

ERIC EUGENE MURANGWA



KEEP THE MEMORY ALIVE
Holocaust Memorial Day 2015



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Eric played for Kigali's top football team. During the Genocide in Rwanda his fellow players protected him from the killing. Today Eric runs an organisation which uses football to promote tolerance, unity and reconciliation among Rwandan youth.



'Zuzu, a person who tortured, raped and murdered many Tutsis, became Eric's saviour not once, but twice. Why? Zuzu's passion was Rayon Sports.'

Eric was born in the eastern Rwandan city of Rwamagana in 1975, the eldest of six. His family ran a bar and restaurant in a town with a large Tutsi population. For decades the ruling Hutu nationalist government encouraged persecution and discrimination of Tutsi people. By 1982, the police harassment had become too much and Eric's family was forced to close up shop and move to the Rwandan capital Kigali. It was here during Eric's formative years that he developed a passion for football. His talent was quickly noticed and Toto, as he became to be known, grew to become one of Rayon Sports' best loved players – a fact that would later save his life.

When the plane carrying the President of Rwanda was shot down on 6 April 1994, Eric had been watching a football match at a bar. That day would be the last time he would see many of his friends, colleagues and family members, including his seven-year-old younger brother Irankunda Jean Paul.

The assassination, which the Hutu government blamed on Tutsi rebels, marked the culmination of decades of tension between the two ethnic groups, sparking the [100-day genocide](#) in which over 800,000 people were killed. Eric was woken in the early hours of 7 April to the din of a city embroiled in fighting. Radio broadcasts demanded people stay in their homes while soldiers crashed down their front doors to find those they deemed 'responsible'.

Eric's home was soon swamped by five armed men searching for weapons supposedly hidden on the premises. Refusing to believe his explanation that he was a player for Rayon Sports, they threatened to take his life unless he could prove it. Eric pulled out an old photo album, saving himself and those he was with.

Deciding he was no longer safe at home, he fled to his Hutu teammate's house. While players at many other football clubs throughout Rwanda were killing each other, those at Rayon Sports remained united throughout the genocide. After hiding there for a week or so, Eric had to move on

after being told by his teammate that the killers were coming for him. He needed a new destination to hide and, after discussions with his colleagues, it was decided they would try one of the board members of the club.

The move was risky and audacious, for the board member was Jean-Marie Vianney Mudahinyuka, otherwise known as Zuzu, a notorious leader of the *Interahamwe* militia – a man subsequently imprisoned for his role in the genocide. Zuzu, a person who tortured, raped and murdered many Tutsis, became Eric's saviour not once, but twice. Why? Zuzu's passion was Rayon Sports.

Zuzu took Eric in but there others in his neighbourhood who were uncomfortable with the presence of a Tutsi, seeing him as causing an unnecessary risk. Eric was forced to return to his old teammates' house after just a few days. He was unable to rest long. A trio of militia tracked him down, demanding he come with them. His refusal was met by violence, with one of the militia hitting him around the head with a grenade. After stealing all his money, the men were ready to take Eric with them before the intervention of his teammate's cousin, who was a government soldier. He convinced them to leave him behind.

Feeling his luck was about to expire and with a dwindling number of people ready to put him up, Eric knew he had to find somewhere more secure. He returned to Zuzu who promised to take him to the city's Red Cross HQ across town, which was providing sanctuary to refugees. Escorted in Zuzu's vehicle, with two armed guards brandishing their rifles out of the open windows, Eric was safely taken through the road blocks and to the HQ in a largely deserted area of Kigali. He was left outside the gates of the compound to fend for himself.

The facility's director claimed that he could not admit Eric for the sake of the safety and security of those already inside. Out of ideas and accepting his fate just a stone's throw from safety, Eric spent the next few nights sleeping outdoors. The arrival of a young couple and their baby at the gates of the Red Cross HQ increased the pressure on the facility's director and, while he would not grant them admission, he helped organise transportation for the family, as well as Eric.

Eric was suspicious of this altruism amid the 100 days of violence. He boarded apprehensively; worried he might be being transported to his death. However, he found himself taken within the confines of Hôtel des Mille Collines where more than 1,200 took refuge during the genocide – a story famously retold in the 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda*.



He remained there for over a month, reunited with close friends and a board member from Rayon Sports, before being evacuated to an internally displaced person camp outside the city. Eric discovered that, although he lost 35 relatives in total, most of his immediate family had survived.

After carrying out two months of humanitarian work in the south of Rwanda, Eric returned to Kigali. Yet, his safety was far from assured. Lurking in the countryside and in neighbouring states were bands of Hutu militia unwavering in their desire to complete their mission to wipe out the Tutsi population. Eric discovered his name was on a list of targets of one of these groups.

He knew he was not safe in Rwanda while rebel Hutu groups remained. An opportunity presented itself to escape when the Rwanda football team played in Tunisia. Instead of returning on the flight

home, Eric stayed behind. Later he immigrated to Belgium and then finally to the UK in 1997. The move meant he had to sacrifice his greatest love – his footballing career. Yet, his passion and gratitude for the sport has remained steadfast.

Football saved his life. It transcended ethnic differences and ultimately gave him hope for the future. It is this faith in the game that led Eric to establishing the organisation [Football for Hope, Peace and Unity](#). It uses football as a tool to promote tolerance, unity and reconciliation among Rwandan youth in order to prevent tragedies like the 1994 genocide from occurring again in the future.

For more information:

- Read about the [Genocide in Rwanda](#) on the HMDT website