**September 15, 2002**

# A Woman's Work

**By PETER LANDESMAN**
**NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE**

Slaughter, and then worse, came to Butare, a sleepy, sun-bleached Rwandan town, in the spring of 1994. Hutu death squads armed with machetes and nail-studded clubs had deployed throughout the countryside, killing, looting and burning. Roadblocks had been set up to cull fleeing Tutsis. By the third week of April, as the Rwanda genocide was reaching its peak intensity, tens of thousands of corpses were rotting in the streets of Kigali, the country's capital. Butare, a stronghold of Tutsis and politically moderate Hutus that had resisted the government's orders for genocide, was the next target. Its residents could hear gunfire from the hills in the west; at night they watched the firelight of torched nearby villages. Armed Hutus soon gathered on the edges of town, but Butare's panicked citizens defended its borders.

Enraged by Butare's revolt, Rwanda's interim government dispatched Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, the national minister of family and women's affairs, from Kigali on a mission. Before becoming one of the most powerful women in Rwanda's government, Pauline -- as everyone, enemy and ally alike, called her -- had grown up on a small farming commune just outside Butare. She was a local success story, known to some as Butare's favorite daughter. Her return would have a persuasive resonance there.

Soon after Pauline's arrival in town, cars mounted with loudspeakers crisscrossed Butare's back roads, announcing that the Red Cross had arrived at a nearby stadium to provide food and guarantee sanctuary. By April 25, thousands of desperate Tutsis had gathered at the stadium.

It was a trap. Instead of receiving food and shelter, the refugees were surrounded by men wearing bandoleers and headdresses made of spiky banana leaves. These men were Interahamwe, thuggish Hutu marauders whose name means "those who attack together." According to an eyewitness I spoke with this summer in Butare, supervising from the sidelines was Pauline, then 48, a portly woman of medium height in a colorful African wrap and spectacles.

Before becoming Rwanda's chief official for women's affairs, Pauline was a social worker, roaming the countryside, offering lectures on female empowerment and instruction on child care and AIDS prevention. Her days as minister were similarly devoted to improving the lives of women and children. But at the stadium, a 30-year-old farmer named Foster Mivumbi told me, Pauline assumed a different responsibility. Mivumbi, who has confessed to taking part in the slaughter, told me that Pauline goaded the Interahamwe, commanding, "Before you kill the women, you need to rape them."

Tutsi women were then selected from the stadium crowd and dragged away to a forested area to be raped, Mivumbi recalled. Back at the stadium, he told me, Pauline waved her arms and then observed in silence as Interahamwe rained machine-gun fire and hand grenades down upon the

remaining refugees. The Hutus finished off survivors with machetes. It took about an hour, ending at noon. Pauline stayed on, Mivumbi told me, until a bulldozer began piling bodies for burial in a nearby pit. (When questioned about this incident, Pauline's lawyers denied that she took part in atrocities in Butare.)

Shortly afterward, according to another witness, Pauline arrived at a compound where a group of Interahamwe was guarding 70 Tutsi women and girls. One Interahamwe, a young man named Emmanuel Nsabimana, told me through a translator that Pauline ordered him and the others to burn the women. Nsabimana recalled that one Interahamwe complained that they lacked sufficient gasoline. "Pauline said, 'Don't worry, I have jerrycans of gasoline in my car,' " Nsabimana recalled. "She said, 'Go take that gasoline and kill them.' I went to the car and took the jerrycans. Then Pauline said, 'Why don't you rape them before you kill them?' But we had been killing all day, and we were tired. We just put the gasoline in bottles and scattered it among the women, then started burning."

Around the same time, some Interahamwe arrived at the local hospital, where a unit of Doctors Without Borders was in residence. Rose, a young Tutsi woman who had sought refuge at the hospital, watched in terror as soldiers stormed the complex. (Rose, who is now under military protection, requested that her last name not be printed.) "They said that Pauline had given them permission to go after the Tutsi girls, who were too proud of themselves," Rose told me. "She was the minister, so they said they were free to do it." Pauline had led the soldiers to see rape as a reward.

Chief among the Interahamwe at the hospital was Pauline's only son, a 24-year-old student named Arsene Shalom Ntahobali. Shalom, as he was known, was over six feet tall, slightly overweight and clean-shaven. He wore a track suit and sneakers; grenades dangled from his waist. Rose said that Shalom, who repeatedly announced that he had "permission" from his mother to rape Tutsis, found her cowering in the maternity ward. He yanked her to her feet and raped her against the wall. Before leaving Rose to chase after some students who had been hiding nearby, he promised that he'd return to kill her. But before Shalom could do so, she fled the hospital and ran home to her family.

A few days later, Rose recalled, a local official knocked on her door. Rose told me that the official informed her that even though all Tutsis would be exterminated, one Tutsi would be left alive -- one who could deliver a progress report to God. Rose was to be that witness. And her instruction on her new role began that moment. "Hutu soldiers took my mother outside," Rose told me, "stripped off her clothes and raped her with a machete." On that first day, 20 family members were slaughtered before her eyes.

