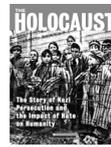


INTERVIEW WITH JACQUELINE MUREKATETE



On these pages you will find our complete interview with Jacqueline Murekatete, the survivor of the Rwandan genocide whose abbreviated story appears on pages 29-31 of the Holocaust Reader. Scholastic interviewed Jacqueline on November 4, 2014.

—Interview conducted and edited by Veronica Majerol

SCHOLASTIC: I know you were 9 years old in 1994, when the genocide in Rwanda began. Can you tell us your story? What happened to you and your family during this time?

Jacqueline Murekatete: As you said, I was 9 when the genocide started. And I was one of seven children—I was the second-oldest. I was in elementary school at the time. I went to school in my maternal grandmother's village, which was a couple of hours away from my parents' village. And when the genocide began, it coincided with the end of spring break, so [after spending the break in my parents' village] I had gone back to my grandmother's village thinking that school was going to start, and I had told my parents and my siblings that I would see [them] during the following break. So part of the reason I ended up surviving when they were killed is because I was not with them when the killings began in my parents' village.

On the evening of April 6th [1994], when [the Rwandan] president's plane was shot down and he was killed, that's when the killing really began, starting in the capital city of Kigali. And then every day [the killings] were spreading out to other areas of the country, [like the] countryside, where my family lived. Both of my parents were farmers.

So starting on the night of April 6, 1994, it was no longer safe for Tutsi to travel anywhere in Rwanda, because the government had asked that anybody who attempted to travel at the time carry an ID card. In Rwanda every

person 18 and older had an ID card, which said "Hutu," "Tutsi," or "Twa" [a minority group in Rwanda]. So basically it became nothing less than suicide for Tutsi at the time to go anywhere. If you passed a roadblock—put up throughout the country to prevent any Tutsi [from] fleeing to neighboring countries—[and] your ID card said you were Tutsi, you were immediately taken aside. If you were lucky, you were shot, but in most cases you were butchered with machetes, or beaten, or killed in a very torturous way.

Because the genocide began when I was already in my grandmother's village, I could no longer go back to my parents' village, and my father [and] my older brother who used to come and visit me couldn't [anymore]. So basically, wherever you were when the genocide started, you stayed there, and you started trying to find places to hide in that province or in that village.

When the killings began in my grandmother's village, my grandmother and I, and some of my other relatives, decided to run away to a county office because we thought that maybe we'd find protection there. Or people thought that if they could at least organize themselves in one place, perhaps they could defend themselves there. [When] we got to the county office, there were hundreds, and then later on thousands, of Tutsi—men, women, and children—who found refuge there.

Within a few days, our Hutu neighbors started coming in mobs, in groups, with machetes, singing,

"All Tutsis deserve to die! All Tutsis are cockroaches!" This is the kind of hate speech and dehumanization that was going on every day on the national radio. Every day the Hutu-led government officials would come on the radio and they would say, "Tutsis are cockroaches!" "Tutsis deserve to die!" and "All Hutus everywhere, you have to do your duty, and you have to kill your Tutsi neighbors—they're cockroaches, they're snakes!" The mobs would come singing those songs, and they would kill people. The Tutsi men at the county office did their best to try

"Our Hutu neighbors started coming in mobs, in groups, with machetes, singing, 'All Tutsis deserve to die!'"

and fight, but nobody had [fled their homes] with weapons. When we left our homes, [we] thought, OK, these things are going to calm down and we're going to go back to our homes within a matter of days. [The Hutu mobs] would kill indiscriminately men, women, and children. It became clear that we were not going to be protected there. We were going to die. So some people started leaving the county office and trying to find other places to hide.

It was at that time that one of my uncles, one of my mom's brothers, somehow found out that my grandmother and I were at the

county office and that the killings were happening every day, and that it was only a matter of time before we would be killed. And he was very fortunate in that he found two [Hutu] men, one policeman and one driver, who he paid to try to come in the middle of the night to the county office. My uncle gave the two men an ambulance from the hospital where he had previously worked as a doctor before the genocide.

