free, they had to work very, very hard. They were also very protective parents, they protected us enormously and spoiled us. Sometimes, the other young children, teenagers were baffled to see how overprotected we were, but later, when I grew up, I understood that my parents didn’t want their children to experience what they themselves have lived through. So they worked a lot, they protected us a lot, but they were very discreet. When I think about it, my parents didn’t talk much about politics, about what was going on in the country. No, they were quiet about it and when we were about to broach the subject, they would say, “You should keep quiet, now is not the time.”

**M.M.: In relation to politics?**

M.-J.G.: In relation to the politics at the time. My parents didn’t talk about it much.

**M.M.: Did they show affection?**

M.-J.G.: Of course. [laughter]

**M.M.: Their emotions?**

M.-J.G.: Listen, we were only three kids—

**M.M.: That’s what I wanted to know.**

M.-J.G.: —and at that time having three children was not many. My mother suffered that—I think my mother was very sad for not having many children. It wasn’t a choice, it just happened that way. So my mother, she would have—my mother loved children so much that she would have loved to have ten kids. [laughter] There were often children who stopped by our house, who came to get something to eat, who would spend a week [with us]. There was also—we had adopted a little boy, he was one of our neighbours whose parents were very, very poor and his father had passed away. He came to our home and he stayed with us; he was killed during the genocide. That’s it, that’s all I can say. My parents were hard-working people, discreet, very discreet, and proud, very proud too. I remember, people in our region were saying that we were rich. [laughter] They believed—they thought—they would say, “Oh, they are rich!” while other families were in a situation similar to ours. There were many couples where both partners were working, but I don’t know why people were saying that we were rich. We could study without a problem, go to high school without a problem—when I say “without a problem” I mean without financial problems. Yeah.

**S.G.: What was your relationship like with your brothers and sisters? You said you are three siblings?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, there were three of us.

**S.G.: Do you have younger or older brothers?**

M.-J.G.: I was the eldest and the other two—well, the youngest died—he was murdered during the genocide.

**M.M.: He was a boy?**

M.-J.G.: A boy, yes.

**M.M.: So you are the girl?**

M.-J.G.: I was the only girl… [laughter]

**M.M.: Oh, so the others, the other two were boys?**

M.-J.G.: Boys, yes.

**M.M.: Okay, so you were one girl and two boys.**

M.-J.G.: Yes. Well, we had a normal relationship, like any brothers-sisters relationship. We had fights sometimes and at other times there were moments of affection, of trust; but above all, we had a strong bond. Yes, a strong connection.

**M.M.: When you think about it now, did you feel a closer connection with one brother in particular?**

M.-J.G.: With the youngest, the one who died. Maybe because he was younger and I felt I should protect him. [laughter] Yes, that’s it. With my brother who was born right after me, it was like we were the same age, so we challenged each other often and at the same time we were very close, we confided little secrets to each other. But my youngest brother… Frankly, when I think that he was killed in that way, it’s hard to accept, to understand. And it’s also because of his character that I am very sad, very, very sad [to have lost him] because he was such a sweet child, very, very sweet, very nice.

**M.M.: How old was he?**

M.-J.G.: He was 23 years old.

**M.M.: In 1994?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, yes.

**M.M: Can you tell us your dates of birth, so that we know that if he was 23—**

M.-J.G.: Yes, I was born on February 11, 1965.

**M.M.: And your youngest brother?**

M.-J.G.: My brother, the one born after me, on April 24, 1969 and the youngest was born in 1971.

**M.M.: Do you also remember, more or less, the birth dates of your parents?**

M.-J.G.: My father and my mother were actually born the same year, 1939.

**M.M. and S.G.: Oh!**

M.-J.G.: But the dates—

**M.M.: You mean months?**

M.-J.G.: —they didn’t know them.

**M.M.: It’s hard to know that.**

M.-J.G.: Hard to know, yes.

**M.M.: That’s interesting. Going back to your family and the children’s upbringing—so, both of your parents were teachers. When it comes to raising the children at home, did they have different roles? Who was more involved in the children’s upbringing? What were, more or less, their respective roles at home?**

M.-J.G.: It was like in all patriarchal societies: the mother stays at home—well, my mother didn’t really stay at home, but she was there, she worked both outside and inside the home at the same time, so she was pretty much always there. My father was authoritative, we feared, respected him a lot. And my mother used that to threaten us: she would say, “I’ll tell your father when he comes back, you’ll see.” So it was like he was an authority figure, but ultimately—pardon me [blows nose]—in the end, mother was the boss. [laughter] Yes. But in my memory, in fact, my father was the more lenient one, and I understand him—

**M.M.: Despite his authority.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, and I understand him. He wasn’t always there to see the stupid things we were doing, to see—now that I am a mother myself, I understand what it’s like. [laughter] We rebelled sometimes: “Mom is too—Mom is not nice sometimes, she’s not kind to us.” The same is happening now with my daughter. [laughter]

**M.M.: The same thing is happening again.**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**M.M.: [laughter] So what are your memories of the place where you grew up?**

M.-J.G.: My memory is of—[laughter] it was like a little corner of paradise, now that I think of it, it was like a little corner… It was the countryside, we lived in the countryside. We would have liked to live in the city, in Kigali, when we were young, to be city dwellers, but now that I think of it, I think we were privileged to live close to nature, to live surrounded by so much beauty: the mountains, the greenery, the space, especially the space we had, we played outside all day, we ran—

**M.M.: —everywhere—**

M.-J.G.: [laughter] We would come home exhausted, breathless, hungry…

**M.M.: And you weren’t afraid?**

M.-J.G.: No, we weren’t afraid of them, really it wasn’t—

**M.M.: Of the neighbours?**

M.-J.G.: No, as children we were carefree, we played, we shouted, we ran in the bush, we herded the cows, the calves, *kuragira*, *twaragiraga inyana* in the evenings. When I think about it now, I think we had a happy childhood, after all.

**M.M.: Even though you were seen as a well-to-do family? [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: [laughter]

**M.M.: Sometimes, the relationship with the children next door—were you free to—what was it like? Was it easy to play with your neighbours’ children? Were you free to go anywhere?**

M.-J.G.: No, not anywhere, oh no, no, not anywhere, but our neighbours—we had no problems with our next-door neighbours. Well, my aunt lived 500 meters from our house, so we played with my cousins ​​and with other kids from the neighbourhood. But we didn’t go very far, we stayed close to home. Yes.

**M.M.: In Rwanda we talk about ethnic groups and that what happened was inevitable**.

M.-J.G.: Yes, we do.

**M.M.: Which ethnic group were you from?**

M.-J.G.: [laughter] What do you think?

**M.M.: [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: We were—we were among the—we were Tutsi, but I only found that out later. [laughter] That’s why I was saying that my parents were not very talkative people.

**M.M.: We often learned that later, that’s right.**

M.-J.G.: You as well? You found out later?

**M.M.: Yes, when it was starting to—[inaudible]**

M.-J.G.: Listen, when I started primary school, I didn’t know what it was. But I did know that I was *umwegakazi*.

**M.M.: That’s very interesting. Some people grow old without knowing it.**

M.-J.G.: There was an old woman, a neighbour who loved me very much. [laughter] We would talk a lot, her and I, and she would say, “You are a *wowe uri umwegakazi*, you are a *umwegakazi*, you are like me.”

**M.M.: And what does that mean? What did she mean by *umwegakazi*?**

M.-J.G.: It meant a woman with a strong character, an active woman, [laughter] who seems to be everywhere at the same time [shows with a gesture], and I too seemed to be quite active.

