

Extract from Chapter I

Forty centimetres: space

Forty centimetres is the standard width of a prisoner's individual space, where he sleeps, where he eats, where he sits, where he lives. He calls it his *château*, his castle. It consists of one or two planks of wood placed on a metal frame. The planks are lined up next to each other, with no space in between. Sometimes there are makeshift partitions between the planks, but often there aren't. The planks are on a structure of bunk-beds, on three levels, with a wooden ladder propped up against the front to climb up to the top levels. There are no cells, just row after row of these bunk-bed structures, erected in basic buildings. Each building is a block. Several hundred prisoners are crammed into each block. Several thousand prisoners are crammed into each prison.

There are not enough *châteaux* for everybody – far from it. Those who get a space on these planks are the lucky ones. Others have to sleep on the ground in a tiny space underneath the lowest row of planks, on the concrete; it is so low you would not think an adult could enter it. But they do, tall men with supple bodies crawling in there like cats, their bodies bending at improbable angles. Or old men for whom the process of sliding in and out of this space is visibly painful. Once in, they can barely move. They lie there with the top of their head grazing the planks of the bunk-bed above them. They can't turn over and they can barely breathe. In Cyangugu Central Prison, these spaces under the beds are called "mines"; in Butare, they are *indake* (trenches); in Gitarama, they are *igara* (the place underneath). One prisoner told us he had spent six years sleeping in a mine, on the concrete under someone else's bed.

Other prisoners sleep on the ground in the corridors, in the gangways between the bunk-beds, where they are often trampled on or accidentally kicked. One prisoner told us that people can't complain if you walk on them, because it is obviously not done on purpose. Another prisoner who had been sleeping in a corridor for more than three years explained how he had to fold up his legs all the time so that people could pass without walking on him. Many sleep directly on the ground. Others sleep on pieces of cardboard, or on a torn sack, or on part of a blanket, with the other part folded over them.

In one huge room in Butare Central Prison, known as the chapel, there are no metal structures and no bunk-beds. There are just rows of narrow wooden benches on the ground. Each bench is about 30 centimetres wide. One layer of prisoners sleeps on top of these benches and another underneath, in a grid-like formation. The prisoners gave us a demonstration: one person lies on the bench, on a folded sack which serves as a mattress. Three others lie underneath, on the ground between the two feet of the bench, at right angles to the one on top. The only way for those on top to get up at night is to step on the last few inches of each bench which have deliberately been left empty for this purpose. Other people sleep across all the pathways on the ground. About 400 people live in the chapel.

In Butare prison, there is another area known as Kuwait, so named by the prisoners because it is a gulf, a narrow impasse. It is dark, damp and airless, and there is an overpowering smell from the adjacent toilets and showers. Just outside Kuwait, people sleep in an area which is also used to wash, but which is distinct from the official showers. It is a narrow corridor, but less dark than Kuwait because it is in the open air. When we walk through, some of the prisoners who live there are sitting crouched up against the walls, with dirty, soapy water swilling around their feet and dripping down the walls, while others are having their shower opposite them. They have to clean the area each night before going to sleep there.

The even less fortunate sleep outside, in the yard, in the open air, exposed to the hot sun and frequent downpours of heavy rain. Some have plastic sheeting to protect them, but it is old and worn, stitched and patched up again and again until it can be patched up no longer; the rain drips in through the holes. The sheeting is rolled back during the day, unless it is raining, and brought back at night, but it doesn't cover the whole yard, so some prisoners remain exposed. Some more enterprising prisoners have erected precarious structures against the walls of the yard, made of a combination of wooden planks and pieces of sheeting; these are called *ibyari*, birds' nests. But most just sleep where they can on the ground outside, sitting against the walls, or in the middle of the yard, next to drainage channels and puddles of dirty rain.