Rose told me that until early July, when the genocide ended, she was led by Interahamwe to witness atrocity after atrocity. She said that even though the Interahamwe's overarching objective was to kill, the men seemed particularly obsessed by what they did to women's bodies. "I saw them rape two girls with spears then burn their pubic hair," she said. "Then they took me to another spot where a lady was giving birth. The baby was halfway out. They speared it." All the while, Rose repeatedly heard the soldiers say, "We are doing what was ordered by Pauline Nyiramasuhuko."

I met Rose in Butare this summer. She is 32 now, a pretty woman with high cheekbones and small features. Speaking in an airless hotel room, Rose pitched slightly forward in a red business suit, her gaze direct. She explained that since the genocide she has suffered from stomach ulcers, and occasionally slips into semiconsciousness, racked with delirium and pain. "People think I'm possessed," she said. These fits, she said, frighten her children -- her two born before 1994 and the four genocide orphans she adopted afterward. As we spoke, it was clear that Rose was telling her horrific story as carefully as possible, to finally fulfill, in a way much different from intended, her role as witness.

Rose said that during the months the genocide was carried out, she saw Pauline Nyiramasuhuko three times. The minister was an unforgettable sight. She'd exchanged her colorful civilian wraps for brand-new military fatigues and boots. She was seen carrying a machine gun over her shoulder. Other survivors told me they heard the minister for women and family affairs spit invectives at Tutsi women, calling them "cockroaches" and "dirt." She advised the men to choose the young women for sex and kill off the old. By one account, women were forced to raise their shirts to separate the mothers from the "virgins." Sometimes, I was told, Pauline handed soldiers packets of condoms.

Much of the violence took place in the scrubby yard in front of Butare's local government offices, or prefecture, where at one point hundreds of Tutsis were kept under guard. Witnesses recalled that Pauline showed up at night in a white Toyota pickup truck, often driven by Shalom, and supervised as Interahamwe loaded the truck with women who were driven off and never seen again. Often, when a woman at the prefecture saw Pauline, she appealed to her, as a fellow woman and mother, for mercy. But this, claimed survivors, only enraged Pauline. When one woman wouldn't stop crying out, a survivor recalled, the minister told the Interahamwe to shut her up. They stabbed the pleading woman and then slit her throat.

There will never be a precise accounting of how many Rwandans were massacred between April and July 1994. Human Rights Watch calculates the number to be at least 500,000, while the United Nations estimates that between 800,000 and one million Rwandans died during that period. Whatever the total, the rate of carnage and the concentration of the killing (Rwanda is roughly the size of New Jersey) give it the distinction of being the most ferocious mass slaughter in recorded history. Three-quarters of the Tutsi population was exterminated. Today, Rwanda's common greeting, the Kinyarwanda expression mwaramutse -- which translates as "did you wake?" -- is less an expression of "good morning" than it is of relief that one is breathing at all.

Understandably, the world's attention subsequently focused on the sheer volume of the Rwandan slaughter. But the prosecutors and judges of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania, are now coming to recognize the equally alarming and cynical story of what was left behind. Though most women were killed before they could tell their stories, a U.N. report has concluded that at least 250,000 women were raped during the genocide. Some were penetrated with spears, gun barrels, bottles or the stamens of banana trees. Sexual organs were mutilated with machetes, boiling water and acid; women's breasts were cut off. According to one study, Butare province alone has more than 30,000 rape survivors. Many more women were killed after they were raped.

These facts are harrowing. More shocking still is that so many of these crimes were supposedly inspired and orchestrated by Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, whose very job was the preservation, education and empowerment of Rwanda's women.

In July 1994 Pauline fled Rwanda in a mass exodus of more than one million Hutus fearing retribution by the advancing Tutsi rebel army, the Rwandan Patriotic Front. After finding safety in a refugee camp in Congo, she eventually slipped into Kenya, where she lived as a fugitive for almost three years. On July 18, 1997, however, Pauline was apprehended in Nairobi by Kenyan and international authorities. (Shalom was seized six days later, in a Nairobi grocery store he was running.) After interrogation by investigators, Pauline was transferred with Shalom to Tanzania, where both were delivered to the International Tribunal in Arusha.

At the tribunal, Pauline faces 11 charges, including genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes. She is the first woman ever to be charged with these crimes in an international court. And she is the first woman ever to be charged with rape as a crime against humanity. (Her son, Shalom, faces 10 charges, to which he has pled innocence.)

For the last five years mother and son have spent their days at the U.N. Detention Facility in Arusha in nearby 16-by-19 cells. They have access to a gym and a nurse. Pauline often spends time tending flowers and singing to herself in a common open-air courtyard.

Since June 2001, when their trials began, Pauline and Shalom have spent most of their weekdays in a courtroom inside Arusha's dilapidated conference center. The U.N. Security Council established the Arusha tribunal in November 1994, 18 months after establishing a tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague. With all of Rwanda's judicial and law-enforcement personnel dead or in exile, and the country's physical infrastructure reduced to rubble, the U.N. chose to house the tribunal in this tourist hub near the base of Mount Kilimanjaro. Fifty-three Rwandan genocidaires are in custody in Arusha; 20 more have been indicted and are on the lam, most likely in Kenya and Congo.