**M.M.: You were showing your *umwegakazi* side.**

M.-J.G.: She said, “You are *umwegakazi*.” [shows with a gesture] *Abega*, I knew we were *abega*, but other than that…

**M.M.: Not much more.**

M.-J.G.: Not much more. When I started—imagine, I was in 2nd grade of primary school…

**M.M.: When you realized it?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, but indirectly. At the beginning of every term, one of the teachers—and that is something that has marked me—would say to us, “All *abahutu*, *abahutu hano*, stand on this side and all *abanari*, on the other side.” [shows with gestures]

**M.M.: *Abanari*?**

M.-J.G.: *Abanari*.

**M.M.: Meaning?**

M.-J.G.: From the UNAR party [the Rwandese National Union]. It was a way of saying “cockroaches.” Saying *abanari* was like—

**M.M.: So it was like—specifically referring to UNAR—**

M.-J.G.: Those who belonged to UNAR. UNAR was the king’s party.

**S.G.: Oh, *abanare*.**

M.-J.G.: It was another way of undermining the Tutsis, by calling them *abanari*. Yes, [inaudible] in people’s heads; simple folk who didn’t even know what that meant. Calling them *abanari* was another way to further demean the Tutsis.

**M.M.: And did the children understand?**

M.-J.G.: No, of course not, we didn’t understand anything. So he would say, “*Abahutu hano*, the Hutus on this side, [shows with gestures] *fyou* everyone.” [laughter] That’s what I’m telling you was going on through my head: all of a sudden, *fyou*… [shows with gestures]

**M.M.: Everyone starts moving places, yes.**

M.-J.G.: Now that I think about it, I wonder how did these children—

**M.M.: How did they know…**

M.-J.G.: —know that they were Hutu or Tutsi. *Fyou* the Hutus on this side [shows with gestures] and then he said “*abanari*,” and there were some—

**M.M.: —who didn’t know where to stand.**

M.-J.G.: —because 8-year-old children, 7–8 year-old—if you weren’t in this group, you had to be in the other. But I knew I was *umwega*, and I had a bit of doubt.

**M.M.: He didn’t mention *abega*?**

M.-J.G.: No, no, he didn’t mention *abega*, but I was unsure, I thought to myself, “Should I go there [shows with gestures] towards the Hutu group, or there [gestures] to the *abanari* group?” And while I [inaudible] he said to me, “You, you go there, [gestures] to the *abanari* group.” [takes a tissue from a box nearby]

**M.M.: So he knew?**

**S.G.: Oh my god…**

M.-J.G.: He knew… [blows nose] We were from the same region, so he knew. “What are you waiting for? Go this way.” [imitates shouting] I went, but my head was full of questions. [shows with gestures] Later, I asked my parents what *abanari* was. That’s a question that kills, a question that has the power to kill. [sighs] I didn’t get an answer, but later on, speaking to the other children—you begin to understand later on. My parents’ answer wasn’t clear. That’s it. It was—actually, they wanted—they didn’t want the kids talking about it. They didn’t want us, children, going back [to school] and saying, “My dad told me that… My mom told me that…” They were really embarrassed.

**M.M.: And they were protecting themselves too.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, they were very embarrassed. So it was like a blur, and they let it go, they dropped the subject and you’d learn about that later. I remember their embarrassment, the disappointment too. So there you go. Did I answer the question?

**M.M.: Yes, yes. You mentioned the teachers. I’m going to ask you now to talk to me about your teachers. [laughter] What do you remember about them?**

M.-J.G.: As I’m speaking and as I’m thinking about my teachers, the image of this one teacher, this gentleman always comes to mind, it’s him I see all the time in my mind, every time.

**M.M.: In 2nd grade?**

M.-J.G.: In 2nd grade. I see him, it can’t be erased from a child’s memory… It’s like it kills the innocence in you, this separation in—anyway, he knew who we were because—you do remember the students’ personal files, don’t you? The ethnicity and everything was written there. It was done to humiliate us from a young age, to let into our little heads that you had to be on this side and not on that side. Yes. It’s really, uh—that gentleman was—yes.

**M.M.: He was your teacher in primary school?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, in primary school. The other teachers were good. In 1st grade I had a very kind teacher, a neighbour; in 3rd grade, another very nice gentleman; in 4th it was my father—in fact, when—[laughter]—in 5th, another very nice gentleman. Actually, things were good in primary school.

**M.M.: How many years was primary school?**

M.-J.G.: [laughter] For me it was eight years.

**M.M.: Okay.**

M.-J.G.: It’s six—

**M.M.: You had six—**

M.-J.G.: I had six—

**M.M.: No, eight teachers, oh that’s right—**

M.-J.G.: I had eight, actually nine, because I did my 6th grade—I don’t know how many—I did my 6th grade three times. I would do 6th grade and then I would repeat it, I had to repeat it because I failed to pass the exam. Actually, I passed it, but I wasn’t selected, it was the famous equilibrium policy and all that. So what could I do?

**M.M.: Start over again.**

M.-J.G.: Start falsifying things and then I was sent to my grandparents’ house and that was a huge shock. Then after spending eight years in primary school, I remember I—[snuffles] excuse me—

**M.M.: That’s okay.**

M.-J.G.: —uh, that’s when I was accepted to a high school, and that wasn’t easy either even though I was first in my class.

**M.M.: Yes, precisely, how did you get accepted to high school?**

M.-J.G.: Well, my father had to pay money—he knew someone who worked at the Ministry of Education, he paid a large sum. My parents worked hard, they had put money aside and all, and he paid a big sum, and then I was accepted into a shabby high school that had just opened in our area, in Mubuga.

**M.M.: In high school—**

M.-J.G.: Initially, it was a three-year high school for, you know, to train teaching assistants, things like that. And later, it was decided that all programs would provide a six-year training, so we spent six years there.

**M.M.: Six years in high school.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, yes.

**M.M.: Did you obtain a specific—a particular qualification?**

M.-J.G.: Well, yes, I was—yes, I [inaudible] excuse me—I was in the “Normale primaire” stream.

**M.M.: Which led to…?**

M.-J.G.: Being able to teach in primary schools. Yeah.

**M.M.: And after six years you started teaching?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, for two years—[laughter] I taught for two years, it was the law.

**M.M.: And how did you find work, your first job?**

M.-J.G.: Work? It was automatic.

**M.M.: Oh really?**

M.-J.G.: When you finished your teaching program in high school you had to write a letter to the school inspector, the area inspector, and then he hired you, he assigned you to a school.

**M.M.: Hired—was it certain that you would be hired?**

M.-J.G.: Oh yes, yes, it was certain. It was certain because they needed teachers, they needed qualified teachers.

**M.M.: Whether in your case or in the case of your parents, how did you manage to reconcile your responsibilities at home and at work?**

M.-J.G.: Well, in the case of my parents: we had servants who lived in our house. Also, family members often came and went. It wasn’t complicated, it wasn’t very complicated, I don’t think. [laughter] It was alright.

**M.M.: We are now in Quebec. I have to ask: When did you leave the family home? [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: The family home?

**M.M.: Yes.**

M.-J.G.: I arrived here in—in August—August 18, 1998.

**M.M.: So you left to come here?**

M.-J.G.: I left to come here.

**M.M.: And that was the first time you left your parents’ house?**

M.-J.G.: Actually, when I finished university—well, I left my parents’ house to go to university—no, no, to start working, to start work in Kibuye as a teacher, in a college in Kibuye.

**M.M.: You were not living at home at that time?**

M.-J.G.: No, no, I lived there. So it was the first time… Actually, the very first time was when I went to boarding school as a high school student. It wasn’t complicated. Then I left to start working, then I went to university in Ruhengeri, in Nyakinama, and then, after the genocide… In fact, after university I started working in Butare, while my father lived in Kigali, so during that time we didn’t live together.

