

Kwibuka25: Carl Wilkens, the US aid worker who refused evacuation during the Genocide

James Karuhanga

April 7, 2019



Carl Wilkens during the interview. He is the only American who stayed in Rwanda during the Genocide against the Tutsi. Emmanuel Kwizera

Carl Wilkens, the American who stayed in Kigali throughout the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, on Tuesday, talked to The New Times' James Karuhanga. He explained why he chose to stay and save lives while compatriots were being airlifted to safety.

The 61-year-old spoke about what was probably one of the toughest decisions he has ever made.

Wilkens talked about his suspicions as to why Jean Kambanda, the Prime Minister of the genocidal regime, helped rescue orphans at some point yet the latter had a direct role in the genocide.

Excerpts :

In 1994 you were in Rwanda, what were you doing and how did things unravel, in your own eyes ?

I, with my wife and children, first moved here in 1990. I worked with ADRA (Adventist Development Relief Agency) and we enjoyed working in this beau-

tiful little country.

We were here when the war began in 1990.

And, of course, we were here when the Arusha [Peace] Accords were signed. We were very optimistic about peace. And, in April 1994 when the American embassy, along with all other foreign embassies, decided to evacuate their staff, we had a very difficult decision, my wife and I.

The (US) embassy said, 'bring your family to the ambassador's home and the convoy will meet there to evacuate but don't bring any Rwandans with you. We will be driving to Burundi and we will have to go through roadblocks.'

How did you take it ?

We had a young lady who lived and worked in our home. She had been with us for probably three years, and had the Tutsi ID card. By that time we knew very clearly that the Tutsi were the ones marked for extermination. It was a hard decision but a clear decision.

You see, some hard decisions are not very clear. Rwandans had so much respect for foreigners. I thought, perhaps, I could use that privilege to help protect the lives of this young lady.

And this young man who came in the evening as a watchman, because the plane was shot at night and the roadblocks happened right away. In less than an hour he was trapped in our house. I thought this wouldn't last more than two weeks, you know.

The international community is well aware of what is happening. It can't be more than two weeks, I said to my wife.

How did you deal with calls from your bosses, friends and relatives to leave ?

The embassy was doing the job the best they could. And they said, you know, ‘you don’t have a choice. We are evacuating all Americans.’ And I responded [that] I do have a choice.

I am a private American. I can make a choice for myself and I am choosing to stay. So they then asked me to sign a paper saying I refused the help of the American government to leave Rwanda.

I wrote a letter and signed it and gave it to my wife and she handed that letter to the American ambassador.

How did your family cope in all this, your children especially, being young ?

My wife is an amazingly strong and courageous woman although she usually denies it. But this experience really showed. If she was here she would tell you that, you know, God gave her enough peace.

Not like an overabundance of peace but enough peace. One of the ways we coped was that we were able to talk on a shortwave radio every day during the Genocide. She was first in Burundi and she went to Nairobi because Burundi became too unstable.

And in Nairobi, at the beginning she would go to the American embassy and they would let her in the communications room and we would talk on the radio. That communication every day was a big part of coping with all of this.

How was your typical day in those days ?

The first three weeks I was stuck at the house in Kacyiru, just below Village Urugwiro. On that road that now runs to the American embassy past Village Urugwiro.

That road was the dividing line between the RPA forces and extremists who had taken over the government. Our house was just a few thousand meters from that road.

After three weeks, the extremists announced on radio that if you have a legitimate reason to come out of your house, come to the Prefecture office and you can get a movement permit.

That was the first time I met Colonel Renzaho [former Kigali Prefet (Governor), Col. Tharcisse Renzaho] at the Prefecture office in down town Kigali. I introduced myself, said I am the director of ADRA and, can I help people who are suffering ?

And he said, ‘sure, sure, I will give you a travel permit and I will even introduce you to some places where I know there is great need.’ So he sent me with his social affairs man to meet a Frenchman who had stayed here.

I don’t know if you ever heard the name Marc Vaiter. He is a Frenchman who had a house near CHK Central Hospital and he had orphans there. I met Marc and everybody I met was basically desperate for the basics, food and water.

Then (Tharcisse) Renzaho’s social affairs man took me to the Gisimba orphanage in Nyamirambo.

What went on with Renzaho and his social affairs man that day ? Events at the Gisimba orphanage. . .