This summer, I attended sessions of Pauline's trial. In court, her appearance suggested a schoolteacher. Now 56, she favored plain high-necked dresses that showed off the gleaming gold crucifix she usually wears. According to observers, at the beginning of the trial she shook her head and smirked as charges were read out. But as more and more survivors have come from Butare to testify against her, she has grown subdued. During my visit, Pauline mostly looked blankly around the courtroom past a pair of scholarly bifocals, taking copious notes on a legal pad and avoiding the gaze of witnesses. Sometimes, I was told, she wears wild hairstyles and headdresses and slumps behind a computer screen that sits in front of her, as if she were trying to disguise herself from witnesses asked to identify her. On one such day 11 months ago, she didn't show up at all, preferring, her attorneys told the court, to worship in chapel; that morning, when asked to identify the defendant, the witness could point only to Pauline's chair. The courtroom is typically crowded with three judges, 12 defense attorneys and prosecutors, clerks, interpreters and other staff. Most days there are only a handful of spectators watching all this in a narrow gallery behind bulletproof glass -- and frequently there are none at all.

Pauline and Shalom are being tried together with four other Hutu leaders from Butare who are also accused of genocide. Fourteen witnesses for the prosecution have testified so far, with 73 more still to go, most of whom will have something to say against Pauline, who faces life imprisonment. In most cases, she is accused of inciting crimes rather than carrying them out herself. However, according to a document prepared by tribunal investigators in preparation for the trial, one witness, code-named Q.C., saw a Tutsi community leader die "at the hands of Nyiramasuhuko." (The report does not specify what weapon Pauline used.) Attorneys for each of the six accused will most likely open their defenses in 2004 and will probably call more than 100 witnesses of their own as the trial creeps along for at least another two years. Justice at the tribunal has moved at a glacial pace, with only eight convictions and one acquittal handed down in seven years.

Pauline has consistently denied the charges against her. In 1995, before she was arrested, she gave an interview to the BBC in a squalid Hutu refugee camp across the Congo border, where she had been leading the camp's social services; her job duties included the reuniting of separated parents and children. When asked what she did during the war, Pauline replied: "We moved around the region to pacify. We wrote a pacification document saying people shouldn't kill each other. Saying it's genocide, that's not true. It was the Tutsi who massacred the Hutu." Told that witnesses had accused her of murder, Pauline shot back: "I cannot even kill a chicken. If there is a person who says that a woman -- a mother -- killed, then I'll confront that person."

Over lunch during a break in court this summer, one of Pauline's attorneys, Nicole Bergevin, accused the Tribunal of making her client a scapegoat of the vindictive current government in Rwanda and of an international community guilt-ridden over its failure to stop the bloodletting. "I'm sure there were some rapes," Bergevin said, "but Pauline never ordered any rapes." Later she added: "She was never known to be anti-Tutsi. I'm not saying that no one wanted the Tutsis to be exterminated. Probably there were, but it was not a plan. It was never the government's intention. If it was, Pauline was not aware of it." Bergevin then told me that Pauline didn't have any knowledge about the rapes taking place in Rwanda during the genocide.

Pauline has only one concern, Bergevin said, and it is for Shalom, who like his mother, faces life imprisonment. "She feels helpless," Bergevin said.

My many requests to see Pauline were denied. The tribunal bars prisoners from contact with anyone other than family and friends (and even these visits are limited). I did, though, reach Pauline's husband, Maurice Ntahobari, who at the time of the genocide was the rector of National University in Butare. He now lives in Antwerp, Belgium; his Rwandan passport has been taken away. Though he admits to being in Butare during the genocide, Ntahobari insists he didn't see or hear any killing. As for the charges against Pauline, he reminded me that she had been a social worker. "She was committed to promoting equality between men and women," he said defiantly. "It is not culturally possible for a Rwandan woman to make her son rape other women. It just couldn't have taken place." Pauline's only error, he insisted, was in belonging to the side that lost.

Pauline Nyiramasuhuko was born in 1946 amid lush banana groves and green, misty valleys. Her parents were subsistence farmers in Ndora, a small, neat roadside settlement six miles east of

Butare. Her family and friends remember her as more ambitious and disciplined than bright. Her sister, Vineranda Mukandekaze, who is 60, told me that Pauline was "good but not generous. She kept everything to herself." Juliana Niyirora, an old friend of Pauline's, said: "From her childhood Pauline had political ambition. She always wanted to achieve high. If she saw someone build a house, she wanted a bigger house. If she saw someone do well, she wanted to do better."

In high school, Pauline became friends with Agathe Kanziga, the eventual wife of the Hutu president Juvenal Habyarimana. It was a crucial connection. After graduating, Pauline left Butare for Kigali to join the Ministry for Social Affairs, which was then establishing a network of centers teaching women how to take care of their families, providing instruction on such basics as cooking and supervising children. When Pauline was only 22, Agathe helped her skip up the bureaucratic ladder to become national inspector of the ministry.

In 1968 Pauline married Maurice Ntahobari, who later became president of the Rwanda National Assembly, then minister of higher education and later rector of National University in Butare. By all accounts, however, Pauline was the dominant force in the family. "Maurice was like the woman; he didn't say anything," said Jean-Baptist Sebukangaga, a professor of art at National University who has known Pauline since her childhood. "Pauline directed everything. She got Maurice his job as rector at the university." A friend and neighbor told me that she once saw Pauline screaming at Maurice for not being more committed to the politics of the MRND, the ruling Hutu extremist party.

