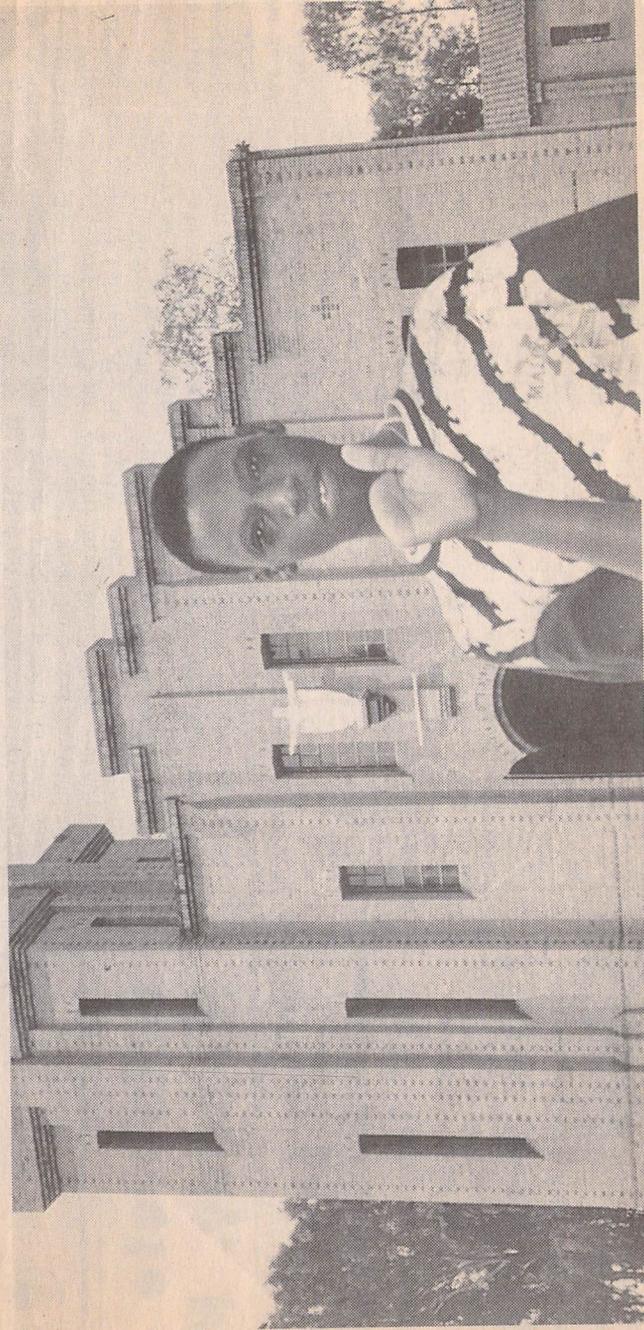


NAT HENTOFF

I Saw My Father Cut to Pieces

A Holocaust We Could Have Stopped



MIKE ROBINSON/BBC COURTESY OF FRONTLINE

Valentina Iribagiza, a survivor of genocide in Rwanda

We were pretending to be dead. They took stones and smashed the heads of the bodies. They took little children and smashed their heads together. When they found someone breathing, they pulled them out and finished them off. . . . They killed my family. I saw them kill my papa and my brother, but I did not see what happened to my mother.

—Valentina Iribagiza, a survivor of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda

They took one person out of the group and cut off his head. And even the pregnant women, they cut open their stomachs. . . . I saw my father being killed. They cut him to pieces.

—Placide Uwimagiye, another survivor of the holocaust in Rwanda

The graves are only half-full—who will help us to fill them?

—The Hutu radio, exhorting Hutus to finish off the Tutsis, Rwanda, 1994

In March 1998, William Jefferson Clinton and the First Lady arrived in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda. The hundreds of thousands of corpses had been somehow removed, and the president of the United States told the dignitaries greeting him at the airport:

“It may seem strange to you here, especially the many of you who lost members of your family, but all over the world there were people like me sitting in offices, day after day after day, who did not fully appreciate the depth and the speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable terror.”

On the contrary, word of the coming terror had reached the White House—and the State Department and the Defense Department and the UN—as early as 1989. But the warnings were ignored.

Clinton’s culpability in this holocaust is not an impeachable offense, but it is the single most repellent charge against him

and his administration.

In his extraordinarily detailed and probing book, *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories From Rwanda* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), Philip Gourevitch says plainly that “throughout the entire period” of the genocide, the Clinton administration’s approach was not a failure to intervene but “a success of a policy not to intervene.” (Emphasis added.)

Carrying out the Clinton policy of letting the killing continue was Madeleine Albright, then our ambassador to the United Nations. Says Gourevitch:

“Her name is rarely associated with Rwanda, but ducking and pressuring others to duck—as the death toll leapt from thousands to tens of thousands—was the absolute low point in her career as a stateswoman.”

So far.

Clinton’s name is also rarely associated with Rwanda. The American press noted the corpses at the time, but largely failed to begin to cover Clinton’s complicity in this crime against humanity, as it essentially failed to cover Franklin Roosevelt’s refusal to rescue Jews from the Nazis.

More and more of the bloody facts emerge. Gourevitch first began to tell the story in the December 18, 1995, issue of *The New Yorker*. Whatever Tina Brown’s mistakes as editor of that magazine, her financial and personal support of Gourevitch during the many months of his research and writing was a lasting and honorable achievement.

On January 26, 1999, more of the ghastly story of Rwanda (and the rest of the world’s determination to avert its eyes) was told on PBS’s *Frontline*, in a report called “The Triumph of Evil.” Since 1983, *Frontline* has been the only television series to equal the standards set by Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly at CBS, back in the days when network news operations covered foreign af-

fairs—and atrocities—in penetrating depth.

Watching “The Triumph of Evil,” Bill Steigerwald of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* had the same reaction I did to Clinton’s “apology” four years later in Rwanda:

“Before presenting the president of Rwanda a tacky plaque honoring the victims of a holocaust that consumed at least 800,000 humans in 100 days, Clinton made a vague apology for the failure of the international community to fully appreciate ‘the depth and the speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable terror.’

“But by the time the president is seen making that carefully worded statement at the end of ‘Triumph of Evil,’ *Frontline* has exposed it to be a shameful lie.”

Next week, the story behind that shameful lie. And at the end of this series, I will again ask how the American left can continue to insist that this man remain in office. Clinton has corrupted many of the most decent people I have known in previous battles against injustice.

In an earlier *Frontline* program on the holocaust (“Valentina’s Nightmare,” April 1, 1997), the narrator tells of what happened in a churchyard in a remote village, Nyarubuye, in southeast Rwanda. There, where 13-year-old Valentina Iribagiza became an orphan, “the house of God had become one of Rwanda’s most terrible killing grounds.”

In April 1994, a mob of Hutus surrounded the village church as the radio blared: “All Tutsi will perish. They will disappear from the earth. Slowly, slowly, we will kill them like rats.”

Valentina remembers: “Their leader said we were snakes. That was when they started to cut people up.”

And the order came from the Oval Office not to intervene.

This month, Bill Clinton was listed as one of the nominees for the Nobel Peace Prize. ▼