

Maggy, the Angel of Burundi

The founder of the "Shalom houses", where the children of Burundi come to find refuge, Marguerite Barankitse continues her struggle. Passing through Geneva, she found time to talk to us. A meeting with a very exceptional woman.

Of course there are the ten thousand children she saved, and of course there are the prizes and distinctions she has received; but what impresses you with Marguerite Barankitse is her smile, the joy of life that permeates her finely drawn face. This, despite a life filled with good reasons never to laugh or smile again; and yet Madam Barankitse, or "Maggy" as she prefers to be called, always shows her good humour.



She was born in Burundi and grew up in a region far away from anywhere, near the Tanzanian border. Tutsi in origin, she and her brother were brought up by their mother, her father having died when she was only five.

"We were only three at home, but there were always lots of other children of all races," she remembers. "Mum's door was always open, she said that we were all 'God's children'." So the three races of the country were always side by side at the Barankitse's table: Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. "There has always been racial warfare in Burundi. But in our house there was no racial discrimination."

Maggy became a teacher, and sought to struggle against social injustice. "One day at school a little Hutu girl was crying at the back of the class. I asked her what was the matter, but she didn't want to answer me: she must surely have thought that a Tutsi like me would not understand." Finally the child confided that her father had been killed, and her mother was dead. "She had nowhere to go, so I brought her home." Chloë was to be the first of thousands of children that Maggy would take in. When war broke out in 1993, she had already adopted seven of them, four Hutus and three Tutsis. "People thought I was crazy. Neither married nor a nun, I earned the equivalent of twenty Euros a month and had more and more children around me. I was so happy."

Until tragedy struck. Three months after his investiture, on the 21st of October 1993, the president of the Burundian Republic, the Hutu Melchior Ndadaye, was assassinated by troops of the national army. "The Tutsi rejoiced at this assassination. For myself, I was ashamed. I did not know how they could rejoice over somebody's death." The murder signalled the start of the mutual massacre of the Hutu and the Tutsi. "All of a sudden, your neighbour became a criminal, people you had been at school with wanted to kill you. Everyone went mad. When I pleaded for help from my Tutsi uncles and aunts, they refused it to my Hutu children. And when I went to the Hutus, they sent me away because of my Tutsi origins."

A devout Catholic, Maggy decided to seek refuge in a neutral place, the bishop's house at Ruyigi, where she worked as a secretary. Outside, the Hutus tried to escape the massacre. "I decided to help them." Hiding them in the bishop's house, Maggy protected them from their attackers. Then on Sunday the 24th of October the Tutsis arrived, armed with machetes. "I told the children to hide, locked the place and went out to talk to the Tutsis. I told them 'Go away. There are no criminals here.' They would not listen to me," sighs Maggy, her voice trembling slightly. Instead, they stripped her, tied her up and beat her. "They demanded the



keys of the house. I told them 'Never. If I have to die, I want a worthy death.'" But in the end they got into the place somehow. Maggy then had to watch the unspeakable murder of seventy-two people: men and women, the elderly and the children, cut down one after the other by machete strokes and clubbed with bamboo sticks. "When they had gone, I wept before the altar. I said to God, 'Lord, explain to me. You cannot be the God of love if you allow this to happen. I have given all I have, and this is your answer? What sense is there to my life now?' At that moment, Maggy's seven children came out of the sacristy where they had remained hidden during the massacre. Twenty-five other children had also survived. "I had witnessed a miracle," Maggy affirms. From that moment on her destiny was decided. "I rejected fratricidal hatred. It was that on very evening my adventure really started."

The following day she buried all seventy-two bodies with her own hands. With the thirty or so children she would look after from then on she set up house in a disused school, and so the first "Shalom house" saw the light of day. At the start it was all improvisation. Then the German branch of Caritas helped her to structure Shalom House as an NGO. Since 1993, in her own region and throughout Burundi, Shalom houses have multiplied. Ten thousand children of all races, orphans or not, victims of the massacres or of AIDS or of famine, all have found refuge there. "These children are the future of humanity," says Maggy, radiant with joy. "In raising them, I want to rebuild my native country. Tomorrow, they may change the world." Chloë, the very first of them all, has become a doctor.

Since then, in Europe or in the USA, Maggy has collected humanitarian awards: the Human Rights Prize, the Four Freedoms Award, the World's Children's Prize, the Solidarity Prize, the Children's Nobel Prize, the Defence of Displaced Persons Prize. She has been called the "Angel of Burundi" and the "Mandela of Ruyigi". The Vatican has honoured her. Catholic organisations have made her an icon of universal charity, a sort of black-skinned Mother Teresa.

But anyone who meeting her expects to see a saintly person is in for a surprise, for tirelessly she provokes, attacks, rails. Her own position makes her smile, "I travel in the States, in Europe, where people die of overeating. I am received with pomp and circumstance, but at those buffet dinners I can't help thinking to myself 'My

God, what these people throw into the waste bin would feed all my people! It's a delayed-action bomb. If we don't help these who have nothing, they will one day come and help themselves." But for all that, "Living on aid from outside is not such a help as you might think, because when the aid stops, what happens? The people who had been receiving it have forgotten how to manage on their own."

Today, even though Burundi has started the process of reconciliation, the situation remains difficult. "There is much corruption at various levels of government." The country ranks thirteenth in the world for the prevalence of AIDS (20% of the 8m population), remains third in the list of the poorest countries and has more than 800,000 orphans. Life expectancy is no more than 46 years. In setting up a hospital this year, Maggy hopes once more to improve matters. But even she recognises her limits: "God has given me a job that is beyond my capacities. I have to accept that I cannot do everything."



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