



U.S. COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES AND IMMIGRANTS

Supporting the Successful Integration of Burundian Refugees

BURUNDIAN REFUGEE STORIES

Profile: FK

FK* is now a resident of North Chicago. He is a man who wears bright blue pants and vividly colored shirts and is generally cheerful. As we talked, he thoughtfully struggled to explain what it means to grow up in a refugee camp. FK never knew childhood outside the Fizi camp, the place where he was born. His parents were Burundian nationals who fled in 1972 to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). They fled to escape the violence and civil war which tore through their homeland from 1970-71 as a result of a Tutsi military coup. Fizi is one of the first and oldest camps in DRC; for FK it was home.

As a child, FK explained, “you don’t know much about the camp...you feel you are okay. Once you are old, you understand life is hard. As a child, as long as you can eat, you are like anybody.” As he got older he found that, “life in a camp is not that easy; life in a camp is hard... you can’t leave like nationals, you are not free. Sometimes you go to Kinshasha, you have to ask permission. Sometimes you have to leave illegally.” For FK, the lack of identity associated with one’s homeland and home culture was unsettling. To the question: “What was life in the camps like?” I received an answer not of physical pain, hunger, or the like, but a more personal, more intrinsic and emotional response. FK answered, “I grew up in that area [the camps], more than 10 years. Thus, I felt like a national. I wasn’t a national, but I felt like one. I adopted the culture. At home, my parents teach me Burundian culture.” At home, his parents told him that even if he was born in the Congo, “We are not from here, it is temporary.” Still, FK did not feel Burundian. His identity was further jeopardized in 2000 when the government of Burundi stated, “You are not Burundian if gone for more than 15 years.” Anyone who could not claim Burundian nationality (FK included) was thus stuck in Fizi, a citizen of nowhere. “Where will we go?” he asked.

The United Nations ruled that FK and others in his situation would be settled in a third-party nation. FK and his family (his wife and two children, 2 years old and 7 months old) were resettled to America in 2007. He was “very, very happy.” In Chicago it was raining and cold when they arrived, but their apartment was ready with food and clothes. He remembered that the staff at Heartland Human Care Services was nice enough to prepare food that they knew from their home country. His apartment building is “very impressive...in the camp there were no buildings,” he explained. He said that the language is difficult, but he is learning. Other than that, he explained, “the culture is not that hard to adjust, I just adopt behavior...I think, if they [Americans] sleep standing, I sleep standing too, its okay!” He is just content that he and his family are somewhere safe.

Interview by: Maryann Cairns

* Full name withheld

Profile: John Peter

“War” was all John Peter said about why he had to leave the orphanage. When asked about who took him to the camps, his succinct answer explained the situation in his country. He kindly laughed at the question and replied, “When the machine guns started to fire, everyone ran. No one told me “Let’s go.” No one took me.” His flight to Tanzania at ten years old was fared alone. He followed strangers during the two week journey. “Many others were fleeing,” he said. When he arrived in Tanzania he was greeted with a little food and then processed into the camps. The ten year old was grouped with five other people and they were given a shared tent and a cooking pot.

Every day John Peter was alone and filled with fear for his future. “How is my life going to be in the future?” he would ask himself. “What can I do?” Soon John Peter had the opportunity to attend carpentry school. He was lucky. The school noticed he was smart and he was able to attend school and work for pay at the same time. John Peter was employed building furniture for Kartumb, one of the oldest camps in the region. He said, “Actually, life over there wasn’t that bad [then].” He was a tradesman making money. He met his wife, who is also Burundian, and they married. Together they applied for resettlement and one year later they were given the chance to come to America. He smiled talking about his two daughters and then recounted his family’s resettlement experience so far.

The flight was long, over two days of travel in all. “I do not get scared, and my child did not get scared, like me,” he says proudly. He had expected that his family would be going to Atlanta, but they were sent to Chicago instead. “You have to like it,” he said. In January 2008, he and his family arrived in Chicago wearing flip flops. Heartland Human Care Services staff picked them up at the airport. Their apartment was ready and there was food. They were given coats and cold weather clothing. “So far nothing is disliked,” he explained, but “everything is different.” The architecture impresses him the most. He spends much of his time exploring the city, but his wife, he said smiling, “[She] can’t go to the market. Every time she goes she gets lost! She can’t get back home.” A month after resettling to Chicago, the time change still keeps his family hungry for lunch at 4 a.m., but they are quickly adjusting. He said it helps that “people are nice.” He likes everything in America. He is happy to be here.