At 24, nine months pregnant, Pauline, already the mother of a little girl, traveled to Israel on a government mission and gave birth to a son there. (Hence, Shalom.) She returned to Kigali, where in the years that followed she had two more daughters. But Pauline never gave up her job and eventually enrolled in law school, one of the few women in Rwanda to do so. "She had four children, but she still wanted to go back to school," her friend Niyirora marveled. Already a local MRND party boss, in 1992 she was appointed minister of family and women's affairs.

Pauline's brother-in-law, Matthias Ngiwijize, told me that when Pauline became a government minister, she changed. "She stopped coming to her family's homes," he said. "She didn't talk to anybody. She was only close to herself. She resented the poor part of the family. She even stopped visiting her mother."

A woman eager to prove herself in a party structure built around men and Rwanda's patriarchal society, Pauline soon found that the road to political success led her back to her birthplace. Butare had become the government's biggest headache. Home to National University and a scientific-research institute -- and with the highest concentration of Tutsis in Rwanda -- Butare had the most enlightened citizens in the country. The town had been largely immune to Hutu extremism; the MRND never gained a foothold there. But Pauline tried to change all that through a program of intimidation. She would convoy through town with party thugs, setting up barricades in the streets, paralyzing traffic and disrupting town life. Pauline's periodic invasions of the town became known as Ghost Days, days when Butare stood still.

Pauline was soon caught up in the anti-Tutsi ideology of her party. "Before 1994 there was no racism in Butare," said Leoncie Mukamisha, an old schoolmate of Pauline's who worked under her at the ministry. "Then Pauline came and organized demonstrations in town. The local papers described her as a frenzied madwoman." Leoncie said that Pauline's actions won the favor of the president, who recognized her obedience and anti-Tutsi virulence, and assigned to her a number of extremist Hutu ideologues as advisers.

Other friends I spoke with claimed that Pauline's anti-Tutsi conversion was a purely careerist move meant only to please the higher-ups. It was an echo of the old argument that many Nazis were "just following orders." Her sister told me that even in 1994, just before the genocide, Pauline had many Tutsi friends, and that a number of Tutsis worked peacefully under Pauline at the ministry.

Leoncie portrayed her differently. She said Pauline's racism was ardent; at the ministry, she said, Pauline was "horrified at having to be in daily contact with Tutsis." And a former Hutu political figure who met Pauline in 1992 says that in private discussions, her antipathy toward Tutsis was chillingly clear. "When one spoke with her, one became aware that the Tutsi were people to be destroyed," he said.

It may never be possible to answer what motivated Pauline's actions. She may have genuinely felt rage toward Tutsis; she may have been a simple opportunist, hungering for power. But certainly by 1994, her anti-Tutsi zealousness was public. During the genocide Pauline delivered admonishing speeches over Radio Rwanda. A witness recalled one speech: "We are all members of the militia," Pauline said. "We must work together to hunt down members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front."

In his confession to genocide and crimes against humanity, former Hutu Prime Minister Jean Kambanda identifies the members of his inner sanctum, where the blueprint of the genocide was first drawn up. The confession names only five names. Pauline Nyiramasuhuko's is one of them.

During my visit to Butare this summer, two young women, Mary Mukangoga, 24, and Chantal Kantarama, 28, led me into the center of Butare to the prefecture, where they first met and became friends. "I went to the prefecture because other refugees were there," Mary said in a near whisper. "I preferred to be killed when we were all together."

In the first weeks of the genocide, Chantal said, she had been abducted and raped by two Hutu men. She escaped and took refuge at a school near the prefecture. One day, Chantal recalled, she heard Pauline announcing through a microphone: "I have a problem. The cockroaches are now near my house. Tomorrow come and help me. Help me get rid of them." Chantal fled to the prefecture. The next day, Chantal said, Pauline visited the prefecture with Shalom. Mother and son came with the young men of the Interahamwe and selected girls to rape.

In silence, Mary and Chantal led me to the ruins of what was once a plastics factory, in a shady grove of trees 200 yards from the prefecture office. They explained that the Interahamwe used to store their ammunition in the factory, and that many evenings they were taken from the

prefecture, led there and raped. "Pauline would come and say, 'I don't want this dirt here, get rid of this dirt,'" Chantal recalled.

The two young women became part of a group of five sex slaves who were kept at the prefecture and raped, repeatedly and together, every night for weeks. Then one day, the women were thrown into a nearby pit that was full of corpses. The pit, about 400 feet square, is now half-filled in with rubble and weeds. Chantal took me there, stepping to the edge; at that point she turned aside, refusing to look in. "They used machetes to kill the ones who resisted and dumped them into the hole," she explained. She began to weep. She remained inside the pit for a night and a day, she said; then, on the second night, she climbed the jumbled corpses to pull herself out.

I took Chantal back to her home, a neat mud hut in a bustling, dusty neighborhood of shops and wandering livestock. Chantal is married with two children; she was the only genocidal-rape survivor I met who was married. Her husband knows what happened to her. But for thousands of Rwandan survivors, one of the most insidious legacies of the rapes is the stigma -- and the inevitable isolation. In Rwandan society, it is almost impossible for a woman who is known to have been raped to marry. One witness who testified against Pauline in Arusha had been engaged to be married a month later. When her fiance heard about the testimony, he broke off the engagement.