**S.G.: And how did you feel, those first times when you found yourself alone, without your parents? Apart from boarding school—being on your own, did you find that hard or…?**

M.-J.G.: Not really.

**S.G.: No?**

M.-J.G.: No, because I wasn’t very far from my parents in the beginning when I started working in Kibuye. No, it was alright because I could go home whenever I wanted.

**S.G.: On the weekends?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, yes.

**S.G.: Okay.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, on the weekends and they also came to see me. Uh, I have to say that I left my parents when I was really young, as I said in the beginning, I was 12 when I went to live with my grandmother. To me that was a terrible shock, even though my grandmother was there, but I had never lived with her before. My aunt was there too, she was a teacher, we lived under the same roof. I had a cousin and a maid, so we were a whole family. Despite all of this, it was still very hard, very, very hard, at 12 years old, it was very difficult because that was another way of life, another environment, it’s—yeah. It was very difficult, but after a while it wasn’t so difficult anymore. So there. But at the same time, I—when I left as an adult, it was a whole new experience living away from my parents—I felt free. [laughter] I said before that my parents were very protective. Had I stayed close to them—[laughter, shakes head saying “no”]—no, no, as an adult, I had to experience that, to live—to take care of my life. Yes. But I also must say that I was used to moving around. I was an athlete, I played volleyball and we travelled often with the team, we played all over the country and outside of the country too, so I had—I loved that experience of—

**S.G.: Going on an adventure—**

M.-J.G.: —going on an adventure—I loved it! Yes. For sure my parents were always, always worried—

**M.M.: Right.**

M.-J.G.: —but I liked it.

**S.G.: Especially since you are a girl, the only girl [in the family].**

M.-J.G.: Oh yes, the only girl—what will happen to her? When I was far away from them, I was living a different experience. [laughter]

**M.M.: It was always an experience.**

M.-J.G.: Yes. [laughter]

**M.M.: And what was your salary?**

M.-J.G.: …?

**M.M.: Your salary when you started working. I don’t know—did you continue working there after you graduated from university?**

M.-J.G.: No, after university—I went to Butare… After—well, I started working after high school. I had a big salary… [laughter]

**M.M.: Was it enough?**

M.-J.G.: I didn’t know what to do with that money. [laughter]

**M.M.: Even though at that point you were living in a house away from home?**

M.-J.G.: The first year, I lived at home with my parents, I was teaching at the primary school in my region during that first year. And I didn’t know what to do with my money because I had never managed money before. [laughter] I had never had any responsibilities and with a big sum like that—I think it was something like 12,000 Rwandan francs—so I didn’t know what to do with that amount, honestly. I spoiled myself.

**M.M.: It was enough, it was a pretty good sum.**

M.-J.G.: Oh yes. And my parents didn’t really need me.

**S.G.: [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: No, really. My father was telling me to keep my money, to save most of it. He said, “Save your money, buy yourself whatever you need, but especially save your money, you will need it.”

**M.M.: You never know.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, pff, that’s true. I wasn’t frugal at all. I was never worried about money.

**M.M.: So, after university you didn’t work there?**

M.-J.G.: After university, I worked in Butare, I was teaching assistant.

**M.M.: So it was an even bigger salary?**

M.-J.G.: No.

**S.G.: [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: No, on the contrary, I was poor. [laughter]

**M.M.: How come?**

M.-J.G.: I was poor. [laughter]

**M.M.: How come you became poor?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, I was poor because I had more responsibilities.

**M.M.: Why more responsibilities?**

M.-J.G.: Because—

**S.G.: Rent—**

M.-J.G.: —I had to pay rent—

**M.M.: In Butare?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, pay the rent and—

**M.M.: [inaudible] when did you finish university?**

M.-J.G.: In 1997, in 1997. At the same time there were children, orphans, people who were really in need, I couldn’t ignore them. And my father had gone to Kigali because we couldn’t live where we were, there was nothing left for us to do in our village, nothing, so we were in Kigali and life had become more expensive. My father was working, he was a teacher, he continued doing that. He was a teacher in Kigali. It wasn’t like before. Orphans stayed with us at our house, so it was tight quarters. But we managed. Space was tight though.

**M.M.: This is the time after you survived?**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**M.M.: I’m going to ask you—**

M.-J.G.: What?

**M.M.: About that period, which brought along with it so many problems and orphans.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, after the genocide?

**M.M.: And during the genocide too.**

M.-J.G.: Oh yes. [laughter] No, no, ask the question, ask it clearly…

**M.M.: Tell me about this period, in 1994.**

M.-J.G.: Uh, 1994, yes, actually, I was in Kigali when it happened.

**M.M.: How old were you? Where were you?**

M.-J.G.: I was 29 years old, I was in Kigali. I had left my—it was Easter break. I had left on a Wednesday morning, very early in the morning, to go to Kigali, I had some shopping to do. I arrived in Kigali around 10 am. I had some contacts—people I was going to meet. Then, in the evening—paff!—they said that the President had just crashed, his plane had just crashed. Just a few hours prior to that, I wouldn’t have believed there could be an accident because the soldiers from the UN mission were there and we had signed peace treaties in Arusha. In my mind it was rather—well, I—in my mind I thought it was—I thought that something good would come out of it, that we would make it through. But when I heard the news—I was with friends of mine, a family—when we learned that apparently the President’s plane was burning, a dark picture emerged right away. To me, it was clear. It was like I could see what was going to happen. And at that moment I was ready, I was ready. I thought that if Habyarimana were killed, it was over. I had been thinking, “Even if he had died from a sickness, we are going to pay.” And this time I thought, “If he’s been killed, it’s over.” There was no doubt in my mind. If I could have left, I would have right away—leave the country, that is—I would have, but I couldn’t. We heard that roadblocks had been set up and we could hear gunshots all night—they had already started killing people. This family and I, we fled to Saint Paul [Centre], near Sainte-Famille, and we stayed there for three months. We arrived on the 7th in the afternoon and we left a few days before they captured Kigali, we were evacuated to Kabuga, in the zone controlled by the RPF. So during that whole time, there was no doubt in my mind that I was the only survivor in my family.

**S.G.: Who were you with exactly during that time?**

M.-J.G.: With a lot of people.

**S.G.: At Saint Paul?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, with many people who lived in the neighbourhood or other people who were sent to Saint Paul. There were about 1,000 of us—1,500, I think. And every day we were waiting to be killed. Every morning they would come, the militia, the soldiers, they came to pick people up, they took the young, the men, they killed them downstairs, they shot them downstairs.

**M.M.: What kind of a place is Saint Paul?**

M.-J.G.: It’s a pastoral centre. Saint-Paul is right next to Sainte-Famille, so there were—it’s a centre that hosted people, I think, for meetings or retreats, it belonged to the Kigali diocese. There was a priest there who was really great, who—well, he protected us, he did his best not to give us up, he did his best to keep us alive, he interceded with the militia, he would say, “There are no RPF supporters here; these are just poor people who are hiding.” We survived, and then the RPF came to evacuate everyone.

**M.M.: What did you do for food and how did you manage to survive in this place with 1,500 people?**

M.-J.G.: I’m telling you, we lived, we survived, I don’t know how, but we survived. It was, precisely, this priest who went every morning to get food, to get some water. For sure, it wasn’t much of a life, it was survival. We could—sometimes, we didn’t eat for days! That wasn’t the problem. The problem—

**M.M.: And after that you knew you were capable—**

M.-J.G.: Yes, the problem was fear, insecurity. And the news we were hearing from here or there about families decimated completely, and then hearing every morning the militia who came to work there as employees—yes, they were employees.

