**On Tuesday 30th January 2018, RPF Liberation war top diplomat Patrick Kayumbu Mazimhaka was laid to rest having passed on 25th January. In this article first published by *Rwanda Dispatch Magazine* in July 2012, he reflected on his early life and the cause for liberation.**

Former Deputy Chairperson of the African Union Commission **Patrick Mazimhaka** was at hand to witness Independence Day celebrations in Gitarama on July 1st, 1962. Later he played a big role in the Liberation struggle at one time serving as RPF Vice Chairman. He reflects on the history;

Rwanda's Independence came on July 1st, 1962. I was 14 years old and a Secondary School student at Shyogwe, in Gitarama, the school was located several kilometers east of Kabgayi and Queen Mother Kankazi's palace at Bukinankwavu. Our school, like many others around Gitarama, participated in the celebrations with parades, gymnastics, dances and songs. So we had a front-of row view of the Independence event and the new leaders (political and military). These were the President, Gregoire Kayibanda and his Ministers, the first officers of the young national forces, among them Juvenal Habyarimana and Alexis Kanyarengwe both of whom were to become significant characters on the national scene.

The previous year 1961, my home region in Eastern Rwanda had been "burnt", meaning cleansed of Tutsi and other undesirables, through killings, burning of homes, and destruction or appropriation of property. My parents had had to flee into exile. We were therefore marking Independence when I was homeless. I was trapped at school with no hope of help. My young mind therefore could notice that there was something wrong with that Independence. There were fellow students whose families had already been exiled to Bugesera, outside the country in Tanzania, Congo, Uganda, and Burundi since 1959.

## We managed to escape

Therefore for us victims, celebrating Independence was problematic. I was celebrating nothing; I wasn't convinced my country was getting better. Two weeks after Independence together with other Tutsi students from Shyogwe and Groupe Scholaire, Astrida (Butare), we fled the country to Uganda.  We were helped by Staff at my school who organized transport, travel papers and a white lie claiming we were going for camping at Kazi in Masaka, Uganda.

Our chaplain Rev. Eustache Kajuga (RIP) accompanied us across the border and to

the refugee camps where some of us re-united with family and others found host families. Unfortunately Rev. Kajuga was to pay with his life at the hands of the genocidaires alongside a large number of his family. He took the risk of taking us, young Tutsi to safety and I am sure all those who were with me will forever be grateful for the lifeline him and his colleagues offered us. The teachers at the school knew that we were definitely going to be killed and they could no longer stave off the attempts by Parmehutu militants to overrun the school in a hunt for Tutsi students. Fellow students were aware of this too and that is why for the Tutsi there was no enthusiasm to celebrate an event heralding an uncertain future but with certain signs of worse things to come.

The meaning of Independence was therefore that of double  edged sword; for some Hutu who were not bothered by the state of things, it was time to look for a “bright” future, as they euphemistically called the effect of “ethnic cleansing”, where there will be privileges, good jobs, scholarships, economics opportunity etc… completely ignoring  their erstwhile friends and relatives who had been and were still being chased out of the country. For the Tutsi it felt like the end of the world as they knew it.

As expected, those who went to exile were taking it sitting down. They kept trying to come back by force. It was thrilling to hear about the attacks by these various resistance groups called **Inyenz**i fighting the status quo. The only channel left to allow our return.

Those who did not escape and stayed faced further pogroms. That is why some of us insist that genocide began in 1959 when the Belgians were still in charge and it never stopped until 1994. French Philosopher Bertrand Russell called what happened in Rwanda in 1959 genocide but the United Nations ignored it although it own mission mentions all the acts of genocide observed from 1959 to 1961.

One of the roles of the United Nations mission was to monitor a referendum on the monarchy and general elections. Inspite of the fact that many people were killed or exiled and homes were burnt, the UN still said the 1961 elections and referendum were valid.

Also at the time nationalists were targeted. Prominent members of UNAR were persecuted for demanding immediate independence regardless of whether they were Tutsi or Hutu.