These two men came and they packed my grandmother and me and one of my cousins in the back of the ambulance and covered us up with clothing and things. The [plan] was that whenever we'd pass the roadblock, this Hutu policeman and the driver would try to convince the people at the roadblock that everything was fine, they were just taking patients to the hospital. And of course the [hope] was that they would not look inside the ambulance.

The roadblocks were guarded every day by Hutu men, boys, [and] sometimes women—24 hours a day. If they [had] looked inside the ambulance, that would have been the end of us. But with what was going on at the county office, this was a risk worth taking. So we left the county office that night, and we did go through a couple of roadblocks, but fortunately we survived.

After that, my uncle found another Hutu family that was willing to try to hide my grandmother, me, and my

“The day that I left for the orphanage ended up being the last day that I saw my grandmother.”

cousin. He paid them, and we were [then] separated from my uncle, [who] went to try to find another place to hide himself. The Hutu man hid us for about a week until we were discovered. To this day, I'm not sure if perhaps somebody saw us there, [or] somebody heard us

and went and brought the people who were at the roadblocks to us, but all I remember is one morning we were woken up and we heard loud banging on the door and Hutu screaming at the man who was hiding us, saying “You have cockroaches inside your house! We're gonna find them, and we're gonna kill them.” And within a few minutes, we heard this group of men, armed with machetes, and at that point, we thought, this is it, we're going to die. And whenever I speak about my experience, I always say, to this day I have no logical explanation as to how we survived that particular attack on our lives. The man who was hiding us kept pleading and begging and saying, “This is an old woman,” speaking about my grandmother. “She might as well be your mother, and these may as well be your children.”

But for one reason or another, after a lot of begging and pleading by the man who was hiding us, the Hutu decided to leave. But they told him, “You have to kick these cockroaches out of your house. Otherwise we're going to come back, and next time we won't spare them.”

The Hutu man knew he had to kick us out, because at this point his life was also in danger. During the genocide, the Hutu government said any Hutu who is discovered hiding Tutsi or aiding them in any way was considered a traitor, and they also were to be killed.

At that point, we didn't know where to go—we were in a different province now, in a place where we didn't really know anybody. So my grandmother started talking to [the Hutu man], saying, “Where could we go to hide?” This Hutu man told my grandmother [about] an orphanage that was not too far away from his house. This orphanage had existed in Rwanda before the genocide. Two Italian priests had come, set up the orphanage, and used it to take [in] Rwandan children whose parents had

died of malaria [or] other diseases. When the genocide began, these two Italian priests were among the few foreigners who made the decision to stay in Rwanda and try and protect children. As you may know, when the genocide began, most of the foreigners—whether American, British, or French—who worked in Rwanda as diplomats [or] businesspeople left. Their embassies came and evacuated them. The few foreigners who stayed in Rwanda did so at the risk of their own lives.

So [the Hutu man] told my grandmother that he could take my cousin and me to the orphanage. But unfortunately, my grandmother would not be allowed in because [taking in] Tutsi adults would be more risky; that would invite more killers to target the adults as well as the children. They were hoping that perhaps the killers would have mercy if they came and saw that there were just children.

My grandmother decided to have the man take my cousin and me to the orphanage. I remember she told me: “Don't worry. Everything's going to be fine. I'm going to find a place to hide, and then in a few days, I will come for you.” And I actually believed her at the time. During the genocide, whenever you [woke] up to see the next day, you used to hope and pray that either an outside country would hear about what's going on and will come and stop the genocide, or our own government will come to its senses and realize the evil that it was creating and would stop. So when my grandmother told me, “I'll come back for you in a few days; everything's going to be fine,” I actually believed her.

But the day that I left for the orphanage ended up being the last day that I saw my grandmother. After the genocide, I learned that she had been killed soon after she sent my cousin and me to the orphanage.