**M.M.: They came to work?**

M.-J.G.: Every morning they came to work, and after that—

**M.M.: What were they doing? What were they there to do?**

M.-J.G.: Well, they came with their shining machetes—

**M.M.: That was their work?**

M.-J.G.: Oh yes, they would come looking for people, searching to see if there were any RPF agents; then they would take the young, the men, they would bring them downstairs.

**M.M.: That was the work they were doing?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, that was their work. [silence] [smile]

**S.G.: How did you get news from the others? Was it because other people were coming to the church, to seek refuge there—**

M.-J.G.: Every day there were people who—

**S.G.: —was it them who brought news?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, people were coming every day and were telling us, “This family is completely gone, that family is gone, that other family is—” And there were other kinds of news too that were more difficult to bear, yeah.

**M.M.: Do you remember when you went to that church?**

M.-J.G.: To Saint Paul—it was April 7, around 3 o’clock. But at that time things weren’t clear yet. I—we were very scared, things weren’t clear yet. We got there, we were [sleeping on] bedspreads—pff—we were living in fear and the children were crying, we didn’t want to hear them cry—pff—it was scary, it really was. We were very, very scared.

**M.M.: And do you remember when you left this place?**

M.-J.G.: In fact, I left it—

**M.M.: —and how?**

M.-J.G.: I left it to go to the Hôtel des Mille Collines because I was injured. [points to her shoulder] I was shot in the shoulder and had an infection and I wasn’t feeling well. I was very sick. One of the soldiers from the FAR, the Armed Forces—

**M.M.: —the Rwandan—**

M.-J.G.: Yes, he was—there were soldiers who had been sent to Saint Paul supposedly to protect us, but in fact they were informing on us, they were watching the entrances, they were observing us and they were—they were watching the people there. But he was a very kind man—we could see that he really was—he believed in the cause, but he had—

**M.M.: —a humane side, he had preserved his humanity.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, he had remained a human being. He knew all kinds of information such as that they were going to kill everyone there. He asked a friend of mine if or what he could do for her—although he didn’t really have power, he was only a subordinate. And my friend said, “Can you transport us to the Hôtel des Mille Collines?” because we had heard that—we had learned that they had water there. [laughter]

**M.M.: People were treated better there.**

M.-J.G.: They had all that water from the pool. [laughter]

**M.M.: Ops. [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: And then he asked me, “Do you want to go to the Hôtel des Mille Collines?” Well, I didn’t know anymore—I didn’t know what I—I couldn’t think straight. I said, “Okay, let’s go.” We got into his car and we drove to the Hôtel des Mille Collines. The next day, the RPF evacuated Saint Paul, where we were. And people later told us that everyone who was at Saint Paul had been massacred—everyone. All of them.

**M.M.: And you had just escaped!**

M.-J.G.: I sank to the ground.

**S.G.: When you heard the news?**

M.-J.G.: Yes. I collapsed because for me those people were my only family, the only family I had left, we had created very, very strong bond between us. When you live together with someone for three months you become like one person. But fortunately, it wasn’t true.

**M.M.: Aaah…**

M.-J.G.: It wasn’t true. We were evacuated the next day. The same day the militia attacked us—pardon me—[takes a tissue and blows her nose]

**M.M.: At Mille Collines?**

M.-J.G.: [Nods] We were attacked—wow, wow—it was difficult. Fortunately, the UNAMIR soldiers [United Nations Mission in Rwanda] were there and there were ongoing negotiations to exchange refugees. Some refugees were on the side of the RPF zone and some were on the government side; there were negotiations to exchange them. Fortunately, we were in—

**M.M.: —part of that exchange.**

M.-J.G.: The next day we were put in trucks and we were sent to the area controlled by the RPF. And that’s the end of the story. [laughter] Yes.

**M.M.: You went to the RPF-controlled zone?**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**M.M.: But the war was not over yet?**

M.-J.G.: No, no. We were driving by the posts of the Presidential Guard. Pff—I thought to myself: Is there anything more ridiculous than this situation? I didn’t understand anything anymore. A few days before, we couldn’t even look out the window, and now we are driving past them—

**M.M.: And now you’re going to the RPF zone.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, they knew we were going there and they were saying—the militiamen were saying, “Tell Kagame that we will meet him one day.” [laughter] And then—throughout this whole journey I was praying; I couldn’t believe it—I couldn’t believe it… I was praying and I was thinking that if we died, at least I’d be ready for that. [laughter] Then, suddenly, I saw the RPF soldiers and—ah, things shifted in my mind and it was strange to think we were safe. And that’s when I started to cry.

**M.M: That’s when you started to cry?**

M.-J.G.: [Nods] That’s when I started to cry, realizing that I was going to survive and being mad at myself—it’s weird, huh? I was angry at myself to have survived. I started to get mad at myself, seriously, I didn’t want to live anymore. I was either thinking about all the people who had died or I was mad at myself to still be alive. It lasted for some time, this feeling. I hated myself. I didn’t love myself at all, I hated myself. It seemed I didn’t want to survive. Finally, I grasped that it was all real—I was really there. It’s as if I had betrayed my people, I had betrayed them and that was the reality, it wasn’t a dream, no. But during all that time when we were in Kabuga—that’s a suburb of Kigali—I wasn’t doing well. No, I wasn’t doing well at all. I was confused, really, I was—I was confused. I was seeing people getting back to their lives, regaining the desire to live, but I was—I felt guilty about that too. I said to myself, “Why am I not like the others? Why am I not happy?” I wasn’t happy to have survived, I felt guilty. I thought, “I’m not normal, I’m not—” [is thinking about the word]—that I’m not grateful. I felt angry at myself and at the same time I was thinking, “Why should I be grateful? Why did you live, why did you survive?” It was confusing.

**M.M.: Yeah.**

M.-J.G.: Also, my wound was infected, I wasn’t doing well at all, I thought I had malaria too. Yes, I looked at myself and I didn’t love myself at all. I was like a—I was like dead or as if I was in a dream, in a nightmare and I didn’t want to wake up. I—then—when we were in Kabuga, I could see people getting furniture, getting the things they needed to carry on with their lives—there were abandoned things, abandoned houses, stuff left on the side of the road, and everything. It was as if people wanted to get out of—

**M.M: —to rebuild—**

M.-J.G.: —to recover, while I had no desire for any possessions. I remember, one of the people who passed by, he was from my region, he had been a refugee in Burundi—he passed by with his car and he said, “Hey, Josée, are you alive!” I said, “Yes, I am alive.” Then he said, “I’m leaving now, but I’ll be back tomorrow—what would you like me to bring you?” I said, “I don’t need anything.”

**S.G.: [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: He gave me some money, I refused, I told him I didn’t need it. [laughter]

**M.M.: Oh, honestly…**

M.-J.G.: Honestly, he gave me money, but I—no, I refused, I said I didn’t need it. “Do you need any clothes?” I said no. [shakes head] I said I didn’t need anything. I was just there, in the present moment, the way I was—I wasn’t thinking about how I was going to live tomorrow, I wasn’t thinking about that.

**M.M.: It wasn’t your problem anymore.**

M.-J.G.: [laughs and shakes head] No, no, no.

**M.M.: So how long did you stay in Kabuga?**

M.-J.G.: In Kabuga—

**M.M.: Before returning to I don’t know where after that?**

M.-J.G.: Do you know what happened to me afterwards? Oblivion, amnesia. I can’t tell you how long we stayed in Kabuga, I can’t tell you when we left for Kabuga and on what date we left Kabuga—no. When I think about it, it’s like a single day that is being drawn out. I completely lost the notion of time. That may have helped me survive, but my capacity to remember was blocked.

