

The Torture of the Living

Francis Xavier Ruhesi (1930–1972) was among the pioneer indigenous chartered civil engineers who helped lay Uganda's technical foundation at independence. Ruhesi's career and family life were abruptly cut short when he was abducted on September 25, 1972. He was never seen again. More than five decades later, his disappearance remains unresolved, with his family still searching for answers and holding on to the hope of uncovering the truth about his fate, writes his son, **Emmanuel Tuslime Ruhesi**.

Francis Xavier Ruhesi was born in 1930 in Isingiro to Petero Kabaterine, a veteran of the King's African Rifles. After the Second World War, the family settled in Rwarire, Nyamitanga, in present-day Mbarara District.

He began his education at a time when schooling was beyond the reach of most peasant families.

His academic distinction earned him bursaries throughout — from primary school at St Aloysius Nyamitanga to secondary at St Leo's College Kyegobe in Fort Portal, and on to Uganda Technical Institute Nakawa, then Uganda's leading institution for engineering training.

In 1957, the Ankole Kingdom Native Government awarded him a scholarship to the Portsmouth College of Technology in England.

This would position him as a foundational figure in the design and development of post-independence Uganda's infrastructure.

When he returned home briefly in 1960, Ankole Kingdom celebrated him at a reception in Kamukuzi as the first Munyankore to qualify as a civil engineer. He returned home fully qualified as a member of the Institution of Civil Engineers and the Institution of Water Engineers. He was, by any measure, a man of distinction.

On his return in 1963, he was appointed regional engineer for Ankole and Kigezi under the Ministry of Works, Communication and Housing. Promoted to senior executive engineer in 1965, he played a central role in the early post-independence expansion of public infrastructure, overseeing construction of roads and bridges, airstrips, government buildings, schools, water systems, and urban services across the region. In 1967, he was appointed deputy commissioner of Water Development in Entebbe. In 1970, he transferred to Jinja Municipal Council as town engineer.

On Monday, September 25, 1972, his trajectory as a leading statesman was violently halted when he was abducted. Ruhesi was picked from his office at Jinja Municipality by military personnel, together with his colleague Henry Kasigwa, the town treasurer. He was last seen alive aboard a military vehicle on

Ruhesi: The engineer who vanished without a trace

the outskirts of Jinja town.

The search that never ended

In the weeks and months that followed, Hildegard Korugendo Ruhesi, his wife and the mother of their six children, searched tirelessly for any information about his whereabouts. Supported by family, friends, and sympathisers, she pursued every possible lead: detention centres, government prisons and army barracks. Each lead raised hope briefly, only to end in disappointment.

At some point, the search led her to Nile Mansions, the heart of the regime's terror apparatus. On arrival, she was intercepted, interrogated, and held captive.

Her life was spared only by a chance encounter with a soldier who felt pity for her, moved by the sight of her clutching a rosary in prayer, and by her pleas that she was a single mother of six young children. In an act of extraordinary kindness, the 'Good Samaritan' smuggled her through some subterranean passages, navigating the darkness until she emerged to safety near Radio Uganda.

She later learned that she was one of the few people to survive a visit to Nile Mansions and the notorious Pink Building beside it.

After this near-death experience, hope of finding him alive diminished. She began searching through the dead. A relative in the police force helped arrange a visit to Namanve Forest. The search was led by body-finders — men who moved through the remains with what she describes as a detached efficiency of scavengers. She examined shattered faces and decomposing limbs, one after another, searching for any trace of her husband. She did not find him. The body-finders suggested searching in other dumping sites but she was too traumatised to go through it again.

After years of fruitless searching, the family conceded. Ruhesi was presumed dead. Life — what remained of it — had to go on without him.

Property seized, family silenced

At the time of his abduction, the family lived in the official residence provided by Jinja Municipality. The municipal authorities, to their credit, allowed the family an extended stay.

On relocation to Mbarara, they found that their family home — on Plot 11 Buremba Road, Kakoba — had been seized by the Uganda Army and was being used as a residence for senior officers of the Simba Battalion. The army officers did not leave until February 1979, when anti-Amin forces took Mbarara.

In the interim, the family did what survival required. Bishop John Baptist Kakubi, a personal friend of Ruhesi, arranged for the family to be accommodated at St Helen's Primary School while they quietly built a modest house on the adjacent plot.

"We used to play with the children of the army officer next door. They would come to our house and we would go to theirs. None of us knew that the bigger house next door belonged to us," Rose Ruhesi, the daughter, said.