I don’t remember his [the social affairs man] name. I remember he had a limp. I met Damas Gisimba and asked him how many children he had. He said ‘before we had 80 but they are coming in daily and the number is growing.’

I said I noticed what looked like graves in the parking lot and he said ‘our children are dying from diarrhea and dysentery. We are desperate for water.’ I started to bring water and some food that I could find and medicine from the Red Cross.

The Red Cross man Philippe [Gaillard] stayed here throughout the genocide. Philippe told me that they tried to send their vehicles out to help people but their vehicles were stopped at roadblocks and Red Cross people killed.

So they had to make the decision to stop sending their people. He told me ‘If you can come to the hospital we’ll try to help you, but we can’t come to you.’

To help the Gisimba orphans, you interacted with then Prime Minister Jean Paul Kamukama. . .

That was a crazy story.

How crazy ?

Towards the end of June we had no idea when the Genocide would end. An ADRA colleague, Gasigwa and I, we were bringing water up to the orphanage.

The young brother of Damas, Jean François, came out and said, 'ah, you are coming today ; it is like an answer to our prayers.'

He said, 'the Interahamwe were here yesterday.' He said they said they would come back the next day to empty the orphanage. Everybody that would remain will be killed.

Just after he finished telling me this, about 50 Interahamwe with machine guns started circling the orphanage. For some reason they just stayed on the outside when they saw me.

Their director, Grégoire, was the Conseiller for that region of Nyakabanda. I tried to greet him but he wouldn't talk to me. He just walked past me and went to Jean Francois. They talked in Kinyarwanda and he left.

Jean Francois said they were looking for Damas. We had what ended to be maybe a two or three hours' standoff. And I was talking on my hand held radio to the UN. I explained my situation but they couldn't come to that part of the city and I called Philippe at the Red Cross.

He told me that Damas was at his office. I said 'good, don't let him come back, the orphanage is surrounded and they are looking for him.' Eventually Philippe contacted some gendarmes and they came, in a truck.

A man, I believe he was a lieutenant, got out of the small pickup truck. I said, 'can you spend a night here?' He said, 'no, there is too many of them [Interahamwe], you need to go and contact my superior to get us more reinforcements.'

That was probably one of the toughest decisions that I had to make, outside of saying goodbye to my family. The next toughest decision would be ; what to do that day.

If I stayed, it would soon be dark and I had no doubt that this lieutenant was not going to stay with his men when it got dark. I knew when it got dark then all kinds of things would happen then. I decided to trust that lieutenant.

You had no choice, right ?

I felt that my choice was to stay and let all of us be killed or trust the lieutenant and go look for help. Which was a big risk ; that as soon as I left the lieutenant may join the interahamwe and kill the people

because some of the police officers were participating [in the killing].

But some police officers were not. You didn't know who you could trust. But anyway, I went to the police camp down near the old prison in the center of town. I found an officer I actually had known from before the genocide.

He was surprised ; he said 'Wilkins, you are still here ! What are you doing here ?'

I explained the situation.

He tried to call some military colleagues but couldn't get anybody. I went to Renzaho's office and met the secretary there. I knew Renzaho was gone that day. I found out earlier that morning.

The secretary said there is a surprise visit from Prime Minister Kambanda. Of course I knew the [previous] Prime Minister had been killed. And I knew that this guy [Kambanda] was one of the top men organizing the genocide.

And then the secretary says to me, 'ask him for help.' I said, 'no, wait a minute, why would I ask this man to help?' And she says, 'no, just go ask him.'

She had to have known something I didn't know. Since then, I have my suspicions why he stopped the massacre [at the orphanage]. He organized the movement of those orphans from Nyamirambo to the center of town at the St Michel church where Marc, the Frenchman, had moved his orphans because his house got hit by a bomb.

Now, imagine, it was on the orders of Kambanda, working with Renzaho that the orphans from Gisimba moved. I only have suspicions as to why he [Kambanda] helped.

What are your suspicions ?

At that time, the end of June, Opération Turquoise had started in the western part of the country. And Time magazine had reported, 'Good Idea,' a foreign force setting up safe havens and that's what [Lieutenant-General Roméo] Dallaire, wanted to do right from the beginning.

Time Magazine said, 'Good Idea, wrong country.' They said these French soldiers coming to set up safe a place ; that is a good idea. But the French doing it, Time magazine said, they are not the right people to do it.