**M.M.: And so, at some point—I don’t know when—where did you end up going?**

M.-J.G.: The people around me were becoming restless, [laughter] they were looking for food, they—I was also there, but it was like I was in another world. Luckily, I reunited with my brother.

**M.M.: Aaah…**

**S.G.: Well! Tell us about that!**

**M.M.: Where and when?**

M.-J.G.: He was alive. [nods] Where? It was—I saw him suddenly, it had been four years [or months?] since I had seen him.

**M.M.: What I was going to ask you was—we talked about Saint Paul, Mille Collines, Kabuga, which you have completely forgotten about… But I was going to say: During all this time were you alone, did you know where the other members of your family were?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, I knew, I knew they were dead.

**M.M.: For you, they were dead?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, except my father.

**M.M.: Oh, so you knew that he was alive?**

M.-J.G.: I learned it afterwards, in August, after our return to Kigali. I was wearing clothes again, washing myself, I was living alone and beginning to accept what had happened. That was also when I decided to take on my father’s name. I thought I would call myself Gakwerere, because in Rwanda we don’t carry the family name. And I talked about this to my friends, they were laughing, but for me it was serious. The first thing I was going to do was—well, on the identity cards that we were given, I was going to adopt the surname… And then one day in Kigali, I was with a friend, and I met this person, the same one I met in Kabuga, who wanted to give me something, who wanted to give me money, and he said to me, “Josée, do you know that your father is alive?” [makes a facial expression of shock] [laughter]

**M.M.: It was like you were dreaming…**

M.-J.G.: No, no, it was like my spine broke in half, I was unable to stand upright. I sat on the asphalt, I started crying [laughter] and I said, “No it’s not my father, it’s my brother you’ve seen.” The youngest one that was killed. I said, “No, I don’t want to hear you say that. I don’t want my father, I want my brother.” [laughter]

**M.M.: The youngest?**

M.-J.G.: Yes. [wipes tears] No, it was—[laughter]—no, I said, “You’re wrong. It wasn’t him. It was my brother, tell me it was my brother.” [I was saying that] because I simply couldn’t imagine my father being able to survive this. He said, “No, it’s your father, he’s alive.” And he told me where my father was and two days later I took—there were taxis operating, going all over the place—I took a taxi and a bus. I went to see him, he was in a camp in Gitarama and then—

**M.M.: And he wasn’t with your brothers nor with your mother?**

M.-J.G.: [Shakes head] No, he was alone. He was alone. And, oddly enough, like me, he had also learned just two days before that I was alive. A woman from Saint Paul who—I don’t know how—she went back to her region, looking for members of her family, I think, and she recognized my father and told him, “Your daughter is alive.” My father had the same—he had the same reaction as me: he told me it was like he heard something blowing on his face and then he lost consciousness. I went to look for him. I couldn’t recognize him at first and he couldn’t recognize me, we had changed so much.

**M.M.: Yes.**

M.-J.G.: I thought that he had aged 50 years. And then—oh, the poor, poor man—I picked him up and we walked over to the road, we waited for the trucks to pass by, you could see the UNAMIR trucks. [laughter] We got on one big truck—me at the back and him inside the truck, he found a place in front, because he was very weak—and we went back to Kigali. I was sharing a house with some friends, also survivors, for me they were my family and they welcomed him as if it was their own father. We had—I had found a bed, sheets and a mattress, new clothes, shoes—

**M.M.: You had started to live again.**

M.-J.G.: I had planned everything. I had bought everything necessary. I had asked people to lend me some money; I was not ashamed to ask for money. Then he arrived, he took a shower, I burned all the clothes he was wearing because they were full of lice, yes, I burned everything. He washed, he put on clothes, he had something to eat. He ate for the first time—well, not the first time, but it had been so long that he had forgotten what food tasted like. And it was like he was brought back to life. Then we started talking, telling each other everything that had happened, the horrors he had lived through. He had spent three months in Bisesero, in the bush [inaudible]. My brother then found us, he came to pick us up and we all settled in a house, and we had nothing, nothing, really nothing, but we weren’t concerned about that, we were living, we were living on very little. [laughter]

**M.M.: Oh my god.**

M.-J.G.: We survived on very little, in fact. I would leave in the morning—in August, there wasn’t much that was working, but things were beginning to function again, and we were subsisting. We weren’t concerned with eating or drinking, we didn’t need—we needed very little. The human presence, on the other hand—that felt very good: to reunite, to find each other, us, survivors, to tell our horror stories, to go to Mass to pray—Mass was held not far from where we were, we went every night, my father and I, and while walking on the way there and back we talked or we would bring orphans to stay with us, and that’s it.

**M.M.: I don’t know if I can ask you this…**

M.-J.G.: Yes, go ahead.

**M.M.: What did you learn about those whom you never saw again? You found your father—**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**M.M.: You found your brother.**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**M.M.: And the others, what did you learn about them?**

M.-J.G.: Actually, I learned that my mother was killed the same day—no, it was April 9. People were starting to flee, the situation was getting more difficult, people were leaving their homes to go to the churches and public places like that, and they were encouraged to go to the churches. My mother was getting ready to go to the church as well and she told my father to go scare the cows away. [laughter]

**M.M.: We are laughing, but [the cow is] something very valuable.**

M.-J.G.: It was very, very valuable. She said, “Take the herdsman and go scare the cows away.” The cows had to be sent away to the mountains of Bisesero, far, far, far away—the cows were also affected by the genocide.

**M.M.: Yes.**

M.-J.G.: So my father went out of the house, he left quickly—

**M.M.: —with the cows—**

M.-J.G.: —with the cows and with the herdsman—we had a whole herd, especially the calves, the little ones that had just been born, my father and the herdsman had to carry them on their shoulders and walk to—and my brother, the one who was killed, along with my other adoptive brother, they were also out to see if—they went to the highest place on the hill to observe from there what was going on, and they didn’t come back. They—people were saying, “Hey, you, the fugitives, go quickly, go either to the church or to Bisesero in the high mountains, but don’t come home.” So that’s how they left. And my mother was preparing to leave too. There was a girl who was living—a cousin who was there with my mom and also another girl who was living with us—oh, that girl survived, she was the one who told me the story afterwards. My mother gave her the keys to the house—my mother always had a bundle of keys, and she said, “Take the key, if anyone survives, you will be able to open the door to the house for them.” And, apparently, while she was saying that, she was also praying the Rosary, the girl told me. Then they attacked the house and my mother, my cousin, and this girl, they ran out, in the other—in the opposite direction. But the killers ran after them. And there was a man on the hill on the opposite side who told the killers, “That’s where they are, go through there, go through there!”

**M.M.: Ouch.**

M.-J.G.: And a few meters away they slaughtered them with a machete, my mother and my cousin. This other girl, she went—she hid with a Hutu family. What else was I going to say? Then they went to our house and they took absolutely everything, everything: the doors, the windows. What they didn’t take was the cement that covered the floor, that’s the only thing they couldn’t take. So that’s it, they took it all. They thought that even the old pot was worth something or that an old basket had some value. Apparently, they took everything. There was a jerrycan filled with gas because we didn’t have electricity in the village, we used candles to light the rooms in the house, and my mother was buying large quantities of gas. They came across that and they were convinced that the gas was to be used to burn Hutus. Then they waited for my father, they went to look for him and for my two brothers. And my father, after hiding the cows, wanted to go back, but people said, “Don’t go home, they’re waiting, they’re waiting for you. Your wife, the children who were there—finished, your house—forget about it.” So my father remained in Bisesero, on the hills of Bisesero. So that’s the story I was told.

