

Exploring survivor stories through drama



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*Learning from genocide -
for a better future*

This activity uses drama techniques to explore the experiences of Holocaust and genocide survivors.

It includes drama activities based on Bertolt Brecht's techniques, which protect performers and allow the audience to learn about experiences of those who have survived the Holocaust or a more recent genocide.

The lesson does not ask performers to re-enact traumatic situations.



Learning objectives:

- Students will learn about Bertolt Brecht's life and his drama techniques
- Students will gain an understanding of lived experience before and during the Holocaust or the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda
- Students' creative engagement with selected components of life stories will help them reflect on the impact of representation strategies on reception of narratives
- Students can also create a performance piece to commemorate Holocaust Memorial Day

You will need:

- Henry Wermuth's life story
- Henriette Mutegwaraba's life story
- *Character mapping* worksheet (one per group)
- Brecht bingo sheet

Background knowledge:

This activity would work well for a youth or community theatre group, or a drama class for students aged 13-16. Some basic background knowledge of the Holocaust and the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda is helpful but not essential. This lesson can be accompanied with other resources, such as ***HMD Assembly - Secondary Schools***.

Background information sheets for teachers on the Holocaust and the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda can help you answer students' questions. They are available at hmd.org.uk/teachersheets.

Teacher notes:

We have been careful in this resource to suggest ways of using drama to tell of people's experiences during the Holocaust and genocide without the use of 'empathetic techniques' such as asking students to imagine themselves in the position of victims or perpetrators. These exercises, while useful in other drama lessons, are problematic in teaching about the Holocaust, since asking performers to imagine themselves in unimaginable situations may cause stress and limit ability to absorb information about the history.

By safely engaging students with real life stories, these activities can inspire empathy and encourage students to learn more and share the experiences they have explored.

Teacher notes - about Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht was a German playwright born in 1898. His work is highly political, and he used his writing to express his anti-fascist beliefs and to criticise the German government, who banned his plays. When the Nazis came to power in 1933, Brecht fled Germany knowing that he would be persecuted for his writing. The Nazis formally removed his citizenship and destroyed his work in public book burnings.

Brecht's techniques aim to remind the audience that theatre is a construction and representation, not real life, and, and to make them think. He wanted to keep audiences engaged in the events on stage but without them being emotionally invested. He believed that this would help the audience to consider the meaning of what they are watching.

This makes his exercises particularly useful when exploring the experiences of people during genocide, as actors are not asked to 'represent' the unimaginable violence and loss. His techniques help us to explore real experiences and discuss what we can learn from them.



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Introduction to Holocaust Memorial Day

Each year on 27 January we mark Holocaust Memorial Day to remember:

- The six million Jews murdered during the Holocaust
- The millions of people murdered under Nazi persecution of other groups, including Roma and Sinti people, disabled people, gay people and political opponents, amongst others
- The millions of people murdered in more recent genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur

Schools, students and communities across the UK learn from genocide on or around this day and take action to create a better future.

Life stories

In this activity, students will explore the life stories of Henry Wermuth and Henriette Mutegwaraba. Two versions (easy to read and full formats) are included at the end of this lesson plan for you to choose from, according to the level of your learners and the time you have available.

Differentiation

Smaller groups or lower ability students: The whole group should explore one easy to read life story together.

Medium ability students: Split the group in half so that both easy to read life stories are being explored.

Higher ability students can read the full versions of each life story.

Hand out copies of the life stories and *Character mapping* worksheets which are included at the end of this resource.

Read through the life story together or in groups.

Ask students to fill out the character maps in small groups, listing what they know about the main person and the environment they lived in.

Character mapping extension questions if you have more time:

1. How were words used for good or evil in this life story?
2. What have you learnt about the genocide from reading this person's life story?
3. What can we learn from these life stories to apply to our own lives and actions?
4. What would you like to say to this person?

Whole group discussion:

1. What do we need to think about when using drama to tell a real person's story?

Answers may include: trying to remain factual; showing respect to the person; telling the story in an engaging way so the audience remains interested.

2. What are the particularly sensitive parts of these life stories?

Answers may include: the deaths of family members; people suffering; how we represent victims and perpetrators without being simplistic.

Teacher note – Your students may have questions at this stage about the Holocaust and the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Our fact sheets on each will help you give students an overview and answer their questions. These are available at hmd.org.uk/teachersheets.

Learning about Bertolt Brecht

'Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.'

- Bertolt Brecht

Discuss this quote. What does this reveal to us about Brecht's reasons for writing and producing plays? What does he aim to achieve?