Here in Kigali, I remember on the streets, all of a sudden, all four-wheel drive vehicles – many foreigners left their vehicles back in Kigali when they evacuated – were flying home made French flags on the antenna. There was this big excitement that said the French were coming to Kigali.

With this excitement, later I thought, maybe they wanted to use those orphans as an excuse, a justification, to have French soldiers here in Kigali. But that was just an excuse.

The idea was that French soldiers would help Kambanda and the extremists who were being crushed by the RPF not be crushed. That's my suspicion. In reality they would be here to prop up the crumbling extremist government.

Knowing what you knew at the time, how did you take in Kambanda when you met him ?

[Laughs] you know, you think of these thoughts afterwards. You don't think about them so much in the moment. In the moment, we were desperate. We just wanted somebody who would stop the [impending] massacre.

If they [Gisimba orphans] weren't already killed we were hoping that somebody would stop them [interahamwe]. And so, you would do whatever it took to try and find an ally.

And so, he talked to me like anybody else talked to me. Renzaho was there; very kind and respectful when we interacted multiple times during the Genocide. I never saw the side of Renzaho that got him captured and tried and convicted for his role in genocide.

I saw him definitely in a role of power but I didn't see him in what you might call a genocidal role because I wasn't at those [genocide planning] meetings.

What did you do after the Genocide ended ?

We had a big dump truck that I had gotten from Renzaho to hold barrels of water in. On July 5, I drove to Amahoro stadium. I went to talk to the leadership of the RPF and that's when I met Rose Kabuye.

They introduced her as the new Mayor of Kigali and I said I have a capability of holding water with a big truck. I know that people need water. I would like to offer that service to all the people that had been corrected in all the different places in Kigali where

the RPF is securing the city.

I stayed here for another week. I wasn't able to come back for seven months after that because the seventh day Adventist church, which ADRA is under, was not sure about security.

And I had to argue with them for quite a while before, finally, in 1995, they let me bring my family back.

What lessons should humanity take from all this ?

One of the things, of course, is that in every situation, we do have a choice. A lot of times people say, 'I had no choice.' Viktor [Emil] Frankl who wrote about his survival of the Holocaust said 'we always have a choice even if it is a choice of how we are going to suffer, we can choose how we are going to suffer.' People told me, I didn't have a choice.

But I knew that I did have a choice. The choices can be limited but we have a choice.

Another thing is; we don't really appreciate the power of presence. If you and I were having this interview over the telephone it would be different from seating here looking into your face.

Face to face presence is power. And a lot of people think, 'oh I don't have a gun, I don't have a military connection.'

We often focus on what we don't have. But during the genocide, it really drove home the lesson; you focus on what you have.

What other lessons ?

These stories I told you havestarted a new way of thinking in my brain that says 'some of our most important allies might be among the group that we consider the enemy.'

We usually look for help from people who think like us, who look like us, who speak like us, who worship like us, or wherever the thing is. But sometimes, our most important ally maybe somebody in a group we call the enemy.

And if we don't open our mind to that, we never ask them. I didn't have my mind open to that.

When the secretary said, 'ask Kambanda [for help]' I was like, 'no no no! Why would I ask him?' He is the enemy.

I had a pastor staying with me in my house during the genocide. He had a Hutu ID but he stayed and he

was a great source of advice and wisdom. After the first three weeks, he said, 'if you're gonna do anything outside the house, you need to build a relationship with the people in power.'

That meant people who are committing the genocide. But then to realize, in a time of life and death, they might be your most important ally, was a whole new pathway in my brain; a whole new way of thinking. They might help save somebody's life.

Later, there was evidence that they used their power and influence to take lives.

Another really important lesson for me from this situation is in as much during the genocide as after the genocide.

This is the question; it is one thing to survive, but then how do you live with all the sorrow and the grief and the trauma? One of the most important parts of unpacking the mess in your head is to realize that 'that mess is not who I am.'

If I am defined by my anger and my pain and sorrow, then I don't have a clear way forward. I am a husband, a father, a global citizen; I am somebody who loves problem solving, somebody who likes building relationships. The anger, sorrow, and bitterness, is something I have to deal with.

One of the most important things I tell people is that in Rwanda, they have showed me, again and again, that if you just define a person by their worst history, their worst choices, and you don't look at other parts of the person, you actually become part of the problem.

In fact, if I only focus on the worst things that people did, I am making it worse.