In the annex to Butare prison, known as Rwandex, there are prisoners who sleep on top of the septic tanks located under the main path in two of the blocks, in the open air. Once or twice a month, the path has to be dug up, using metal handles, and the septic tanks emptied into the drainage channels which run through the prison and out. The job of emptying the septic tanks takes 24 hours. The team of prisoners responsible for hygiene works through the night. When the tanks are being emptied, the prisoners who live there have to move and find somewhere else to sleep. We met a prisoner who had been sleeping on the ground over the septic tanks for one year and four months: "Since arriving in Rwandex, until today, I've been sleeping over the septic tanks. The smell is very bad. They empty the tanks regularly and it stinks terribly. On the nights when they empty it, we just walk around all night. We call it *abari ku izamu* [nightwatchmen]."

Every aspect of prison life in Rwanda is defined by the overcrowding. The first hint is the noise. At Nsinda, the approach to the prison is down a quiet path dotted with small houses, one or two shops, and fruit and vegetable crops. As you draw closer to the prison, you become aware of a sound like the humming of thousands of bees coming from behind the prison walls a few yards ahead. It is the sound

of prisoners talking, working, getting on with their daily lives. In other prisons, the sound is not audible from the outside, but as soon as the guards open the interior gate to let anyone in or out, the sound rises and wraps itself around you. Once you are inside, after a few seconds, you no longer even notice it.

Many of the blocks we walked through were so dark that it took some time for our eyes to adjust. We were afraid of tripping over or bumping into people as we wended our way down the narrow passageways. Some prisons have electricity, but the supply is erratic at best, and there was no lighting in the blocks we visited during the daytime. Nsinda prison has tents instead of blocks, and a larger space outside the tents in which prisoners can walk around, but inside each tent, there is the same three-tier bunk-bed structure as in the other prisons, in the same oppressive darkness, overflowing with hundreds of prisoners. In some prisons, efforts were still being made to carve out new living areas within the limited space available: in Cyangugu prison, prisoners had constructed a new place in the yard which they called *gariyamoshi* (train, in Swahili) because it is made of metal. Prisoners who live there say they live in the train. The train was covered with sacking, but within a short time, the sacking was already torn.

In Butare prison, until 2003, people were still sleeping in the showers, in the toilets and on makeshift platforms higher up above the toilets. They also used to sleep on the roof, in the open air. In 2004, the roof area – which we accessed by climbing up a long steep ladder – is still crowded but no one sleeps there anymore. It is used for classes. Groups of 15 or 20 prisoners sit clustered in front of blackboards, in the blazing sun. There is no shelter. All around them, on the rooftops, blankets have been laid out to dry on the corrugated iron roofs, placed there with long wooden poles. When you stand on the roof and look out over the prison walls, you get a clear view of the green hills all around; you can see fields and people in the distance, lots of open space, the world outside.

In Gitarama prison, the first interior courtyard, after going through the gate, is crammed full of people. It is as if they have gathered there for a purpose, awaiting a meeting or an important announcement. In fact, they are just standing there because that is where they live. It is the same thing in one of the big rooms inside, formerly used as a chapel. It is a huge room, full of people, some sitting, some standing, some lying down, again looking as if they are waiting for something. The chapel is home to 320 prisoners and, as in Butare, they sleep on benches. Further inside the prison, unpleasant smells waft in from the kitchen and swirls of acrid smoke and ashes blow into our eyes as we walk past. Prisoners are living and sleeping right next to the kitchen, with the smoke blowing straight at them. A few prisoners walk past, screwing up their eyes against the smoke, but most are just sitting there; that is where they spend their days and their nights. Inside the blocks, it is dark and extremely crowded. Many prisoners are just lying or sitting in their châteaux. Some peer out from behind improvised curtains. They don't seem surprised by our visit. Some smile and greet us. Most stare in silence. The expression in their eyes is not blank; it is a direct and piercing look, yet it is difficult to decipher its meaning. I remember, when I visited the prisons in earlier years, being met by a sea of intense stares, distrustful, defiant, even fierce, and all of them expectant. Several years on, there is no longer any ferocity, and no longer any expectation, just a tired resignation.