

## **President, military commander**

Born in Gitarama Prefecture, Rwanda, in October 1957, Kagame was the youngest of a Tutsi family of four sisters and one other brother. His father was from a privileged Tutsi background, and his mother was intimately related to the King's wife. Despite these elite connections the Kagame family was forced to flee Rwanda two years after Paul's birth in the face of ethnic violence by Hutu extremists. In search of security and a somewhat normal life, Kagame's parents took him in 1960 to Uganda, where they made their long-term home in the Toro district of the Nshungerezi refugee camp.

### ***A Refugee's Childhood***

The Kagame family's departure was in response to the political rise of the Hutu majority in the 1959 "peasant revolution"—a movement that was fueled by Tutsi and Belgian oppression and abuses of power—that resulted in the deaths of 20,000 Tutsi. The revolution came to define an entire swath of Tutsi refugees like Kagame who, in the face of violence and the Hutu power, had fled to Uganda where they became known as the "59ers."

In Uganda Kagame went to school to learn English, and then continued his education at a local state school in Ntare where he excelled. But as a Rwandan "59er" he was not granted Ugandan citizenship and as such did not qualify for a scholarship to enter secondary school. Instead he benefited from financial assistance from a family friend based in Belgium that enabled him to continue his schooling. This sense of alienation in Ugandan society was later summarized in an interview with Kagame: "Professional advancement was restricted for Rwandans in Uganda. There were limitations on our progress," as quoted in Colin M. Waugh's biography, *Paul Kagame and Rwanda*. But Kagame also stressed, according to Waugh, that he "would never have accepted Ugandan citizenship.... I wanted to be a Rwandan."

Kagame's contact with Rwanda happened again in his early twenties when he bravely organized two trips to Rwanda in 1977 and 1978. Even though the 1973 military coup d'etat by Juvenal Habyarimana had led to a period of relative calm in Rwanda's ethnic tension, Kagame knew that his trips were dangerous in the context of the previous massacres and oppression of Tutsi. Reflecting upon these trips in later years he said that he was searching for his identity as a Rwandan: "I wasn't sure what I was doing, I wanted to know something and perhaps build on that," as quoted by Waugh.

### ***Uganda and the National Resistance Movement***

In 1986 Kagame met his fellow graduate and local Ugandan activist Yoweri Museveni, who would eventually become president of Uganda. This chance meeting proved to be formative in Kagame's political awareness and professional military development. Museveni had convinced Kagame of the injustices of the Ugandan government and in the late 1970s recruited him to the struggle against the regime from their base in Tanzania. In early 1981, Museveni's National Resistance Army (NRA) made its first military strike against the Ugandan state; Kagame was

among this tiny band of 27 guerrillas along with one other Rwandan. For a number of years Kagame was an intelligence officer in the NRA and gathered information in rural areas.

Upon taking power in 1986, Kagame held a senior position in the NRA. Kagame's experiences in the NRA and its political wing, the National Resistance Movement (NRM), cannot be underestimated. As one RPF leader put it: "If the NRM could liberate Uganda, the RPF began to ask why it could not do the same in Rwanda," as quoted in Mahmood Mamdani's *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*. Museveni subsequently selected Kagame for a nine-month training stint in Cuba and in 1989 he was again sent abroad for training, this time in the Joint Combined Exchange Training course by the U.S. military in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

### **Genocide *The Rwandan Patriotic Front and Its Aftermath***

Using his organizational base in the Ugandan NRA where several thousand other "'59ers" served, Kagame was one of the leading figures in the 1987 formation of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which was loosely modelled on the NRM. Led by the respected and energetic Fred Rwigyema, the RPF was a political movement that campaigned for the repatriation to Rwanda of 480,000 Tutsi refugees and strongly opposed Habyarimana's Hutu-dominated one-party state. The RPF saw their chance and its military wing, the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA), made their first attack from Uganda in late 1990, initiating what was to be a four-year civil war.

Rwigyema died leading the RPA's first flawed attack in October 1990, leaving the force in disarray. Kagame quickly returned from the United States to lead the RPF/RPA, assuming the title of major-general. His role was central to the future success of the rebellion as he rapidly rebuilt the RPA to a force of 15,000 men and led a series of military victories against the far more numerous forces of the government army. However, many Rwandans were not enthusiastic about being "liberated" by the RPF and by the time of a major RPA offensive in February 1993 almost a million Rwandan citizens were displaced. Moreover, Hutu militants exercised a brutal policy of revenge killings against Tutsi civilians. Nevertheless, despite appearing "more like a stern college professor than a rebel army commander," according to Lt. Gen. Roméo Dallaire in his book *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*. Kagame's campaign was a strategic success and the RPA managed to take control of some Rwandan territory. This was against the odds since the French sent paratroopers, military advisers, and financial support for a mass inflow of arms to the Hutu-led government.