Interview by: Maryann Cairns

Profile: Feliki Kabura

Feliki Kabura was born in Burundi in 1964. In 1972, to escape the civil war in his homeland, he and his brothers (orphaned years earlier) fled to Tanzania. When they arrived, they lived with Tanzanian nationals. However, as the civil war continued and more refugees came to Tanzania for asylum, the boys were relocated to the Gatumba camp. Gatumba is one of the oldest camps for Burundian refugees in Tanzania. Opened in 1974, it is still in use today.

When they arrived in the camps, Feliki explained, “life kind of okay, we were happy....” However, that does not mean life was easy. The shelters they built were “made of mud, tree, and grass...they were always leaking,” he said. The food assistance would sometimes be late. “You may have corn, but no money for the mill,” he said. Also, sometimes the corn “was very hard to chew, to swallow, you would grill it and eat it just to survive. “Sometimes even the corn was gone and people would die of hunger,” Feliki continued. The problem in Gatumba, he explained, was that “we [the refugees] could not go out of the camp; we could not work for money.”

He is now very glad to be in Chicago with his family of ten. He said he was “very, very happy to find a lot of food here.” He likes everything “apples, beef, chicken, eggs, we have everything,” he said. Feliki also appreciates the United States for its tolerance, its diversity. He explained, “This country, [the U.S.] has many cultures and tribes...each groups respects the other, you are not worried about it.” He is most of all very proud and happy that his children “attend school as if they are in their own country.” Feliki has recently gotten a job with a butcher and is very glad to have work.

Still, caring for such a large family in a new country is not an easy task. Money is always a concern for him. Even so, Feliki ended our interview with the following question: “I’m just asking if I can help the orphans...they count on me. Can I help them?” His dreams are no more than this: to have his children grow up proudly as Americans and to help others have the same opportunity.

Interview by: Maryann Cairns

Profile: Maria

Maria fled Burundi in 1972 when she was 10 years old because of the war between the Hutus and Tutsis. At that time, people were fighting for power, and rapes and killings were occurring especially of those who were associated with the government. Maria remembers military soldiers coming to her home looking for her father because he was a soldier in the military. There were accusations that her father was abusing government money, but Maria thinks it was because her father was a Hutu.

When the military came looking for Maria's dad, Maria's mom gathered the family and fled to Tanzania. Since her father was working in Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, they could not get in touch with him and had to flee without him. He later found them and after nine months in Tanzania, her family decided to go to Rwanda. There were rumors that Tanzania was forcing Burundians out and those who returned were being killed. UNHCR brought them to Rwanda with many other Burundian refugees, but this was not a good time for them. They lacked clean water, enough food, and adequate living conditions. Her family spent one year there; Maria was only 12 years old.

Maria's family was chosen to go to another part of Rwanda where there was land to grow food and a permanent place to settle. Everyone had 50 to 300 meters of land and could build their own houses. This was not a camp and it was different than where they had previously lived. Maria lived here for 20 years, briefly fleeing when war broke out in their area in 1990.

In February 1993, Maria had to return to life in the camp, a time she remembers very well. In April 1994, the Rwandan president was killed and they fled again, this time to a camp in Tanzania. They walked for two weeks carrying food and children. Wherever they found water they made camp, cooked, and moved again in the morning. It was unsafe travel with many roadblocks because of the genocide and they were forced to show their identification at each one. Luckily, their identification said they had fled Burundi in 1972 and they were allowed through. No one was killed along the way, however some died of exhaustion. Others returned to Rwanda and were killed by RDF soldiers from the North.

When they arrived in Tanzania, they found the camp by following those ahead of them. Maria was pregnant with her fifth child at this time. They stayed at a second camp for more than one year, but life was not good there. There were illnesses and disease, and many people died. In 1997, they moved to Rukere where life was better and they had a small amount of money from selling wood.

Maria and her family stayed at Rukere until they applied to the U.S. Refugee Program. They went through the application process and in June 2007 Maria, her husband, and their eight children arrived in Manchester, New Hampshire with assistance from the International Institute of New Hampshire. Six months later, Maria is working at a linen service and learning English and her husband is working at the airport. The eldest children have also found jobs and the rest of their children are attending school.