Answers may include:

- He wants his plays to change the world (how?)
- He wants people to leave the play thinking
- He does not want the audience to be comfortably watching what they already know
- He wants to solve problems in society

Brecht facts bingo

1. In advance, print and cut up the Brecht facts bingo sheet
2. Give each student an A or a B slip
3. Instruct students to go around the room and find the other half of their fact
4. Once all the students are paired up they should tell the rest of the group their fact

Brechtian Techniques

Bertolt Brecht used specific techniques in his plays to remind the audience to think about political messages, instead of getting drawn into the characters and story. We will try some of these techniques with the life stories we have read.

Drama activity one - speaking in the third person

In small groups, set up a hot-seating exercise. Make use of the character maps made earlier.

1. One student is on the hot seat with the character map in front of them
2. Other students ask questions about the survivor from the life story
3. The student on the hot seat replies in the third person using the survivor's name instead of 'I am...' (For example: **Question:** 'Where were you born?' **Answer:** 'Henry Wermuth was born in Frankfurt, Germany')
4. Students swap around to give different people a chance in the hot seat

Choosing scenes

Exercises two and three below ask students to choose a part of the life story to turn into a scene. Instruct students to avoid the most violent parts of the life story – the murders and the concentration camps. Some suggestions are provided below:

Henriette Mutegwaraba

- Her childhood memories of celebrating Christmas with a feast
- The scene in the classroom when students are asked to identify their ethnic groups, and Henriette does not know hers
- Her memories of sharing meat with friends, until they started calling her a 'snake'
- The struggle to cross the border to Burundi, and Henriette being carried across the river Akanyaru
- Receiving a letter in Burundi and deciding to travel back to Rwanda

Henry Wermuth

- Henry's surprise as a patriotic German boy hearing soldiers singing in the streets about killing Jews
- Being woken up in the middle of the night and forced to move to Poland
- Having to wear Star of David armbands and clear the streets of snow and ice
- Making the hiding place for Ida and Hanna and leaving them behind.
Finding their pictures
- Blocking the train track thinking it would derail Hitler's train

Drama activity two - creating tableaux

1. Put students in small groups and ask them to choose a moment from the life story you are exploring together and to create a tableau (freeze frame) showing this part of the life story.

Think about the questions:

- Who is in the scene?
 - What are they doing?
 - What are the relationships between the different people in the scene?
 - What are they thinking or feeling?
 - How can you show all of this using your body position and facial expressions?
2. Once students have practised their tableau, each performer will write a 'placard' with a fact about the survivor from the life story. This can be anything – something everyday, or something about how they feel.
 3. Performers go back into the tableau, this time holding up the placards.
 4. Take it in turns to read the placards aloud in the third person. They can step out of the tableau to read it or stay in position. (You could encourage students to discuss what differences these creative choices make)
 5. Practice this, and show the speaking tableaux to the rest of the group. Discuss each one.

Drama activity three - performing a scene

Ask students in small groups to choose a scene from one of the life stories and create a scene based on it. To make this easier, the groups can use the same scenes as in the previous exercise. To make it more challenging, the groups can choose a different part of the life story to the ones already shared in the tableaux.

Each character must have a line but can only speak once.

Encourage performers to use other placards and third person techniques in their scenes. If helpful, they can add a narrator character.

Share these scenes with the rest of the group and give feedback on how each group has used the Brechtian techniques we have learned. As a group, discuss the following questions:

- How are these scenes different to more naturalistic styles of performance?
- What effect does this have on what we, as audience members, learn and focus on in the scene?

Whole group discussion of next steps:

- Can we put these scenes together and add some more to tell the life story of a survivor?
- What message do we want the audience to take away from seeing the survivor's experiences?
- How do Brecht's techniques help the audience understand the message?

Extension activity:

Use these scenes and techniques to complete and rehearse a whole group presentation that tells a survivor's life story.

Consider adding a narrator character to give the audience some contextual information about the genocide and to link the different scenes together.

Perform this presentation to other students, staff or parents as part of an event or assembly for Holocaust Memorial Day.

Take the learning further:

Learn more about these genocides at hmd.org.uk/holocaustandgenocides

Find secondary school assemblies and lesson plans at hmd.org.uk/schools.

Find more resources such as other life stories, films and activities at hmd.org.uk/resources.



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With thanks to Jon Gibson for his help and support with this lesson plan.

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Resources for educators: hmd.org.uk/educators

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Learning lessons from the past to create a safer, better future

Character mapping

You can answer these questions about the story as a whole or a particular moment.

Head:

What were they thinking about?

