

# The Language of the Dead – Genocide, Forensic Medicine and Archaeology

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## Introduction

Functioning institutions in the field of forensic medicine are a necessity for the future positive development of society. Forensic medicine plays a key role for a peaceful society and for internal safety. Developments towards increasingly sophisticated violent activities require even more teaching and training in advanced technologies and forensic practice as well as research on forensic pathology, toxicology and DNA-technology. Crimes of the past and in the reality of today should not remain unresolved. This is an urgent need.

## Activities/Findings

- I. The review starts with a report on the exhumation and identification of unknown soldiers from the 2nd World War. With the help of medicolegal investigation and reconstruction methods, an American pilot presumably murdered by a shot in the head (lynch law) and an interned Italian soldier could be identified after about 70 years and brought back home. – Details of this work were published in the *Archives of Criminology* (compare 1, 2, 3, 9).
- II. Between April and July 1994, the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda claimed the lives of over a million victims. In order to preserve the memory of the genocide, the government of Rwanda and the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide (CNLG) established different genocide memorial sites, which make it possible to properly bury genocide victims, create places for survivors to mourn and remember the lives of those who died. One of the most prominent sites for remembrance, preservation and the prevention of genocide denial is Murambi in the Southern Province of Rwanda (compare 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). At Murambi nearly 50,000 people were killed during the night of 21–22 April 1994 and buried in shallow mass graves. Years later, the bodies were excavated; for the sake of preserving the physical evidence of the genocide they were conserved with powdered lime. We established a very close cooperation with the conservation experts at the Lower Saxony Heritage Conservation Authority (Niedersächsisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege, NLD). The conservation experts from this institution have been involved in our project since 2016 in regards to cleaning and long-term conservation of the human remains in Murambi (Fig. 1). The memorial site in Murambi was opened to the public on April 21, 2019

in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the genocide against the Tutsi (=Kwibuka 25).

To a certain extent, Rwanda, the country that we appreciate, love and deeply admire, and Germany share dark and very sad and violent periods in their history. Germany in the first half of the 20th century was responsible for the First and Second World Wars, killing millions of innocent, unarmed, peace-loving people on battlefields and especially in concentration camps during the so-called Holocaust. Rwanda, with a history of genocidal activities since the late 1950s and 1960s, experienced a brutal, exorbitant genocide against the Tutsi 25 years ago, in 1994.

After the Second World War the Germans swore: Never again! The good thing: In central Europe peace and the supremacy of reason have been a reality for more than 70 years, the longest period ever in European history.

However, days of darkness have come up again and again in other regions of our world, on all continents. This was the case in Rwanda in 1994, when the Hutu killed one million Tutsi within 100 days – unforgettable, unbelievable and inconceivable again!

More than 100 years ago, Germany and Rwanda had points of contact in their history. Between 1884 and 1916 Rwanda was a colonial sector of German East Africa. In 1894, the German officer Gustav Adolf von Götzen was the first European living for two months at the court of the Rwandan king. Between 1897 and 1907 the German medical doctor and Africa scientist Richard Kandt explored Rwanda, especially the area around the Kivu-Lake. In 1898, he described the spring of the Nile, in 1907 he was the founder of Kigali, and since 1906 he acted as resident representing the German emperor. During the First World War, the Germans were driven out of Rwanda by the Belgians. The German colonial activities ended.

We highly appreciated to be back in Rwanda and be part of the 25th anniversary to commemorate the genocide against the Tutsi. It was a great honour for our team from Hamburg and Hannover to work together with CNLG in the preservation of dead bodies of genocide victims in Murambi. The cooperation between our countries as well as between police, legal, governmental and non-governmental organisations and between the societies of our countries has developed into a very positive, sustainable institutional and especially personal cooperation on the basis of mutual exchange, acceptance, confidence, loyalty and friendship. I would like to express my gratitude to our partners at CNLG for their tremendous work to make this cooperation possible. Thanks, too, to all our co-workers in Rwanda and Hamburg and Han-