When the house was eventually re-



Francis Xavier Ruhesi. PHOTO/COURTESY

possessed in 1980, it had been severely damaged by military occupation, wartime looting, and years of neglect.

Ms Ruhesi, a former teacher who had become a stay-at-home mother, faced the reality common to the wives of the disappeared: employers were reluctant to hire her, fearing the regime's suspicion by association. She drew on her Domestic Science training and built a cottage bakery. Cakes, confectionery, and chicken farming became the foundation of the family's survival.

RUHESI AT A GLANCE

Born: 1930, Isingiro

Education: St Aloysius Nyamitanga; St Leo's College Kyegobe; Uganda Technical Institute Nakawa.

Further studies: Portsmouth College of Technology, UK
Profession: Chartered Civil Engineer.

Career highlights: Regional Engineer (Ankole/Kigezi), Deputy Commissioner of Water Development, Town Engineer (Jinja).

Disappearance: Abducted September 25, 1972.

2004 – Possible burial site identified, but no confirmation.

dated the family's survival.

A landscape of fear and trauma

In the 1970s, the Mbarara suburb of Kakoba lived in the suffocating shadow of the Simba Battalion barracks, where the threat of state violence constantly undercut the vibrancy of a cosmopolitan community. Life here was a high-stakes hierarchy of survival.

At the same time, soldiers routinely harassed the population, and the nearby Ruvizi River became a grim repository for the dead bodies. Certain residents paraded their ethnicity, religion, or military rank as shields of impunity to navigate the chaos. For the families of the killed or disappeared, survival meant retreating into the background as they watched their neighbours use identity as armour in an era defined by lawlessness and unresolved silences.

The wives of those who had been killed or disappeared in Mbarara — Basil Kiiza Batarungwa, Francis Xavier Tibayungwa, Lt Col Serapio Kaku-hikire, Paul Bitature, Yosia Nkore, Amos Baryamujura and Nekemia Bananu-ka, among others, formed a quiet sisterhood.

They supported one another, parented together, prayed together, and consoled each other across the private geography of shared grief. The fear reached new heights in 1977, when one in this sisterhood, Edith Mary Batarungwa, a pillar among them, was violently arrested in Mbarara town and later killed.

Memories.

We used to play with the children of the army officer next door. They would come to our house and we would go to theirs. None of us knew that the bigger house next

door belonged to us."
— Rose Ruhesi, daughter

Grave found, body lost

In 2004, the family received a piece of unexpected information. While investigating the possible burial location of Shaban Nkutu, a former minister killed by Amin, the Nkutu family had hired a private investigator — former CID Director Sam Echaku. In the course of his interviews with three surviving former employees of the Mailo Mbiri Cemetery in Jinja, the names Ruhesi and Kasigwa came up.

The former gravediggers and their headman said they had been ordered to bury both men as "unknown persons." They had recognised them: these were their bosses, the town engineer and the town treasurer.

They had buried them as required — six to a grave, each body covered with a thin layer of soil until the grave was full and sealed.

With the support of President Museveni, the family engaged forensic experts and investigators to attempt a DNA-based identification. But the bones were too severely degraded, hence insufficient DNA material to support a conclusive test.

There is no grave. There are no remains. There is no headstone. The family has been suspended, for more than 50 years, in a state that has no proper name — neither mourning nor closure, neither certainty nor hope.

The unfinished chapter

The six children of Ruhesi — Declan, Richard, James (Brig Gen), Rose, Emmanuel, and Dr Hilda — all orphaned before their teenage years, went on to build remarkable lives of their own. Ms Ruhesi, now elderly, still lives at her home in Kakoba, Mbarara City. She outlasted the regime. She may yet outlast the silence.

The children of the disappeared are now grandparents. Most will die without ever knowing where their fathers truly rest, or whether the state ever considered them worth remembering. Ruhesi was one of them. His absence is not only a family wound. It is a national one.

When the Amin regime moved against these pillars of society, it did more than take lives. It severed the trajectory of a nation.

The families of the killed and disappeared are not seeking financial settlements. They are seeking a restoration of truth.

We advocate for the establishment of a National Registry of the Disappeared and a designated National Day of Remembrance.

Only by documenting every name and every contribution can we ensure that the pioneers of our independence are no longer treated as historical footnotes, but recognised as the enduring pillars of the Uganda we inhabit today.