Eyes and ears:

What did they see and hear?

Arms:

What actions did they take?

Mouth:

What words were said or written to hurt or help them?

Legs:

How did they escape or survive?

Heart:

How do you think they felt?

Environment

What is happening around this person?



Brecht facts bingo

Cut these facts out in advance. Give each student an A or a B and ask them to find the other half of their fact by comparing information with other members of the group.

Make sure you keep a copy of the full sentences in case students get stuck.

A: Brecht was born in 1898 in...	B: ... Bavaria (south-east Germany)
A: Brecht was nearly expelled from school for...	B: ... writing an essay criticising World War One
A: In 1924 Brecht moved to Berlin to...	B: ... pursue a career writing and producing plays
A: Brecht wrote political films and plays which...	B: ... attacked Nazism and German society
A: Brecht's plays were...	B: ... banned by the Government
A: Brecht fled Germany in 1933 when...	B: ... Hitler came to power
A: The Nazi party held mass book-burnings of books that were against the government, and...	B: ... Brecht's works were destroyed

Henry Wermuth



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Henry Wermuth's mother and sister were taken away by the Nazis in the summer of 1942. Henry and his father were forced to work for the Nazis and Henry took an opportunity to try and derail a train that Hitler would be travelling on. Although unsuccessful, Henry was later awarded a medal for his attempt to assassinate Hitler.



'I have no hatred towards the German people, because in the same set of circumstances, with support from newspapers and the radio, it could have happened here. There's plenty of antisemitism in England.'

Henry Wermuth was born in 1923 in Frankfurt, Germany, to Bernhard and Ida Wermuth. His sister, Hanna, was born in 1929. Henry, who was Jewish, was fiercely patriotic as a young boy and experienced almost no antisemitism (anti-Jewish hatred).

The rise of the Nazis in 1933 changed everything. The SA (the military wing of the Nazi party) would march through town singing about murdering Jews. Henry never understood how the Germany of which he was so proud could elect Adolf Hitler.

In October 1938, the Nazis deported German-Jewish citizens with Polish ancestry to Poland. This included Henry's parents who were born in Poland, so the whole family were woken in the middle of the night and sent to Krakow by train where they stayed with relatives. Henry spent a happy year there until Germany invaded Poland in September 1939. Soon, Jews living in Nazi-occupied Poland were forced to wear a white armband with a blue Star of David and made to clear streets of snow and ice.

Bernhard and Henry supported the family by trading on the black market until Bernhard was caught and sent to prison. Bernhard was released in late 1940 and Henry's family moved to the small town of Bochnia.

By the summer of 1942, Henry and Bernhard were being forced to build roads for a nearby labour camp called Klaj. They heard rumours that two million Jews had by now been murdered. Henry knew that soon deportations would begin from Bochnia and wanted to save his family. Henry used cardboard to make a hiding place for Ida and Hanna in the crawlspace above the family's front door.

On 22 August, Henry and Bernhard's work group were told that they would be spending the night in Klaj. As they left, Henry urged his mother 'Promise me you will go into the secret place'.

On 24 August, the deportation of Bochnia's Jews took place. A week later, Henry and Bernhard returned to Bochnia and found photographs of Ida and Hanna in the crawlspace. On the back of each picture was a goodbye message. Ida would probably have heard the SS shouting that anyone who did not board the train would be shot. It may have seemed safer to go. It was the first and only time that Henry saw his father cry. Henry's mother and sister travelled from

Bochnia to Belzec extermination camp. All those on board the train were murdered.

In the autumn of 1942, Henry heard rumours that Hitler was due to pass near Klaj on a train. Henry believed his mother and sister were still alive and that if Hitler died, everything would go back to normal. Despite the danger and Bernhard's objections, Henry felt he had to do something. That night, Henry made his way through the forest to the railway line, avoiding guards patrolling the area. Using stones and thick lengths of wood, Henry blocked the track. The following morning, Henry waited for the sound of the collision, but it never came. He never found out what had happened.

Soon after, Henry and Bernhard were put on a train and sent to Płaszów labour camp. Subjected to sadistic and violent treatment, Henry remembers Płaszów as the worst of the nine camps he was imprisoned in.

On 31 July 1944 Henry and Bernhard were marched onto a train heading for Auschwitz-Birkenau. Suspecting they were to be murdered, Bernhard said to Henry a sentence that he has never forgotten 'Should we be gassed, breathe deeply, my son, breathe deeply, to get it over with quickly'.