At the orphanage, there were children [and] infants. There were toddlers. I was 9, and I was one of the oldest children

there. There were children whose arms had been cut off, who were coming in bleeding from their legs and heads because they had been macheted. And there were children who came in very much traumatized because they had witnessed their parents being killed in front of them. So there was a lot of chaos in the orphanage, and as the killings continued, diseases started spreading—dysentery, all kinds of malaria. A lot of children started dying in the orphanage, especially the younger kids, the babies and the infants, either because of the diseases or because of lack of food. As the orphanage got more crowded, there was no longer enough food to go around. The priests could no longer easily go to the market and buy food because there was chaos, and there were roadblocks, and there were killings everywhere.

And initially the orphanage was a haven for us, a haven not from disease or a lack of food, but a haven from the killers. But as the genocide continued, the priests began to be threatened. The Hutu mobs would come inside the orphanage and they would tell them that they were going to kill every Tutsi child. The priests would beg, they would bribe them. Initially, they would give money, and then later on, once the money ran out, they started giving the killers food—the food they had originally used to manage the orphanage and feed us. They started giving it to these people who were coming to take our lives, in order to hopefully save us for another day, for another night. So it is under those circumstances that I and a number of other children survived the genocide.

And while all this was going on, in the first 100 days of genocide, I had absolutely no information about where my parents were, where my siblings were. But I remember throughout the genocide, I used to pray that somebody, one of our neighbors, would be hiding them, and once the killings ended I would go back to the village and I would see them. That's something that

I prayed for every night. I just had hope that it would be all right, that somebody would hide them. I didn't want to believe otherwise.

SCHOLASTIC: Can you describe what actually did happen to your family and when you found out about it?

JM: Once the genocide ended, I was taken out of the orphanage. It turns out that the uncle who had sent the ambulance survived. He ended up finding a Hutu family that hid him and a number of his friends. After the genocide, he had gone back to the Hutu man that he had left my grandmother, my cousin, and me with. The Hutu man had told my uncle that my grandmother had been killed, but that he had taken us to the orphanage and that most likely we would still be alive. So my uncle then sent two [other] cousins to the orphanage, and they took me and my cousin out, and then soon we were reunited with my uncle. I started asking him, "Do you know where my grandmother—his mother—do you know where she is? Have you seen her? Do you know what happened to my parents? Can you take me to my parents' village so I can see them?"

My uncle had gone to my parents' village, and when he got there, he found out that two of my aunts—two of my father's sisters—had survived, and some of my cousins, and they are the ones who ultimately told him what happened. And what I later learned was that one day during the genocide, my Hutu neighbors had come, and they found my mom and my siblings hiding in one place and my father hiding in a different place. They had taken them to a nearby river where they proceeded to murder them and to throw their bodies in that river, only a few minutes from my house.

You know, the first time I learned about this, I didn't believe it—I refused to believe it. For a long time, I used to say that it was a cruel joke. I used to go

to bed praying that the next morning when I woke up, somebody would tell me the whole entire period had been a nightmare that I was gonna wake up from and I'd have my parents, I'd have my siblings, I'd have my aunts and my uncles, and life would go back to normal. But at some point, we who had survived had to acknowledge that this was not a nightmare that we were ever going to wake up from. This was a reality that this government and our own neighbors had taken part in—murdering [about] a million people. And not because [of] anything they had done, but simply because of who they were, because of their ethnicity, something that we did not have a choice in being.

"I was the only one to survive in my immediate family."

SCHOLASTIC: So was your entire immediate family killed? How many siblings did you have?

JM: I had six. I had four brothers and two sisters.

SCHOLASTIC: And they were all with your parents?

JM: They were all killed; I was the only one to survive in my immediate family. And my grandmothers were also killed, and a number of my uncles and a number of my aunts, both maternal and paternal—beyond my immediate family, the majority of my extended family was killed.

It's estimated that 90 percent or even more of Tutsi who lived in Rwanda at the time were murdered in those 100 days. Machetes were imported, civilians were trained, and it was taking place at the village level, [with] neighbors killing neighbors. So the killings were very, very efficient. There were no machine guns and tanks, but because it was so personal and so many Hutu civilians participated, the killings were very, very efficient.

SCHOLASTIC: You talked about how it was your neighbors who ended up killing your family. What were relations like between Tutsis and Hutus before the genocide? Were you friendly with your neighbors, or was there always animosity?