Human Remain MAR09-04

Gender: : female

Age: 8 – 12 years

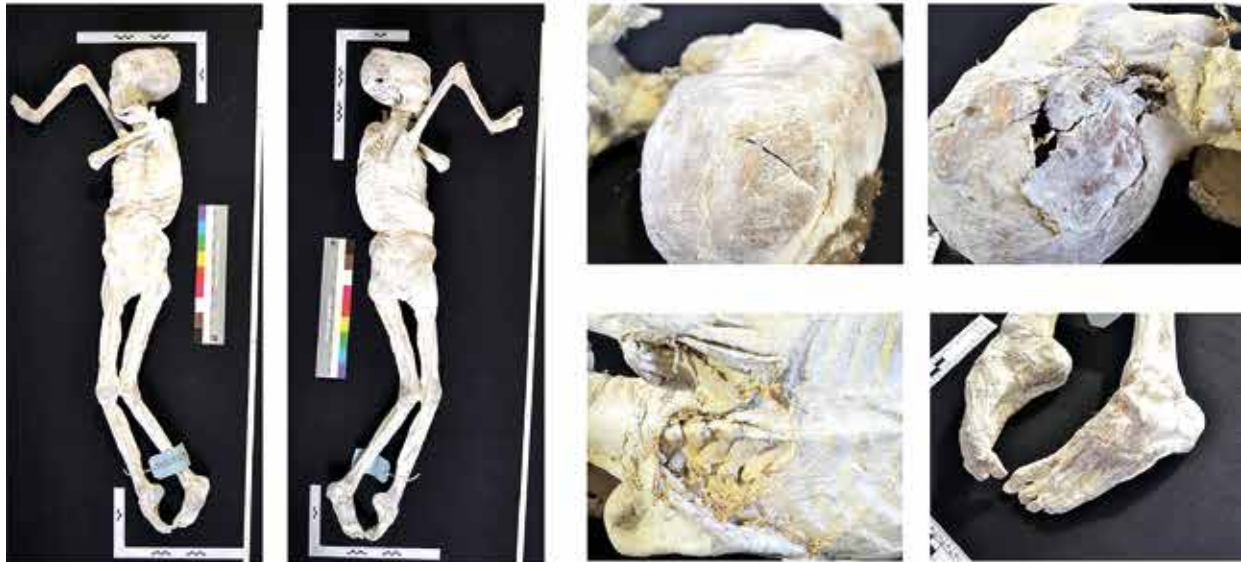
Height: 120,8 cm

Weight: 3,31 kg

Time of Death: April 1994

Probable Cause of Death: sharp / blunt force trauma to the head

Remains before cleaning treatment



Remains after cleaning treatment



This young girl was killed by severe blunt and also sharp force trauma to the head. Additionally, the bones of the upper spine lie open and show some injuries. It is not clear if these fractures happened while the girl was killed or at a later date.

This body was cleaned in 2018.

Fig. 1: Human remains in Murambi



Positioning a body on the carrier plate



Inserting the carrier plate into the coffin



Fig. 2: Workplan scenery in Murambi (thanks to M. Lehmann, M. Schaarschmidt, O. Krebs, M. Muhoza and R. Rurenzi)

nover, who have selflessly contributed with their creativity, knowledge, and experience.

The CNLG is our essential partner for all activities concerning anthropology, archaeology, preservation, human remains, and cultural heritage. We notice expansion and new dimensions of cooperation. It's a great honour for our team from the Medical University of Hamburg-Eppendorf and the Heritage Conservation Authority of Lower Saxony to perform scientific and practical efforts within the scope of conservation and presentation of human remains. Special thanks to Monika Lehmann, Dorte Schaarschmidt, Oliver Krebs, Eilin Jopp-van Well, Martin Mukoza and Regis Rurenzi – our team from Hannover, Hamburg and CNLG/Rwanda. They really worked very hard to arrange the exhibition of the mortally injured victims of unforgettable violence, also against children. – Learning from the dead, from death and evil can be a starting point for positive developments. That's our vision.

A clear decision was made by CNLG and the government of Rwanda, namely to choose 20 dead bodies for a preservation project and to put these bodies into transparent coffins to be publicly presented in the memorial. These bodies – 11 adults and 9 children – were chosen on the basis of several factors, such as visible signs of trauma, the appearance of being better preserved than others, and totally anonymous (see Figs. 1–3).

## Discussion

Of course, this is a complicated framework of juridical, cultural, political, scientific and ethical aspects, also in connection with the feelings, wishes, and visions of survivors, victim organisations, relatives and the whole population, an issue of civic and political education.

From my point of view as a university teacher and scientist responsible for matters of truth and proof, violence, injuries and biomechanics, the reconstruction of the exhibition hall is useful and necessary work. The detailed presentation of dead bodies, including those of many children, is impressive. I am truly and deeply convinced of this project. The dead bodies tell us their story more convincingly than any lecture, book, picture or ceremony.

One can directly see, investigate, recognise and reconstruct what happened. Human remains tell us the true story – personally, directly, and clearly, without whitewashing or discrimination.

We summed up our thoughts, feelings, and reconstruction work in a booklet with the title *Never Forgotten – the Genocide Victims from Murambi/Rwanda* (7). From my point of view, the text and the figures give you an idea of our scientific anthropological and archaeological work.

It was great honour and a very emotional personal experience for me to have been at a place where a forensic expert can show and translate what people can learn from the dead. To investigate, restore and preserve dead bodies is a concrete proof of the lessons we have learned, namely to make sure that the people who were killed will never be forgotten!

MORTUI VIVOS DOCENT!



Fig. 3: Final presentation of individual human remains (anonymous) in the conservation hall in Murambi

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