**M.M.: And the young boy, your brother, your youngest brother?**

M.-J.G.: The youngest, my god—my father told me that someone else had told him that—in fact, my brother was attending the Grand séminaire, he was just starting, he was in his first year at the Grand séminaire. It seems that he was thinking of going to the—he thought he would be able to hide in the presbytery church, not far from the mountains. And while he was getting ready to go there, apparently they cut him to pieces. He was very tall, very, very tall, so it was the fate of very tall people: to be cut to pieces. We never saw his body; we never saw the body of my mother either.

**M.M.: So, we talked about 1994, we talked about you and your family. I also would like to talk to you about Rwanda or the general situation in the country and in relation to everything that took place. Were there any previous signs that suggested that this could happen?**

M.-J.G.: Oh yes. There are things, events we didn’t talk about, but that were, like, in—in—not in continuity, but in—that were in keeping with—which pointed to the same direction. As I told you, when I was 7–8 years old and we were made to stand up and were told “*abanari hano, abahutu hano*,” that was—it’s not normal to talk to children like that. And it’s not normal to indicate one’s ethnicity in—why was the ethnicity written on the identity cards? Or in a child’s personal file at school, from the age of 6, 1st grade? That indication was something that followed you throughout your life. So that’s not normal—that’s what I say is not normal. They knew what they were doing. I didn’t experience the events during the years of the Revolution, my parents lived through that, but we lived in the continuation of what had been started. For example, the information in these personal files followed you until you got your identity card where it was clearly stated that you were Hutu or Tutsi or Twa, but it also prevented us from continuing our studies. That was—that’s the real genocide. Preventing someone from studying is like killing that person, they are already dead. I think that was also part of the genocide; the genocide wasn’t only the outcome, it was [a process that was] already there, it had already begun. It was a very frustrating thing to do, preventing children from studying when they have the abilities; preventing people from having access to services, to jobs, preventing people from working is—it was—I think it was a continuation of what had started before. In fact, it had never stopped. Some people won’t believe it if you tell them that it had never stopped, but I know it, I feel it—it had always been this way. We were scrutinized: whether you had access to high school, what you were going to learn in high school, which section you were enrolled in in high school—everything was monitored. Going to university was almost unthinkable. There was—you had to do a whole lot of maneuvering to be able to access university studies. It was difficult, it wasn’t easy at all, everything was observed, it was—things were doled out to us until—they were aware, I think they knew that at some point they would finish what they had started. Yes.

**M.M.: When did you feel that you were finally safe—if you did feel that way at all?**

M.-J.G.: After the genocide, I honestly didn’t feel safe when the RPF took power, but I felt safe when I thought that we weren’t risking death anymore. That’s when I felt like the weight lifted. Unfortunately, we paid for that very dearly. But afterwards I could at least say: “I can walk down the street, I can walk with my head held high, I’m not ashamed of who I am.” I told myself, “I’m more or less safe.” But at the same time the old demons—

**M.M.: —returned.**

M.-J.G.: —were constantly coming back, all the time. I could see the consequences [of the genocide], the orphans, and I ended up thinking that I had gotten it wrong. I had—I became scared of the people who were coming out of the prisons. But it is only when I came here that I—a 100 percent—[takes a tissue]—this is another world, but nevertheless, I felt 100 percent safe. Yes.

**M.M.: Let’s talk about your departure—**

M.-J.G.: I came here for—

**M.M.: You just said “when I came here.” How did you get the idea to come here or to leave Rwanda?**

M.-J.G.: Actually, I would have liked to leave earlier, after I finished high school. There was a sister, a teacher, who admired—

**M.M.: A nun?**

M.-J.G.: —a nun who believed very much in my abilities. She believed that I must go to university at any cost. She would say to me, “You are brilliant, you absolutely have to—” But at the same time she knew that—she wasn’t telling me this openly, but she knew it was difficult, she had learned the history of the country, she knew it was very difficult. She even made arrangements for me to come here to study, to go to university here.

**M.M.: In Canada?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, but—I had to go to the [Rwandan] Ministry of Education to ask permission, that was the rule because I didn’t have any connections. Everything was monitored so you couldn’t leave the country just like that and go study abroad. I prepared my file, she helped me a lot. I had registered, we put together the file, we filed it with the Ministry of Education and then—there was no response. At one point my father went to the Ministry, I think he wanted to check something in his teacher’s record, and someone there told him—one man spoke to him in a way that was very hurtful to my father; the man said, “It seems that you want to send your daughter to study in Canada?” My father started to—he didn’t know what to say, so he said, “Yes…, no…” And the man said, “But who do you think you are?” My father understood what that meant and when he came back home he said, “Forget it.”

**M.M.: They won’t let you go.**

M.-J.G.: So I forgot all about it. And then I remember when I came here in 1999, the same nun came to see me; we were, by chance, in the—

**M.M.: Was she Rwandan?**

M.-J.G.: No. We were in the same place at the same time. She came to see me and she asked me, “Do you remember your file?” I said, “I remember, I remember…” Yes, but it was afterwards that I got a scholarship, after all, to come and study here.

**M.M.: Aaaah.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, and it was a good timing—it was like a manna falling from the sky.

**M.M.: So, you had a scholarship to come study in Montreal.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, in Montreal.

**M.M.: And then you stayed.**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**M.M.: How did you manage that?**

M.-J.G.: Well, I stayed, yes, I stayed and made a life for myself here, as you can see.

**M.M.: So you decided to stay in Montreal.**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**M.M.: And why here, in Montreal exactly? Why not someplace else, another city?**

M.-J.G.: Because I arrived here first, I knew Montreal well and that is where I first got my bearings. I made friends in Montreal, you among them. That’s it.

**M.M.: Yes, I wanted to talk to you about settling in Montreal—**

M.-J.G.: It the beginning—

**M.M.: —meaning, how did you know where to go? Were there people who helped you, were there organizations that helped you? How did you manage—**

M.-J.G.: So, I didn’t even know—

**M.M.: —to know what to do and where to go?**

M.-J.G.: Oh, since I was here to study, uh, I got help understanding the system, settling—

**M.M.: Help from the university?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, well, the organization that was paying for my studies. And at the university as well, there were people ready to provide information. It was—I thought the way we were welcomed was great. Yes, yes, it was very good. And I had—there were Rwandans I knew who had come before me and we reconnected in Montreal; they welcomed me. They showed me how to take the metro. They let me stay with them in the beginning. They were very, very nice to me. After that I created my own network, a whole network of friends. And that’s it. But it wasn’t easy, it wasn’t—it wasn’t easy at first. It was like I was alone. I was far away from my social network [in Rwanda], a network I had formed after the genocide. The social network I built after the genocide was like—in fact, it was like another life had began. It was like making your first steps: we learn to talk, to walk, to reflect, to think. So I missed very much the people with whom I had started this second life because we had a kind of a symbiotic relationship. We had everything in common. [Coming here] felt like a baby who’d been separated from his mother, a little baby, so it was like—it was almost the same situation [as in Rwanda after the genocide]. We were really vulnerable and helpless after the genocide and with these people we created something new together—how can I explain it?—it’s like we had—like we maintained a symbiotic relationship, we were like that. [makes a gesture with two hands clasped together] We shared a common history, we had everything in common. So when I left that network, that environment, I felt lost. When I arrived here, everything was different, it wasn’t the same, and so I learned again how to live. That’s it.

**S.G.: Did you find here, in Montreal some of the people who were with you at Saint Paul?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, later on, but not many, a few people, yes.

**S.G.: And was that relationship you were just describing still present? [inaudible]**

M.-J.G.: Yes, when we would get together we would talk, and talk, and talk. It’s like—when you see the person who was with—with whom I was at Saint Paul, that person has something more than the others.

**M.M.: We are jealous. [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: [laughter] It’s like, “Hey, so and so was at Saint Paul! We have so much to say to each other.” And yes, we do. There is a connection, we understand each other, we understood each other. Yes, unfortunately there weren’t many [people like that], but I built a network, a whole network of friends.