JM: On the one hand, growing up in Rwanda, even at a young age you knew that as a Tutsi you lived in a country where you did not have equal rights, because the government gives you ethnic ID cards to discriminate against Tutsi in schools, in the workforce, in government. So growing up, I grew up with stories from my parents and grandmother telling me about how they were not allowed to go to school because they were Tutsi. The Rwandan government at the time allowed [only] a very small percentage of Tutsi to go to school. I also grew up with stories from my grandmother who talked about the killings of Tutsi that she witnessed in 1959, and in the '60s and '70s.

So even growing up—even before

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the genocide—I was aware that as a Tutsi I lived in a society where I did not have the same rights, where I could be killed anytime the government said, “Kill Tutsis.”

But at the same time, on a daily basis I went to school with Hutu children. We went to the same churches. We spoke the same language. The majority of people there are Christians, so we had a lot of similarities. We went to each other’s weddings. We went to each other’s child-naming ceremonies.

And that was one of the hard things. When I talk about the genocide, I always

tell people, it’s one thing if a stranger or somebody who you never met comes and kills your family; it’s another thing if somebody whose children you grew up with, whose children used to come to your house to borrow salt or to borrow sugar. This is the kind of life that people lived before the genocide. The villages were not physically segregated; Hutu and Tutsi were dealing with one another. But at the same time, the discrimination was certainly there. The prior killings had happened, and we were aware of it, but I think people somehow believed that that was the past, that it would never happen again. Nobody thought that a genocide, especially on the scale of the 1994 genocide, would ever happen.

SCHOLASTIC: Did you live with your uncle after the genocide?

JM: After the genocide, I lived with him for a little bit, and then I was fortunate to have another uncle, his older brother, who was in the U.S. at the time of the genocide. So my uncle who was in

Rwanda and the one who was here in the U.S. talked after the genocide and decided that it was best for me to come to the U.S. and start a new life. They realized that in Rwanda, it would have been more difficult for me to move forward. In October 1995—I was 10 at the time—I began a new life with my uncle who was at the time living in Virginia, and then later on moved to New York.

SCHOLASTIC: And so now you do a lot of work on genocide prevention and you speak out a lot about the Rwandan genocide and other genocides. Can you tell me what inspired you to become an activist?

JM: Once I got to this country, obviously I didn’t speak a word of English. I was going through a lot of trauma and nightmares, and for a number of years I really didn’t speak about what had happened to me. My

classmates knew that I was an orphan from Africa, but that’s about it. They didn’t know exactly what had happened to me and my parents. I didn’t talk about it. I wasn’t ready to talk about it. I was still struggling to understand what had happened. One day I was a child going to school with goals and dreams, and within a little more than three months, I was an orphan being told that my family had been killed by my own neighbors, simply because of their ethnicity. So the first few years in this country were very, very difficult.

In 2001, I was a high school sophomore. My classmates and I read the book *Night* by Elie Wiesel in AP English. And after we read *Night*, my teacher, Ms. Goldstein, was wise enough to want to do even more. She invited a Holocaust survivor to come and speak to my class, and David Gewirtzman came and he spoke to my class.

I remember David talked about one day being a happy child going to school, collecting stamps. And he talked about how all his rights and the rights of other Jewish people in Poland—he was born in Poland—were taken away slowly, and he talked about being sent to a concentration camp and all the persecution and the loss that he had suffered. In addition to being one of the students who was obviously very saddened and who cried as David was telling his story, I also began to see some similarities between what had happened to him and what had happened to me. Although he was many, many years older than me and had lived in Poland, on a different continent, we had something in common. And that was that both of us were children one day and our lives were dramatically changed, not because of anything that we had done, but simply because of who we were.