Then there is the generation of children born of the rapes. As many as 5,000 such children have been documented and, most likely, there are many more than that who haven't. These children will most likely never know their fathers -- in most cases, the mother was raped so many times that the issue of paternity was not only pointless but emotionally perilous: in effect, all of her attackers had fathered that child.

Compounding the dishonor, the mere sight of these children -- those who aren't abandoned -- can bring on savage memories to survivors. Two women I met who gave birth to their rapists' children named the children with words that translate as "Blessing From God" as a way to ease the pain. But others in the community gave them names that put them in the same category as their fathers: "Children of Shame," "Gifts of the Enemy," "Little Interahamwe."

"Did you ever see the look in a woman's eyes when she sees a child of rape?" asked Sydia Nduna, an adviser at the International Rescue Committee Rwanda who works for a program in Kigali aimed at reducing gender violence. "It's a depth of sadness you cannot imagine." The impact of the mass rapes in Rwanda, she said, will be felt for generations. "Mass rape forces the victims to live with the consequences, the damage, the children," Nduna explained.

Making matters worse, the rapes, most of them committed by many men in succession, were frequently accompanied by other forms of physical torture and often staged as public performances to multiply the terror and degradation. So many women feared them that they often begged to be killed instead. Often the rapes were in fact a prelude to murder. But sometimes the victim was not killed but instead repeatedly violated and then left alive; the humiliation would then affect not only the victim but also those closest to her. Other times, women were used as a different kind of tool: half-dead, or even already a corpse, a woman would be publicly raped as a way for Interahamwe mobs to bond together.

But the exposure -- and the destruction -- did not stop with the act of rape itself. Many women were purposely left alive to die later, and slowly. Two women I met outside Butare, Francina Mukamazina and Liberata Munganyinka, are dying of AIDS they contracted through rape. "My biggest worry is what will happen to my children when I'm gone," Francina told me. These children are as fragile as Francina fears: a U.N. survey of Rwandan children of war concluded that 31 percent witnessed a rape or sexual assault, and 70 percent witnessed murder. Francina's and Liberata's daughters survived but watched their siblings slaughtered and their mothers violated. They will grow up beside children born of rape, all of them together forced to navigate different but commingling resentments.

During my visit to Chantal's home, I asked her how she coped with her savage memories. She replied: "I just want to forget. My children are my consolation. Most rape survivors have nothing. We're poor, but I have my family. It's all I want."

I found Mary later that afternoon a few miles of dirt track away. She was sitting alone in her home, a stifling mud hut about 20 feet square with one small window. Mary told me that the rapes were her first and only sexual experience. Then, eyes averted, twisting her hands, she told me that five months ago she discovered she had AIDS. She said that two of the other young women she and Chantal were kept with are already dead. Their fate is not the exception but the rule. According to one estimate, 70 percent of women raped during the Rwanda genocide have H.I.V.; most will eventually die from it.

In an interview at the State House in Kigali, Rwanda's president, Paul Kagame, talked about the mass rapes in measured, contemplative sentences, shaking his head, his emotions betraying him. "We knew that the government was bringing AIDS patients out of the hospitals specifically to form battalions of rapists," he told me. He smiled ruefully, as if still astonished by the plan.

The most cynical purpose of the rapes in Butare was to transmit a slower, more agonizing form of death. "By using a disease, a plague, as an apocalyptic terror, as biological warfare, you're annihilating the procreators, perpetuating the death unto the generations," said Charles B. Strozier, a psychoanalyst and professor of history at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. "The killing continues and endures."

The use of AIDS as a tool of warfare against Tutsi women helped prosecutors in Arusha focus on rape as a driving force of the genocide. "H.I.V. infection is murder," said Silvana Arbia, the Rwanda Tribunal's acting chief of prosecutions. "Sexual aggression is as much an act of genocide as murder is."

During my visit with Mary, I learned that she had been "murdered" in just this way. This young woman has only one relative who lived through the genocide, a younger brother who lives in Kigali. "All of my friends have AIDS," she told me in June. "But I'll die of loneliness before I die of AIDS," she whispered, choking on her tears. "All I wanted was to marry and have a family." Today, she lies gravely ill in her hut, cared for by Chantal, withering away.

Mass rape has long been a weapon of war. According to legend, ancient Rome was united after Romulus and his soldiers terrorized their rivals, the Sabines, by raping their women. Widespread

sexual assault has been documented in conflicts ranging from the Crusades to the Napoleonic Wars.

It was Abraham Lincoln who approved the laws that eventually established the modern understanding of rape as a war crime. In 1863, he commissioned Francis Lieber, an expert jurist, to develop a set of instructions for governing armies during the Civil War. Lieber specifically named rape as a crime serious enough to be subject to the death penalty. "The Lieber code was revolutionary," said Kelly Askin, director of the International Criminal Justice Institute. "Before, gender crimes had been very much ignored."

International law was more reticent about the problem. "Rape was considered a kind of collateral damage," said Rhonda Copelon, a professor of law at CUNY. "It was seen as part of the unpreventable, fundamental culture of war." After World War II, the rapes of Chinese women by Japanese soldiers in Nanking were prosecuted as war crimes by an international tribunal. However, rape was prosecuted only in conjunction with other violent crimes. The same tribunal, moreover, failed to prosecute the most institutionalized form of sexual violence, the enslavement of "comfort women" by the Japanese Army. In 1946, rape was named a crime against humanity by an Allied statute governing German war-crimes trials, but the law was never implemented. It was not until 1995, at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, that rape was prosecuted as a grave crime tantamount to torture.

