



# Voices from the Rwanda Tribunal

## Official Transcript: Jorge Sierralta (Part 3 of 10)



<b>Role:</b>	Staff Psychologist
<b>Country of Origin:</b>	Peru
<b>Interview Date:</b>	17 October 2008
<b>Location:</b>	Arusha, Tanzania
<b>Interviewer:</b>	Lisa P. Nathan Donald J Horowitz
<b>Videographer:</b>	Nell Carden Grey
<b>Interpreter:</b>	None

## Interview Summary

Jorge Sierralta talks about his role as a psychologist and social counselor for the United Nations and reflects on the challenges of working with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. He discusses his work as a counselor at the ICTR, including the mental health education and support services that have been introduced. Sierralta describes various coping mechanisms employed by Tribunal staff as well as the stigma associated with seeking counseling.

*The transcript of Part 3 begins on the following page.*

## Part 3

- 00:00 Lisa P. Nathan: So can you tell me – reflect back on why you decided to come to the ICTR and maybe what you knew about the ICTR before you came?**
- 00:11 I was telling that I, I graduated in a Russian university so when I was a student I used to share the room with one Rwandese and so that was yeah, from that point, I remember that, that was the time of the genocide and we have to pass exams and that was very demanding. And so you need to study a lot. At the same time you hear from the news that what is happening in Rwanda so, and we share the same room so it was really very, yeah, touching for me to see him.
- 00:51 I never seen him crying but I felt the pain inside. I felt a lot of pain and when we graduated, he stayed. He, I mean, when – as a refugee, in Europe. And then my interest for Rwanda, yeah, was, yeah, I started becoming interested what is happening in Rwanda and the society and . . . And probably because my father also, yeah, he, being member of the Communist Party, he was not very well welcome in, in Peru.
- 01:30 So, we didn't face persecution but it's always like, yeah we were being on many times the police came to our house to search for documents, so we've been always under investigation also. So I have done in this feeling that Rwanda is a good place to go and visit.
- 01:53 So then after spending also few years in a non-family duty station, I decided to come here because it's a family duty station so I could be with my family. And also I probably reached a point in Afghanistan that I was completely burned out because of explosions. Your instinct of self-preservation is always on, you know; you hear a sound and you, you turn.
- 02:26 So it was really a – it was a good change for me and I, I was very happy to, to, to come to ICTR. And also to, I never worked before when we are downsizing a mission, so that was also appealing for me; to go and to see how people are going to face the downsizing. So it's a privilege and I was, yeah, I was very happy when I received the letter of appointment.
- 02:58 And because I speak many languages, yeah. I speak French fluently so, Russian, Spanish. So, so I was also selected and because of my experience also, I believe, yeah.
- 03:12 LPN: So, since you've been here, have there been any surprises to you about the way things are here at the ICTR, anything that you didn't expect?**
- 03:24 I expected that this mission could benefit long before from the service of a counselor because dealing with traumatized population at least – the, the, the investigators, witness support section and so many section here; even the people who translate. I, I, yeah, I saw that they could benefit; because now I'm doing a lot of curative and it could be, probably be better if a counselor was appointed before so it would be more of a preventive, then.

- 04:08 And, yeah that was probably one of the surprise not to, yeah, to care to be the first, to be the first because my colleague in the, in The Hague, they have a counselor. The, the tribunal for Yugoslavia also, they have long time a counselor so it was a surprise for me why there was not any counselor here, so.
- 04:34 LPN: So is there anything since you have been here that you can reflect on that you are, you're proud of? Something that you have been a part of since being here since March that you feel good about being a part of?**
- 04:48 Yeah, there are so many because we receive also – of course we can't help everybody. We have a lot of limitations. Of course what makes you feel even are the very small emails that people leaving sometimes the country and send you a text message from the airport saying, "I don't know how we will," "I don't know how I could," yeah, "go through this without your help."
- 05:12 So that makes you really feel good about you and – because the job is demanding. You deal with people's problems and it's not always easy, because sometimes we move very slow and sometimes it's not any move. And it makes you feel not good, so. Another thing also what I think I'm proud – I'm very proud that I created in this small town in Arusha an association of mental health professionals.
- 05:41 So there was never before. We, they used to be at the hospital there but there were two counselors there operating individually. So I managed to collect all the expertise available here in Arusha. And now, we're a group of about 12 people with somehow, yeah, mental health background. And we meet every month, every one, two months with have some trainings. I teach them. Somebody else will rotate.
- 06:14 So, there's been a big change I think and not only for ICTR but for the community also. Like I used to have a client with less, yeah with, with the breast cancer, so I could send an email to those colleagues and they will find a network here.
- 06:37 We also initiated the, the Alcoholics Anonymous group here for, yeah. And, and I was part of the group that motivated so I was not the, the – I didn't start myself but I was the, the pushing force to . . . And this is also, yeah, this is something I'm also proud of.
- 07:00 LPN: You've been very busy since March.**
- 07:04 I've been trying to, yeah, to think about going, before going to bed what can I – what I can, I mean, what is going to be my contribution? So what I'm going to think about myself by the, I mean, by the day I leave this place?
- 07:19 So since no, I've, since this is a very – ICTR is a very big organization and people have very few, very little knowledge about what is psychosocial support. So my idea was just to make

a foundation for somebody else who will come next to continue or to do probably even a better job, so.