

Mussa Uwitonze



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Learning from genocide -
for a better future

Mussa Uwitonze became an orphan after being separated from his family during the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. He was raised in an orphanage, and it was there that he was first handed a camera – a moment that fuelled his lifelong passion for photography.



'Photography is an art that helps you open up and express yourself. It is a voice, it is a tool for change.'

Mussa was three years old when the genocide began

Mussa was born in 1991 in Rwanda, the youngest of a large family with two sisters and a brother. In 1994, when Mussa was three years old, the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda began. His father made the decision to move the family across the border into Zaire (now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo) in search of safety. Mussa didn't understand why his family rushed to pack up their belongings, though he sensed his family's fear.

The *Interahamwe*, a government-supported militia, had begun slaughtering Tutsis, as well as any Hutus who refused to take part in the genocide. Mussa's family fled the chaos and violence that had now reached their home town.

Long journey to Zaire – and yet no safety there

After a long and arduous journey fraught with danger, the family was able to cross into Zaire after paying a bribe at the border. However, they soon discovered it was no safer for them there than it had been in Rwanda. Although Mussa's family went to great lengths to protect and comfort him, witnessing his strong father in despair was terrifying for him.

Mussa's family found temporary shelter in a refugee camp, however after a few weeks the camps were invaded by *Interahamwe* militia. The *Interahamwe* had fled Rwanda following the end of genocide, however they continued to wage violence in neighbouring countries, targeting Rwandans who had found shelter in camps close to the border.

Mussa's family

The militias killed indiscriminately, targeting any men, women and children they found. Mussa remembers witnessing children thrown against walls and burned alive. Many women were also raped, including Mussa's sister. His brother, whilst attempting to protect his sister, was gunned down by the militia and murdered.

The rest of the family escaped the camp and hid in a nearby forest. At this point, Mussa's father separated from the rest of the family and set off towards the town in search of provisions. However, whilst he was away, the *Interahamwe* invaded the forest and the others were captured. They asked Mussa's mother if the family was Hutu or Tutsi. Mussa's mother replied '*We all have the same race from the Lord, our creator*'. This response angered the militia and she was dragged away. This was the last time Mussa saw his mother.

Cholera, orphanage and meeting Mrs Carr

The children tried to survive alone for a while, begging for food, until it became too challenging. The older siblings decided to take Mussa to the Red Cross, who immediately took him to the hospital as he was suffering from cholera. He spent a month in hospital, constantly asking the nurses for information about his siblings, but nothing was known about them. Mussa was then taken to a temporary shelter, before finally being taken to an orphanage called Imbabazi CENA.

This is where he first encountered Rosamond Carr, an American who he came to see as a mother figure. *'When we got to the orphanage we were introduced to an old woman named Mrs Rosamond Carr. The first day I saw her, I saw love.'* The warmth and affection that Rosamond showed all the orphans gave him a renewed sense of family, security and love.

Photography - the world as you see it

In 2000, whilst Mussa was still at primary school, a photographer called David Jiranek came to the orphanage to run a photography workshop. Mussa was one of 11 pupils selected to take part, and was given a disposable camera to document the world as he saw it. The project, called Through the Eyes of Children, exhibited the photos in the US, with proceeds from print sales used to fund schooling for children in Rwanda. This experience ignited Mussa's lifelong passion for photography.

Over the years, many NGOs came to the orphanage to take portraits of the children, with the hope of reuniting them with their family. Unfortunately, Mussa

still has no information about any of his relatives. He does, however, consider all the children he grew up with at the orphanage to be his brothers and sisters, retaining a close bond with each of them, united by their life experience and mutual love of the late Rosamond Carr.



Girl cutting grass, Mussa Uwitonze Photography

Mussa today

Mussa now works as a professional photographer and runs photography workshops for children and young people with Through The Eyes of Children - the same organisation that introduced him to photography as a child. Through these workshops he aims to give young people a creative form of expression and the tools to share their stories. Mussa has supported young Rwandans, Syrian refugees, foster children in Massachusetts and immigrants in Haiti to name a few. As Mussa explains: *'Photography is an art that helps you open up and express yourself. It is a voice; it is a tool for change.'*

Mussa features in a documentary, **Camera Kids**, in which he journeys across Rwanda to photograph victims and perpetrators of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. He is now happily married with three children. You can see more of Mussa's photography [here](#).

Find out more...

Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda: hmd.org.uk/rwanda

Life stories of those affected by genocide: hmd.org.uk/lifestories

hmd.org.uk
enquiries@hmd.org.uk
020 7785 7029

 @hmd_uk
 hmd.uk
 holocaustmemorialdaytrust

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