

pThis is the testimony of Valentina, a survivor of the Rwandan genocide

My name is Valentina. I am 19 years old. My parents, both secondary school teachers, were killed in the genocide. Only my elder sister, Ariane, three brothers and I survived.

Until 1991 we lived in Burundi as refugees, but my parents decided to return to Rwanda, believing that there was peace. I was still a baby at the time, but I learnt from my elder sister that my father was imprisoned soon after. Following his release, he was appointed a teacher at the Roman Catholic Secondary School in Kabgayi. My mother also taught at the same school.

In 1994, when the killings began we fled to the Roman Catholic Church in Kabgayi. The priests requested that the men be separated from the women. The boys too were separated from us. First the men were killed, and then the boys. My mother and I managed to escape the killing, and together we hid. I was only 5 years old. But Ariane had become separated from us.

My grandfather joined us at Kabyayi. He arrived in a terrible state, his head and face covered in blood. He had severe injuries to his head, and part of his brain was exposed where his skull had fractured. He died 3 days later, a slow, painful death. I was with him.

When he died, my mother buried him. Alone. Without help. I honestly do not know how she managed it. Every other person in the place where we were hiding was afraid to go out, even to help her.

A few days later the militiamen discovered our hiding place. They were armed with machetes and spears. They did not kill me, but they raped me. I do not know how many they were, possibly three. I do not know if my mother was also raped, because during the ordeal I passed out. I was only five years old.

We stayed in Kabyayi, as we had nowhere else to go, and eventually Ariane found us. I have no recollection of how long she was separated from us. She told us that she had seen father. He had waved to her as his killers marched him, and his teaching colleagues, away to be killed. One of the teachers miraculously escaped and he told us how the others had died. They had been beaten with clubs all day long. My father though was killed with a spear. His blood had splattered over his friend, which was what he thinks saved him as he was left for dead.

Ariane decided to hide in a different part of Kabyayi, but Mum and I stayed together. My mother was beaten, but did not die until a few months after the genocide. I think she died of pain, grief and trauma.

Our salvation came when the RPF arrived in Kabgayi in early June. We had been rescued. I came out of the hiding. We were walked to Butare, 80km from Kabgayi, where we were given, along with thousands of others, shelter in a refugee camp. It was here where we found Ariane and the boys.

Later, we were taken to Kabuga, near Kigali. After some weeks, an aunt heard that we had survived. She came for us. Her family adopted me, but decided that my older siblings should return to our home in Kabgayi.

It was not easy for me. I missed my family. But time passed. It was later that I started to get sick. Worse was to come. When I started to develop symptoms of the HIV virus, my Aunt's family isolated me and kept me in a storage room so that I wouldn't infect them.

My Aunt said I would contaminate her children if I shared anything with them. At the time, I had no idea that the lesions I developed on my skin were a symptom of HIV. I suffered from the stigma and felt totally rejected. Eventually, the lesions subsided. I closed myself off from everybody, and kept myself to myself, as I did not want to talk to anybody. Even at school, I always stayed apart from everybody at break, around the corner, and never smiled. I decided then to get in touch with Ariane and my brothers.

Ariane came for me, and together we traveled back to our family house in Kabgayi where I was reunited again with my three brothers. It was a friend who took me to an AVEGA Clinic, where my blood samples were taken and tested for the HIV virus. I was found to be HIV positive but was not told of my status. I was prescribed antibiotics, to be taken daily. I asked why I was on medication when I wasn't sick. Eventually I was told the truth, that I was HIV positive. I lost my head! I became desperate, disgusted with life.

Of course there were a lot of hardships. Ariane had to drop out of school to care for us. But she had no job. Sometimes we had trouble finding rent for the house. Other times we had no food.

We were fortunate to learn of Solace Ministries. I just could not understand why these people cared so much. The only thing I can say is that since finding Solace, I am a changed person. I have even started to make new friends. I feel accepted. I have started to feel that I am also someone.

Today, I can laugh and smile. I have found another family. I believe I am alive and I will live. And I want to live. The proof is that even my school marks are improving. I



am happy now, as I have just been admitted to secondary school, at where I plan to take the national exam.

I pray to God to bless all these people who have helped me!

Today's Reading of the Testimonies marks the 15th Anniversary of the Rwandan genocide, in support of survivors like Valentina.