**M.M.: Now we see you here in Montreal, you are married, you have two children.**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**M.M.: How did you meet your husband? What can you tell us about him?**

M.-J.G.: I met him at the university, he helped me a lot. One of my professors referred me to him, because this professor thought I had problems. He may have detected trauma problems, I don’t know. He told me, “I will refer you to this person, he’ll be able to help you, he’s a very nice guy.” We started meeting, he spent a lot of time with me, he listened to me. He wasn’t just a counsellor—no, no, he was listening to me and a strong connection was created between us. I saw him as a father-figure, as my father, as a great friend. In the darkest days…, just listening to me, asking me a few questions—he let me talk and it helped a lot, it helped me to find brightness in dark days. I could see light again. That’s how it started, the friendship was born like that and then after the friendship came love. And then we got married and had two beautiful children.

**M.M.: How long have you been married?**

M.-J.G.: It’ll be eight years this year. We got married in 2001.

**M.M.: When you talk about you two as “us”—is there a personality trait that comes to mind?**

M.-J.G.: He is an optimistic person, he brings joy wherever he goes—to me, that’s a very important quality. I can’t see myself living with someone who is not an optimist, who doesn’t spread joy around him. Yes, that’s it.

**M.M.: Is he Rwandan or is he a—?**

M.-J.G.: No, he’s a Quebecker.

**M.M.: Aah.**

M.-J.G.: [laughter] And he’s someone very generous, very intelligent too, very bright, he understands everything. He understands everything, you don’t need to explain much, to say anything, he understands. He might even be able to read a person’s state of mind. With him, I’m not worried about risking being misunderstood during difficult moments or when I revisit the darkest periods of my life or my past—he is able to understand everything and to refrain from judgement, to let me live through this as I want to, as I can, he lets me be. Yes.

**M.M.: What is your view on the children’s upbringing? [laughter] You have a boy and a girl?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, a boy and a girl. It’s not always easy [laughter] because I have my African and Rwandan traditions and on the side of their father there is the North American, Quebec, Western education, so it’s not always easy. But at the same time this enriches the children, and we’re already seeing the results. Yes, yes, they are not—they are balanced, intelligent children, who are appreciated—my whole life is greatly appreciated—who know how to live together with others. So, combining the two [cultures] creates something good. At the same time their environment at school, it’s Québécois, it’s not Rwandan—but my influence… As a father he is very present. I am proud of this meeting of two mentalities, of two cultures, which initially don’t have anything in common, but which ultimately complement each other nicely. You only need to see the children’s openness to understand the society in which we live, to understand that they won’t live in the same world in which I’ve lived. Even in Rwanda it has evolved a lot. The world in which I was raised is very different from the one in which the children are raised today. There is a greater openness, so I don’t have to impose my upbringing on my children—no, far from that. We raise our children with the future in mind; we raise them so that they can adapt to this society, adapt to being good to others, helpful, compassionate, sensitive to the problems of others. Yes, that’s it.

**M.M.: Sometimes girls and boys are brought up differently. I don’t know if you’re seeing—in Rwanda raising a girl and raising a boy—I don’t know if it was the same in your family. If you consider how you were educated, the values, the education that were transmitted to the girls, was it the same as what was transmitted to the boys?**

M.-J.G.: No, I can’t use my family as an example, because with us it was different. At home I didn’t feel a difference, I didn’t feel that boys were favoured—on the contrary. We had to deserve what we—to expect appreciation, we had to deserve it first. I never felt inferior to the boys because I was proving myself, I was good at school, I had good grades, there was nothing that predisposed me to be inferior to the boys. On the other hand, I’ve seen—for sure, [in Rwanda] boys were more favoured than girls. So if one of the children had to leave school because the parents couldn’t afford it, it was the girl who left school to help her mother. I wasn’t in—I was lucky not to live in such conditions. My parents knew the advantages of going to school, of education, especially since my mother had had the chance to study. They knew that it was very important for girls to study and even to go farther than they have, to live in better conditions. They took it upon themselves—they worked very hard, very, very hard [inaudible] they wanted us to go farther than they had, I could see that. So they wanted me to go to university at all cost, to go to university at all cost. Yes.

**M.M.: And with your own children—you have a boy and a girl—**

M.-J.G.: I think that—

**M.M.: —is it going to be the same?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, it will be the same thing, we will offer them the best of ourselves, the best possible conditions, as far as possible. So yeah. I see no difference between a boy and a girl, frankly, I don’t see it, no.

**M.M.: What would you do if—how—some children could be a bit difficult, others could be easier and still others could be doing things we, in the family, don’t like. And whether we like it or not…—how do you manage all that?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, for sure, we put ourselves in the child’s place—

**M.M.: [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: —and we say, “What’s going on in his little head?” But we’re also not making up stories, we show the children what to do. We talk to them, we must listen to the children. We must listen to them and we must talk to them. It’s true, children do stupid things, adults as well. And in fact, every time a child makes a mistake, it bothers me how we can get carried away, we are ready to punish the child. But I’m thinking to myself: adults do stupid things too, knowing full well that what they’re doing is stupid, and no one is running after them to punish them. So why are we punishing the children, who are weaker? Rather, [we should] try to understand what motivates the child’s behaviour, understand that and then listen to the child. Then everything will be alright. Maybe the behaviour is due to factors in our environment or aspects of our own selves, and when we understand that, we can take measures, we can talk to the child. Well, for now they are still young, [laughter] we aren’t confronted yet with the big problems, they are still very young, we have no problems with them. Yes.

**M.M.: So what do you do for a living—how is your situation now in Montreal? Are you working, is your husband working?**

M.-J.G.: Yes. I had to interrupt my doctoral degree when my youngest child was born. I put everything aside, I think it was important to devote myself to my child, and I don’t regret it at all. And soon I intend to pick up from where I left off.

**M.M.: Have you been to Rwanda since you left? Have you returned?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, I’ve been back.

**M.M.: How do you find the situation there now?**

M.-J.G.: Of course, there are many things that change for the better, I find. The country is changing a lot. I have the impression that when we leave a place, we think we will find it again as it was when we left, but that’s not what happens. Our lives are where we are, my life is here. I go back there to see family, friends, but I feel that my life is here even if every day, every day I think about Rwanda. Every day I think about Rwanda. I think about this little country that I love so much. I follow the news from Rwanda, everything that’s going on in the region, I am always up-to-date with the latest news. Rwanda is part of me, with the good and the bad memories, Rwanda is part of me. I follow all the news, I’m interested in everything. At the same time, I love this country too, this welcoming country, I like the people here, I like how open they are, I like their authenticity. Still, we check our history, our past, our education against the culture of our host country. But it’s going well, it’s going very well, we know how to distinguish between the two. Yes.

**M.M.: So, after what you just told me, I don’t know if I need to ask you the following question, but would you consider going back to live in Rwanda?**

M.-J.G.: I think about it. [laughter] Yes, I think about it. Listen, when you leave your country at the age of 30, uh, you can’t completely cut the cord. I miss it sometimes: the sun, the hills, the birds… Sometimes I miss it a lot. That doesn’t stop us from functioning well, from living where we are now… But you never know, you never know, I remain open to the idea. I am not torn, though, I don’t feel torn. At the same time, I’m not closing the window to this idea: maybe, why not? Rwanda is still our country [laughter], our little Rwanda. I love our country. Yes, it’s ours, it’s my life.