The defendant in that 1995 case was a Serbian policeman named Dusan Tadic. The tribunal charged him with various crimes, including the rape of a Muslim woman in a Bosnian prison camp. The rape was labeled a crime against humanity. So was another sexual crime, this one perpetrated against men. Tadic tortured two male Muslim prisoners, forcing one man to bite off the testicles of another, who then bled to death. The tribunal's indictments set an important precedent. Disappointingly, tribunal prosecutors were forced to drop the rape charge after Tadic's victim refused to testify -- she was afraid of reprisal if she did so. The prosecutors were successful, however, with the sexual-mutilation charge. Convicted of torture, among other crimes, Tadic was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

Individual stories of rape in Rwanda had begun to accumulate as soon as the genocide ended, mostly through interviews collected by groups like Human Rights Watch. But because Rwandan culture discourages women from talking about sexual matters -- and also because the idea that rape was merely "collateral damage" remained ingrained in the judicial community -- the prosecutors in Arusha did not initially connect the dots between rape and the Hutus' genocide blueprint. The legal breakthrough came by a willful accident, during the 1998 trial in Arusha of Jean Paul Akayesu, mayor of Taba, a Rwandan commune.

Initially, Akayesu had been charged only with genocide. Among the survivors who testified against him was a woman code-named H. (The identities of tribunal witnesses are shielded.)

"H. disclosed to me prior to her going on the stand that she was raped out in the bush," explained Pierre-Richard Prosper, the current U.S. ambassador at large for war-crimes issues, who led the tribunal's prosecution against Akayesu. "She said that the Interahamwe would come in at the end of the day and start raping the women, and that Akayesu was there." Sensing a window into not

just the act of H.'s rape but the intention of her rapists, Prosper dispatched investigators to Rwanda, specifically to find women who were raped in Taba during the third and fourth weeks of April. Of the 500 or so women they knew had been held captive, investigators discovered that almost all had been killed and dumped in a mass grave. Witness H. was one of about a dozen who was able to escape. So was a woman code-named J.J.

Prosper put J.J. on the stand. Her tale was sickeningly familiar: she said she had been dragged away by Interahamwe and raped repeatedly. Then she mentioned that Akayesu watched her being raped from the doorway and goaded the Interahamwe, saying with a laugh, "Never ask me again what a Tutsi woman tastes like."

The indictment against Akayesu was amended to include the first-ever charge of rape as a crime against humanity. Prosper argued that Akayesu, in making that flip remark as the Interahamwe proceeded with raping J.J., was effectively ordering them to continue raping others.

On Sept. 2, 1998, Akayesu was convicted of genocide and crimes against humanity, including rape. He was sentenced to three life sentences, plus 80 years imprisonment, and transferred to a U.N.-sponsored prison in Mali, in West Africa.

"The intention in Rwanda was an abstraction: to kill without killing," said Arbia, the tribunal prosecutor. She described the case of a 45-year-old Rwandan woman who was raped by her 12-year-old son -- with Interahamwe holding a hatchet to his throat -- in front of her husband, while their five other young children were forced to hold open her thighs. "The offense against an individual woman becomes an offense against the family," Arbia said, "which becomes an offense against the country, and so, by deduction, against humanity."

On Aug. 10, 1999, a year after Akayesu's conviction, Pauline Nyiramasuhuko's indictment was amended to include rape as a crime against humanity. According to prosecutors and witnesses, her frequent instructions to Interahamwe at the prefecture to rape before they killed, or to rape women instead of killing them, had triggered a collective sadism in Butare -- one that had even inspired violence in the local peasants.

One Tutsi rape survivor I met in Butare, a farmer named Suzanne Bukabangwa, had never met Pauline, but became her victim by extension all the same. Her neighbors, uneducated farmers, had kept her as a sex slave during the genocide, she said, torturing her nightly. She remembered two things most of all: the stamens from the banana trees they used to violate her, leaving her body mutilated, and the single sentence one of the men used: "We're going to kill all the Tutsis, and one day Hutu children will have to ask what did a Tutsi child look like."

In Butare, I spoke to a local peasant, Lucien Simbayobewe, who was caught up in this cycle of humiliation. Now 40, he was being held prisoner in the local prison. (Only leaders of the genocide have been sent to Arusha.) He wore the pink shorts and matching pink shirt of the Rwandan inmate's uniform. Wringing his hands in his lap, he told me about one woman he killed who still comes to him every night in his dreams. He couldn't remember this apparition's name, but he said he'd killed her when Pauline first organized the Butare Interahamwe. Choking on emotion, he said, "She comes in the night dancing and gesturing with her hands invitingly, like a

lover." My translator gyrated her arms to show me the motion. "The woman smiles, and says, 'How are you?' But before I can answer, she says, 'Goodbye,' and then she vanishes -- and I wake up." Lucien then told me in detail about killing her. But when I asked Lucien if he'd raped the woman, he fell silent and fought back tears. Every prisoner I spoke with described explicitly whom he killed and how. Not a single one admitted to raping a Tutsi woman.