So after David spoke, my teacher encouraged all of us to write notes—thank-you notes—to him, and in my thank-you note, I happened to mention that I was a survivor from Rwanda [and]

talked a little bit about my experience. None of us expected that he would answer those letters, but he read all of them, and he came across mine, and he decided to respond to me. About a week or so later, he invited me and my uncle over to his house and told me about the work that he had been doing—of going to schools and speaking to students, and speaking to churches and different communities—as a way to raise awareness about the Holocaust and the fact that genocide as a crime remains a major threat, even in this day and age. So he’s the one who ultimately encouraged me to start speaking.

Between 2001 and 2012, we traveled all over this country, to many, many schools, many churches, many synagogues. We had the opportunity to speak abroad as well, in places like Germany and Belgium and Ireland and Israel. Our goal was always the same and that was to raise awareness, not only about what happened to us—myself in 1994 and him during the Holocaust—but to talk about hate, to talk about racism, to talk about discrimination, to talk about anti-Semitism—things that ultimately reaped genocide or enabled genocide to happen. And these are things that are happening even now, as we speak. And we were helping young people, in particular, realize that this is not history—genocide is not history, the Holocaust is not history. This is something that is a major threat in this day and age. And unless we do something about it, and we are educated about it and we understand it and we participate in its prevention, it’s going to continue to happen.

Unfortunately, David passed away in 2012. That was about 12 years after we had [started] working together, and it was a very difficult time for me because [David] was the closest person who I lost after the genocide. He had become my mentor and the inspiration behind my work. So it was very difficult, but as he was dying, I remember thanking him for having inspired me to do this

work, but also letting him know that I would carry on the work, that I would try and continue to speak out, in hopes, again, of preventing other children, other people from ever having to experience the horrors and the loss that I experienced 20 years ago.

So that’s really why I do what I do and why I think it’s important. Because even today, when you look at all [that’s] going on around the world, whether it’s in Sudan or Central African Republic or in Iraq with groups like ISIS, we still have extremists who believe that some people deserve to die, period. And I think that level of extremism is something that all of us have to recognize, and we have to participate in fighting [against], because otherwise it’s just going to continue to grow and spread.

SCHOLASTIC: Have you returned to Rwanda since the genocide?

JM: Yes, I went back to Rwanda in 2010. So that was about 15 years after I left. For a long time, I have to be honest, I had no desire to go back; I used to think that if I went back, I would become very bitter, and I would become very angry, or perhaps even lose my mind. But then, in addition to raising awareness, I started working with different nonprofits in trying to raise funds to help settle orphans and survivors in Rwanda. So I started doing some work there, and I started reestablishing connections, especially with the survivor community. I thought that as somebody who had been given the opportunity to come to [the U.S.] and to go to school and to have another chance at life, I felt like I had the responsibility to speak out on behalf of survivors in Rwanda who were not as fortunate. Although I have been living here for the past 19 years, I remain very much connected to the survivor community through online forums, so I’m always

aware of the challenges they face.

I went back because at the time I had worked with a nonprofit to build a community center that today provides a number of educational and job-training services to youth, many of them genocide orphans. But I also went back because after a while, I really felt like I needed to go back to my parents’ village. After the genocide, I went from the orphanage to my uncle’s house to the U.S. So I always had that need to really go back and see for myself. In December of 2010, I went back and it was very difficult, as I had imagined, especially seeing that there was very little evidence that my family was there. Because during the genocide, they not only killed people, but they destroyed homes. So when you go there now, there’s not a single brick. Everything’s a farm, everything’s bushes and trees. It’s heartbreaking, because you see all the children in the village, and those who are under 20, you realize that these people don’t even know [my] family ever lived there, that they ever existed. And that brings a lot of sadness.

I went back to the orphanage. I went back to my grandmother’s village. And I went back to the county office where my grandmother and I had initially run away to. Today it’s a memorial because thousands of people were murdered there. And I learned [that] soon after my grandmother and I had left [the

“Genocide is not history, the Holocaust is not history. This is something that is a major threat in this day and age.”

county office], the government sent trucks of soldiers with grenades, and they basically carried out days of massacres. Many of my relatives actually ended up being killed in that county office. So I went there to pay my respects, at the memorial.