**M.M.: So you’re open [to the idea], you don’t know, it might happen or it might not.**

M.J.-G.: It might happen or it might not. I’m not unhappy here, I feel good here, and when I go back to Rwanda I feel good there too. [laughter] I don’t impose a limit. I know that when I go back to my country I’m welcome there, I’m welcome, I feel good there. And it’s the same when I come back here; I want to come back.

**M.M.: You feel the same in both places.**

M.J.-G.: Yes. [laughter] So I have two countries, in fact. Yeah.

**M.M.: Do you know of any Rwandans who have returned, who have decided to leave here and go live, settle there?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, yes, I know people who did, yes.

**M.M.: Have you heard from them about how it is going there, after their return?**

M.-J.G.: Uh, not at all. Some received job offers even before they left here, and they are feeling well there, they are doing well. But apart from that… In any case, if they weren’t doing well, they would have come back. Yes, it’s good to be able to benefit from living in your own country and to be able to apply there your experiences from here, and vice versa. Yes.

**M.M.: We’re almost at the end [of the interview].**

M.-J.G.: Thank you very much.

**M.M.: I would like to know: When you think of Rwanda, what is the most precious thing that you miss?**

M.-J.G.: The human interaction, the connection between people, the warmth, the warmth and the sense of time.

**M.M.: Time?**

M.-J.G.: Taking one’s time—I find that in Rwanda—well, in Africa in general and in Rwanda in particular—taking the time to talk to someone without running around, without feeling rushed, without being in a hurry… Warm personal connection, you know. Also, improvising, so to speak: deciding to go someplace on a whim, without planning. [laughter]

**M.M.: Yes, I understand.**

M.-J.G.: That’s it. And the sun, the sun, the landscape, I miss the landscape a lot, especially during the long winters [here]. Yes, the landscape, the hot weather—I miss that a lot—but what can you do.

**S.G.: The commemoration [of the genocide] is coming up, in April. Is April for you a more difficult month than the others?**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**S.G.: How do you cope during that month?**

M.-J.G.: It’s not rational; before I even realize that it’s April, I instinctively feel it and I think, “Oh, it’s April.” It’s like it’s programmed [in my mind]. Yes, it’s cyclical. April is a very difficult month. That’s when I start having nightmares, I cry for nothing, I am irritable, in my thoughts, I am with the people who are dead. Yes, that’s April. Right now, I can’t wait for April to come so that we get the commemoration—

**M.M. —over with—**

M.-J.G.: —we get it over with and we move on to something else. Yes, April is a difficult month.

**S.G.: We were talking about your children earlier—that may be the last question…**

M.-J.G.: Yes.

**S.G.: Your children are now quite young, but when they grow up, would you like them to watch this tape?**

M.-J.G.: Yes, yes, yes, absolutely. If they wish. If I’m no longer around, it’ll be a memory, a great memory for them, they’ll know what I have lived through and who their ancestors were. We are lucky to have documents like this, and if my great-grandparents or my grandparents, or even my parents, had left an audiovisual document like this, to me it would have been something very precious.

**M.M.: Do you think that one day you’d talk to them about it?**

M.-J.G.: To the children?

**M.M.: Yes, about you have been through.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, yes, yes. I can’t wait for them to grow up. Already my daughter is asking me questions all the time because of my wound—“What happened?” she asks. I tell her I was hurt by the bad guys. I don’t want to lie to her, but I don’t want to say everything either because at her age it’s not good, she can’t understand. So, I just leave it at that. She is beginning to ask questions about her grandparents, about my grandpa, my grandma—on her dad’s side of the family and on mine too. On my side, she at least knows my father, her grandfather, but she asks, “What was my grandmother like? How did she die?” Well, I say, she was killed. “Who killed her?” Ouf, that’s tough. So yes, I can’t wait for her to grow up, to begin to understand. You know, at my daughter’s school, they talked about wars, but at their level of understanding. And her teacher told me that [my daughter] had said in class, “My mother was wounded in the war, she was hurt in the arm.” Yes.

**M.M.: She already knows quite a bit.**

M.-J.G.: Oh yes. Instead of learning it in a—perhaps in an inappropriate way and learning, perhaps, a distorted version of the story, it is better that I speak to her about it, that I present to her my version, my take on the facts: what I’ve seen, what I’ve experienced. Yes, it’s important. I’ll tell her everything—everything! I can’t wait for them to begin to understand so that I can tell it all. I don’t want anything left unclear—it will all be clear! Yes, I will tell them everything.

**M.M.: Thank you very, very much.**

M.-J.G.: I thank you. You’ve allowed me to open up a little. [laughter]

**M.M.: Although it’s a sad topic and it doesn’t feel right saying that it’s an interesting conversation.**

M.-J.G.: It’s like—it’s like a weight that drops—well, not a weight, but it’s a load taken off, yes.

**M.M.: If you wish to add anything, you can call us.**

M.-J.G.: [laughter] Thank you very much. And thank you for the work that you’re doing, it’s very important and it’s interesting.

**M.M.: Thank you.**

M.-J.G.: One day—well, I mean, the truth must be told. For sure, it won’t stop lies from flourishing, as they are now, with all the deniers… Still, it is necessary to speak up. There is a gentleman in Kigali who works for an organization in the field of dialogue and peace—they have a way of encouraging people from the two groups to talk to each other. He told me that their theme is *umuryango utazimuye urazima*. I have a little bit of a cold…

**S.G.: What does that mean?**

M.-J.G.: *Umuryango utazimuye urazima*. In French *kuzimura* means—

**M.M.: —to report—**

M.-J.G.: —to report in a negative way. It is *kuzimura*: I confide a secret in you and you report it, so *tu kuzimura*. But they say *umuryango utazimiye*: if a family does not—

**M.M.: —does not speak—**

M.-J.G.: —does not speak, it disappears.

**S.G.: Oh, okay, I see.**

M.-J.G.: Yes, it is by encouraging people to confront each other through dialogue, to speak and face each other and then… If you don’t speak to your father—

**M.M.: —to your father, you would never know what your grandfather has said.**

M.-J.G.: —your grandfather, that’s right. Kinyarwanda is a good language—I encourage you.

**M.M.: The saying in Kinyarwanda is: “*Utaganiriye na se ntamenya icyo sekuru yasize avuze*.”**

**S.G.: Oooh.**

M.-J.G.: Kinyarwanda… There are some terms in Québécois French—I tell Yvon, “Do you know what we say in Kinyarwanda…?” And he says, “That’s exactly it, exactly.” In Kinyarwanda we use a lot of proverbs, action verbs, things like that, to describe certain situations, and he says—[I say], “You know, to summarize all that, we say this, this and this in Kinyarwanda,” and I try to do a proficient translation for him, and he says, “Exactly.”

**S.G.: It’s a rich language…, that’s when you get to see the richness of a language, right?**

M.-J.G.: It’s rich. I love Kinyarwanda, I love it.

**S.G: Will you give me Kinyarwanda lessons? We are looking for teachers. [laughter]**

M.-J.G.: Oh yes, if I come back to live in Montreal, we could collaborate perhaps.

**M.M.: You’re welcome to come back.**

**S.G: Yes, yes.**

M.-J.G.: You know, I think that proverbs give direct access to a culture: *Imigani, ibyo bita gusigura ibirari by’insigamugani*. Do you know what “*gusigura ibirari by’insigamugani*” means? There is a proverb that goes like this: *Yaje nk’iya Gatera.* [laughter] We learned that in high school, we had to explain where it came from. It’s loaded with meaning and it explains the context of its time.

**S.G.: You can do a whole class on proverbs—the ones that are used most often.**

**M.M.: I hope you are recording this part on proverbs?**

**S.G.: Yes, yes.**

M.-J.G.: Oh yes? You are still filming? Cut that. [laughter]

**M.M.: Josée, thank you for your time. This is the end of the interview.**