Perhaps this is because after the war, Rwanda's Legislature declared that rapes committed during the genocide were the highest category of crime; those convicted are sentenced to death. Or maybe these men could somehow justify to themselves having murdered but not raped. In any event, the weight of that level of confession was obviously too much to bear, and if there could be any tangible proof that rape was considered the more shameful crime, it was this.

Some scholars are beginning to share this opinion. "Rape sets in motion continuous suffering and extreme humiliation that affects not just the individual victim but everyone around her," said the philosopher and historian Robert Jay Lifton, who in books like "The Nazi Doctors" has explored the psychology of genocide. "A woman is seen as a symbol of purity. The family revolves around that symbol. Then here is the brutal attack on that, stigmatizing them all. All this perpetuates the humiliation, reverberating among survivors and their whole families." He paused. "In this way, rape is worse than death."

Gerald Gahima, Rwanda's prosecutor general, agrees. ''Rape was the worst experience of victims of the genocide," he said. "Some people paid to die, to be shot rather than tortured. Their prayers were for a quick and decent death. Victims of rape did not have that privilege."

The case against Pauline further cements the precedent established in the Akayesu trial: namely, that inciting mass rape is a crime against humanity. But Pauline's case transcends jurisprudence. She presents to the world a new kind of criminal. "There is a shared concept across cultures that women don't do this kind of thing," said Carolyn Nordstrom, an anthropologist at the University of Notre Dame. "Society doesn't yet have a way to talk about it, because it violates all our concepts of what women are."

I found Pauline's mother, Theresa Nyirakabue, on the same plot of land in Ndora where Pauline was born and reared. Directly across the road is one of the many orderly settlements of sturdy homes the government built for Tutsi survivors of the genocide. Theresa is 86, diminutive and half-blind, and keeps upright by grasping a tall staff. But her milky eyes are electric, her smile is quick and she was eager to invite strangers into her home to talk about her daughter.

She hadn't seen Pauline since the genocide began and was hungry for news of her. I asked her if she knew that Pauline was in detention in Arusha, and she nodded. I asked her if she knew why, and she nodded again. Then I said that I saw Pauline three weeks before in the courtroom and that she looked healthy enough. Smiling broadly, Theresa said: "Pauline wanted to teach at the health center. She liked to teach good health." She paused, still smiling, and said, "Pauline's ministership was the joy of my heart."

I asked her if she thought her daughter was innocent of the charges against her. Theresa sobered instantly. "It is unimaginable that she did these things," she said. "She wouldn't order people to rape and kill. After all, Pauline is a mother." Then Theresa leaned forward, her hands outstretched. "Before the war, Hutu and Tutsi were the same," she said. She told me that Pauline had many Tutsi friends. Theresa added that during the genocide, she herself had hidden a Tutsi boy in her home.

At first, Theresa's story took me by surprise. But then, Rwanda's lethal racialism could never be as starkly delineated as, say, Nazi Germany's. Whether Hutus and Tutsis are separate ethnic groups is a subject of debate, but it was only after European colonists arrived in Rwanda that any political distinction was made between them. Intermarriage had long been common, and both groups spoke the same language and practiced the same religion. Around the turn of the 20th century, however, German and Belgian colonists used dubious racialist logic -- namely, that Tutsis had a more "Caucasian" appearance -- to designate the minority Tutsi the ruling class, empowering them as their social and governing proxy.

In the 1930's, the Belgians, deciding to limit administrative posts and higher education to the Tutsi, needed to decide exactly who was who in Rwanda. The most efficient procedure was simply to register everyone and require them to carry cards identifying them as one or the other. Eighty-four percent of the population declared themselves Hutu and 15 percent Tutsi. Considering the degree of intermarriage in Rwandan history, this accounting was hardly scientific. What's more, Rwandans sometimes switched ethnic identities, the wealthy relabeling themselves as Tutsis and the poor as Hutus.

"Identity became based on what you could get away with," said Alison Des Forges, a senior adviser to the African Division of Human Rights Watch who has studied Rwanda for

30 years. "Half of the people are not clearly distinguishable. There was significant intermarriage. Women who fit the Tutsi stereotype -- taller, lighter, with more Caucasian-like features -- became desirable. But it didn't necessarily mean that the women were one or the other."

With desire comes its emotional alter ego, resentment. A revolution in 1959 brought the majority Hutus to power. As tensions increased around 1990, politicians began disseminating propaganda denouncing Tutsi females as temptresses, whores and sexual deviants. Before the 1994 genocide began, Hutu newspapers ran cartoon after cartoon depicting Tutsi women as lascivious seducers.

Unlike the Nazis, who were fueled by myths of Aryan superiority, the Hutus were driven by an accumulated rage over their lower status and by resentment of supposed Tutsi beauty and arrogance. "The propaganda made Tutsi women powerful, desirable -- and therefore something to be destroyed," Rhonda Copelon told me. "When you make the woman the threat, you enhance the idea that violence against them is permitted."

This pernicious idea, of course, came to full fruition during the genocide. The collective belief of Hutu women that Tutsi women were shamelessly trying to steal their husbands granted Hutu men permission to rape their supposed competitors out of existence. Seen through this warped lens, the men who raped were engaged not only in an act of sexual transgression but also in a

purifying ritual. "Once women are defiled as a group, anything one does to them is done in some kind of higher purpose," Robert Jay Lifton said. "It becomes a profound, shared motivation of eliminating evil. Tutsis must be killed down to the last person in order to bring about utopia. They are seen, in a sense, as already dead."

