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Setting the Record Straight

Hotel Rwanda

by AMADOU DEME

A small convoy of refugees is confronted by a murderous mob at a roadblock in the widely praised film *Hotel Rwanda*. The UN troops protecting the convoy, led by a bold white commander, brandish their weapons. After some scuffling, threats and a few shots being fired, the refugee trucks are turned around and the passengers safely returned to the Hotel Rwanda. The hero upon whom the film is based has now written a book, *An Ordinary Man*, in which he describes that terrible incident in much the same way as the film.

But in fact the crisis did not happen as depicted in the film and book. And that troubles me because I was one of the UN soldiers with the convoy. Mr. Rusesabagina, as he acknowledges, was not there, though his wife and children were among the refugees.

The convoy was saved through tense but patient dialogue with leaders of the unruly roadblock. There is no question in my mind, or in the minds of those who served with me, that many could have died if anyone had fired a shot or said the wrong thing. At one point I said to a Tunisian sergeant manning a 50mm machine gun, "Don't start firing" and he answered "Don't worry captain; we're not crazy". The talking went on, the armed crowd calmed down, and the refugees were safely returned to the hotel from whence they had come. No fighting took place between army and militias to provide diversion as mentioned in Rusesabagina's book and the movie.

I wonder why the story has been changed and the truth hidden. A possible answer occurs to me: The man who confronted the angry crowd and did the most to save all our lives is known to Mr. Rusesabagina. His name is Georges Rutaganda. He is an old friend of Paul Rusesabagina and is portrayed as a villain in the film *Hotel Rwanda*. Sometimes the truth can be very awkward.

I know that Mr. Rutaganda came to that roadblock because I am the one who brought him there. The UN and Rwandan leaders had agreed that refugees from the hotel should be transferred to the rebel side of the battlefield. Many in the convoy were

prominent individuals opposed to the government. The crowd at the roadblock were very close to the front lines and very agitated. When the mayor tried to speak to them they slashed tires on the trucks. In this atmosphere of confrontation I made the decision to try to locate Rutaganda, who I knew ran a business nearby and was the 2nd Vice President of the Interahamwe.

As we raced back to the roadblock I told him what the situation was. Then he joined with me in trying to convince the angry crowd to let us pass and not to harm anyone. Rutaganda met the same rage we had encountered, but he persisted and eventually got some of the apparent leaders to enter into a grudging dialogue. That crowd did not know or like Mr. Rutaganda. They saw him as traitor trying to help their enemies. What he did was very dangerous. The afternoon was growing dark, soon killers and looters would be in charge. Had he been the cynical brute as depicted in the film he would have turned away. Fortunately, for our UN mission and everybody at that barricade, Rutaganda is in fact a large, friendly, soft-spoken and intelligent man who saved the day.

It is interesting to me that establishing a dialogue and listening even to angry armed people is one of the ideas stressed in Rusesabagina's story as portrayed in the movie and the book. Paul should know and should respect that it was his old friend Georges who showed that skill on that afternoon in Kigali. Maybe it is possible they learned this together in the schools of the Seventh Day Adventists. Paul's wife and children were in our trucks. Paul was back at the Mille Collines Hotel and Georges was the one without a weapon facing the machetes and guns at the barricade. By listening and reasoning, he found among them the "cooler heads" and got the convoy released.

There are other details wrong in the Rusesabagina account. No Bangladeshi UN soldiers stood with their hands up. There were no Bangladeshi soldiers on that mission. The soldiers were Tunisians and Ghanaians, all under a Ghanaian commander and they behaved professionally.

"Truth and Reconciliation" is said to be part of the mandate of international justice. Averting our eyes from the truth because it is personally or politically awkward is bad for our collective conscience. Georges Rutaganda is today serving a life term for crimes against humanity. I would like to hope that Paul Rusesabagina would join me in acknowledging that on May 3rd, 1994, Georges Rutaganda risked his life to save refugees, including Paul's wife, at a roadblock in Kigali.

In the film, a UN officer resembling General Dallaire takes Georges' place as saviour ... using a gun. In fact, there were no white commanders there that day and General Dallaire was not even in Kigali but in Rwamagana.

If this can be done to Rutaganda in book and film with nary a word of objection, I think it is also possible that he is an innocent man, as he still maintains.

AMADOU DEME was a Senegalese Army Officer who served in the intelligence team of the UN Mission for Rwanda from August 1993 to July 1994. To hear an interview with AMADOU DEME on this question www.taylor-report.com March 13, 2006.