It was very, very difficult, my first trip [back]. But I also feel like it’s something

that I had to do, especially given that Rwanda still has a place in my heart. Even now, I'm in the process of starting a nonprofit organization and trying to do some work there with survivors. So it's a place that I certainly see myself going to more frequently now, but it's never an easy journey.

SCHOLASTIC: In going back to Rwanda, have you observed any steps that have been taken by the society as a whole to heal the wounds of this genocide?

“This country is the best place for us to learn about the importance of tolerance and of respect.”

JM: Yeah. I grew up under a government that had interest in dividing its population on ethnic lines. They knew they could use the [national] ID cards to keep certain ethnic groups, mainly Tutsis and Twas, from ever participating in the government. And when you have a government that has interest in dividing people, then violence is inevitable. But now, for the first time, we have a government that's actually committed to building this larger identity of us being Rwandans. Yes, we are Hutu, we are Tutsi, we are Twa, but we're also Rwandans, and we have the same language, and we have the same religion, and we have the same family to some extent, and we have the same culture. So the government has been taking a lot of initiatives to promote that larger identity of people being Rwandan.

The post-genocide government has gotten rid of the ID card. So now, when you are born in Rwanda, you don't have to worry about being labeled Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa—you are Rwandan. And they've taken a number of initiatives [at the] village level to try and promote more peaceful coexistence and reconciliation between Hutu and Tutsi. As you can imagine, of course, it's not something

that happens overnight. It takes a lot of time, because the whole social fabric was destroyed by the genocide. The trust that existed before the genocide was taken away for many people and has to be re-established. But I think the hope really lies with the new generation of Rwandans, the kids who are being born today and who have been born over the past 20 years. [They] are being born into a society that encourages Rwandanness and that encourages peaceful coexistence and that does not have interest in dividing people. The hope is that if

these kids can grow up within a different society from the society in which I grew up, then the future of Rwanda is bright.

Churches and religious leaders have [also] been active in trying to re-establish trust between neighbors. And they've made some progress, but of course as you can imagine, there are still challenges.

SCHOLASTIC: Your story is going to be included in a larger book, a reader on the Holocaust, and it will be read by middle and high school students in the United States. I was wondering what lessons you think they might draw from your story?

JM: One thing I always say when I speak to students is for them to realize that this is not about the past, this is about the present, and that genocide is not a crime that happens overnight. Genocide happens in a process, and it's preceded by racism, anti-Semitism, by discrimination, by intolerance, and the teaching of hatred. So the best way to prevent genocide is really by fighting these things on a daily basis. I always tell students, if you see somebody being harassed or picked on because he or she is dressed [a certain] way or he or she speaks [a certain] way or believes [a certain] way, this is the time for you to actually stand up and to speak out.

Sometimes students are a bit overwhelmed when they hear my

story; they're like, how is this relevant to us, what can we do to participate in this work of genocide prevention? And I always say, the best way you can get involved is by being involved in your local communities. We live in a country that has people from all over the world—that is diverse in religion, diverse in culture, and in social economic backgrounds. So this country is the best place for us to learn about the importance of tolerance and of respect, of knowing that every human being—irrespective of where they come from, what they believe, or [what] they look like—has the same rights.

And beyond their community, really helping them to recognize that we live in a world where—whether it's via social media or TV and newspapers—we are aware of what's going on. So when they read or hear on Facebook or Twitter about people being persecuted or murdered, it shouldn't matter whether they're in Iraq or Rwanda or South America. We have to stand up. We have to write letters to our leaders, we have to make phone calls, and we have to say this is not OK.

If people had stood up and had acted in 1994, the genocide would not have happened. Rwanda is a tiny country. If the U.S., or the U.K., or France would have come in, they could have easily stopped the genocide. But the problem is that there was no will, there was no interest—and that type of indifference is what enables such violence to happen. So I really try and help students realize that it's not OK to say that's none of my business—you have to actually go a step further and do something about it or speak about it.

SCHOLASTIC: Thank you so much for your time and for your story.

JM: Thank you.

In 2014, Jacqueline founded the Genocide Survivors Foundation, a nonprofit committed to preventing genocide and helping survivors of mass atrocities.