This explanation conformed with my sense of Pauline's view of the Tutsis; like many of her countrymen, she seemed able to view individual Tutsis as abstractions. But in my conversations with Pauline's mother, things became even more complicated. After Theresa told me about the Tutsi boy she had hidden, she paused, looked at me intently and told me, matter-of-factly, that Pauline's great-grandfather was a Tutsi. The great-grandfather had been redesignated a Hutu, Theresa explained, because he became poor. Stunned, and knowing that in Rwanda kinship is defined patrilineally -- through the blood of fathers -- I asked Theresa if that didn't mean that Pauline was a Tutsi. "Yes, of course," she said eagerly. And would Pauline have known that she came from Tutsi lineage? Theresa pursed her lips and gave a firm, affirmative nod.

The young man Theresa hid was not difficult to find. His name is Dutera Agide, 36, a jobless handyman in Ndora. He told me that he is Pauline's second cousin, and that he is a Tutsi. He said he had spent one week hiding in Theresa's house, listening to the slaughter going on outside. Then he said something even more surprising. At one point, he said, he was hidden in Pauline's house. "I saw Pauline twice a week during the genocide," Dutera told me. "One day she came home, and she said: 'The war is not ending. I'm starting to get afraid. I don't know what will happen.' Then she came back again with her husband, loaded things from the house into a car and left. She looked scared."

After my conversation with Dutera, I went back to Theresa's home one more time. Her exuberance had all but gone. She seemed to have settled into the truth, or a form of it. "People killed people because of fear to be also killed by the perpetrators of the genocide," she said. "My daughter, who was also a minister in the government, could have participated in the killing not because she wanted to kill but because of fear." Theresa then used the Kinyarwanda expression Mpemuke ndamuke: "to be dishonest in order to escape death."

I spoke again with Pauline's sister, Vineranda. "In 1959, when the Tutsi regime changed, our family changed with the situation," Vineranda explained. "Because she was a Tutsi, Pauline was afraid that maybe the government would find out. And she was among many men in the government. And she had money and a position. She didn't want to lose that."

Robert Jay Lifton was intrigued by the revelation that Pauline was of Tutsi descent. "Part of Pauline Nyiramasuhuko's fierceness had to do with eliminating the Tutsi in her," he hypothesized. "She was undergoing an individual struggle to destroy that defiled element in herself."

Pauline's husband, Maurice Ntahobari, denied irritably that there were Tutsi roots in either his or Pauline's family. After being asked repeatedly about Pauline's and Shalom's actions during the genocide, he sighed and said: "Try to understand, try to be in my shoes. This is about my wife and my son."

When I spoke again with Pauline's attorney, Nicole Bergevin, in July, and told her what Pauline's mother had told me about Pauline being of Tutsi descent, Bergevin said she knew. (In an odd reversal, she later denied that Pauline was Tutsi.) Bergevin's demeanor had changed since we had last spoken. This time around, she sounded defeated. Though she still insisted that Pauline knew nothing of the mass raping or murdering, she said, "I'm sure she's going to be found guilty." Then she paused and said with resignation, "When you do murder trials, you realize that we are all susceptible, and you wouldn't even dream that you would ever commit this act." There was a short silence. "But you come to understand that everyone is. It could happen to me, it could happen to my daughter. It could happen to you."

The crimes Pauline Nyiramasuhuko are accused of are monstrous. Her capacity for pity and compassion, and her professional duty to shield the powerless, deserted her, or collapsed under the irresistible urge for power. But in seeking a reasonable explanation for Pauline's barbarity, I remembered something that Alison Des Forges of Human Rights Watch told me.

"This behavior lies just under the surface of any of us," Des Forges said. "The simplified accounts of genocide allow distance between us and the perpetrators of genocide. They are so evil we couldn't ever see ourselves doing the same thing. But if you consider the terrible pressure under which people were operating, then you automatically reassert their humanity -- and that becomes alarming. You are forced to look at these situations and say, 'What would I have done?' Sometimes the answer is not encouraging."

Pauline did possess humanity, but it was in short supply, and she reserved it for her only son, Shalom, whom she had helped turn into a rapist and a killer. In one of her last moments as an engineer of the genocide, however, she returned to her role as woman and mother.

It was in July 1994, right when the Hutu Army was collapsing. Butare had descended into mayhem, and Pauline's side had lost. One of Pauline's neighbors, Lela, spotted the minister in the streets. "I saw Pauline and Shalom at a roadblock," she said. "Pauline was wearing military fatigues, and she was still trying to separate Tutsis and Hutus, but the confusion was massive. There were people running everywhere. The Rwandan Patriotic Front was coming." A short time later, Lela saw Pauline again. This time she was standing alone outside her home, looking worried.

"I was shocked," Lela said. "She was wearing camouflage. She was standing upright in her uniform like a soldier, trying to see what was happening up and down the road. She just looked furious. She was looking everywhere for Shalom. He was her pet. She loved Shalom so much."

*Peter Landesman writes frequently for the magazine. His last article was about Afghan refugees who enter England through the Chunnel.*

Copyright 2002 The New York Times Company | Permissions | Privacy Policy