Independence was premised on violence and the exile of the ruling class (Hutu and Tutsi), nationalists and non-PARMEHUTU political leaders. This gave Parmehutu license and, literally, room to abuse power. There weren't many voices which were raised against these abuses.

The policies of the government in Rwanda never changed; the policies towards minorities remained hostile. Parmehutu run out of ideas apart from divisionism based on Hutu nationalism. The Military that overthrew the civilian government in 1973 maintained the same ideology. I remember seeing those military officers at the Independence parade, many of whom participated in the coup, and they looked like they were lost, and in borrowed clothes.

**Was Rwanda ready?**

Actually compared to other African countries Rwanda was more ready for independence given that it had existed as a Nation-state for long thus administratively had structures unlike the artificial states created by colonialists. However the colonialists made sure these structures were destroyed ahead of Independence.

In other areas financially, economically, infrastructure, human capacity Rwanda was not yet ready but not any worse off than the other African states. The state was run by Belgian money. But Independence always comes at such a stage of development; America's independence came when the country was still underdeveloped and headed for a civil war.

**Dictatorships continued**

In mobilizing for the Liberation struggle we were ensuring that these internal problems of lack of democracy, corruption, discrimination -all that was wrong with the country at the time was considered.

There were broader issues in Rwanda. While in exile Kayibanda was not a person to deal with, his policies continued to be hostile. Kayibanda proceeded to ban other political parties once in power. In 1964 Kayibanda gave a speech that threatened to exterminate the relatives of the resistance fighters –you will find your relatives finished. RPF leader Paul Kagame was told the same words in Paris in 1991.

When Juvenali Habyarimana came to power in 1973, he claimed that everyone

could come home. In 1980 he told a journalist that there was no room for those "economic" refugees. The debate was whether refugees can go home or not? Looking at the governance, based on discrimination, there was no way Tutsi could return. The causes of refugee life had to be removed first.  Those who came home were killed, Habyarimana declarations were empty and his policies were the same as Kayibanda's but more systematic and institutionalized.

**Meeting Obote**

One of the significant events that would influence the course of liberation was the persecution of Banyarwanda in Uganda by the second Obote government in 1980's. This saw many youth join Yoweri Museveni's NRA rebels.

As chairman of Rwanda Refugees Welfare Foundation [RRWF], I went to see Milton Obote in 1980 about the fate of Rwandans. While campaigning for election, Obote gave a speech in Iganga attacking Banyarwanda that shocked me, he gave another speech in Masaka with the same theme and I decided to go and see him. And I asked him if his speeches were fair to Rwandans who he had given exile in the 1960s?

Obote claimed Rwandans had been part of Idi Amin's State research, the dreaded intelligence services, and had killed people. I told him it's him [Obote] who had created State Research and people joined as individuals whose actions cannot be blamed on a whole community. Obote's animosity was unjustified.

Obote even claimed to me that he wanted to scare Habyarimana, who he accused of stealing/smuggling his [Uganda's] coffee. Obote's Refugee affairs Minister Katiti and other Banyankole Ministers influenced the hostility.

**Sacrifice for Liberation**

We all had individual problems to solve, but when they coincide with those of others in specific group then it is possible to organize to solve the problem. One could achieve anything in the world but feel incomplete because of psychological problem of not belonging to a nation. Thus the collective plight of refugees is statelessness.

A stateless person fighting to get a state is not sacrificing. The struggle to get your own citizenship is essentially self serving. If you get others in a similar situation you organise and get results beyond yourself. You join a movement because of a

common cause.

However, the benefits of liberation go beyond personal needs. Soldiers who put their lives on the line, and fight for liberation, benefit and others benefited too, including those who do not contribute anything to the liberation, like those who could have fought but did not. But we know that without young people to risk their lives in war others would not enjoy liberty.

Thus the package of risk and effort can be called sacrifice but it doesn’t mean people were not simultaneously solving their own problems. Sacrifice is very important in any revolution because you have to believe in something strong enough to give everything you have. A lot of people did, we have had a lot of success in certain areas because of the spirit of sacrifice.

***As told to Gonzaga Muganwa***