Upon arrival at Auschwitz, they were sent to be deloused and told to undress. Certain he was to die, Henry kept the photograph of his mother and sister in his hand. However, Henry's group was marked for work instead and the next day he was tattooed on his forearm with the number B3407.

Inmates were fed tiny portions of bread and margarine, and a bowl of thin soup. On such a small amount of food, and with such a heavy workload, people were starving to death. A friend, Max Spira, would fill Henry and Bernhard's bowls from the bottom of the container, which meant that they received more vegetables, stopping them from starving.

In January 1945 the SS evacuated Auschwitz, marching prisoners out of the camp and on to a train. The next few months saw the SS trying to avoid capture, and Henry and Bernhard were moved from camp to camp – Nordhausen, Osterode, Helmstedt. One morning, the kapo in charge of Henry's group hit Bernhard in the head. The prisoners were loaded onto a train, and Bernhard began to complain of increasing pain. He was taken to the hospital wagon but died on 27 April 1945, just 11 days before the war ended.

That day Henry entered Mauthausen. Conditions were appalling and Henry was starving and suffering from diarrhoea. Henry weighed only five stone when American soldiers liberated Mauthausen on May 5, 1945. He had survived, and faced rebuilding his life with no friends or family.

After liberation, Henry made his way to the United Kingdom. He was only allowed to stay for two years, but after writing to the Queen Mother and finding a job, he was able to settle in Britain. He became a successful businessman, married, had two children and now has three grandchildren.

Henry continues to speak about his experiences. In 1995, he was awarded the Johanna Kirchner Medal by the City of Frankfurt for his attempt to assassinate Hitler. He has written a book about his experiences, entitled *Breathe Deeply My Son*. A film that carries the same title was released in 2017.

Find out more... The Holocaust: hmd.org.uk/holocaust

Henry Wermuth

Easy to read life story



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Key words



Jews: People who follow the religion of Judaism.

The Nazi party: The group who were in power in Germany from 1933 – 1945, led by Adolf Hitler.

Star of David: A six-pointed star, which is a symbol of Judaism



Death camp: Places specifically designed by the Nazis with equipment to kill large numbers of people.

Auschwitz-Birkenau: The largest Nazi death camp.

The Holocaust: The attempt by the Nazis to kill all the Jews in Europe.

Henry Wermuth was born in 1923 in Germany. He lived with his parents, Bernhard and Ida and sister, Hanna. Henry and his family were **Jews**. Henry was proud to be German.

In 1933, **the Nazi party** came to power in Germany, led by a man called Adolf Hitler. Soldiers marched through the streets singing about killing Jews. Henry could not believe his country had voted for these people.

One night, Henry's family were woken up by the Nazis. They were forced to leave their home and sent by train back to Poland, where Henry's parents were from.

In 1939 the Nazis started World War Two by invading Poland. They forced Jewish people to wear a white armband with a blue **Star of David** and to clear streets of snow and ice.

The family heard rumours that the Nazis were killing Jewish people. Henry used cardboard to make a hiding place for Ida and Hanna in a tiny loft room.

Henry and Bernhard were forced to go and work for the Nazis. They were worried soldiers would come and take away all the Jewish people. Just before they left, Henry said to his mother: 'Promise me you will go into the secret place'.

A week later, Henry and Bernhard returned home and found photographs of Ida and Hanna in the hiding place. On the back of each picture was a goodbye message.

The Nazis had taken Ida and Hanna, along with all the Jewish people in the town, to a **death camp**, where they were murdered.

In 1942, Henry heard rumours that Hitler would be travelling by train near where he was working. Even though it was very dangerous, Henry felt he had to do something.

Henry made his way through the forest to the railway line, avoiding the guards. He blocked the train track with stones and large pieces of wood.

The following morning, Henry waited for the sound of a crash, but it never came. He never found out what had happened.

Soon after, Henry and Bernhard were sent to a series of Nazi camps, ending up at **Auschwitz-Birkenau**. It was hard to stay alive in Auschwitz. They were given tiny amounts of bread and thin soup. People were starving to death.

In January 1945 the soldiers took all the prisoners out of Auschwitz. Henry and Bernhard were moved from camp to camp.

One morning, the man in charge of their group hit Bernhard in the head and he died. It was 11 days before the war ended.

The Nazis killed Bernhard, Hanna and Ida, as part of **the Holocaust**. By the end of the war, they had killed six million Jews.

When Henry was finally rescued from the Nazis, he was very sick. He had to try and rebuild his life with no friends or family.

Henry came to Britain. He became a successful businessman, married, and had a family.

In 1995 he was awarded a medal for his attempt to kill Hitler. He has written a book about his life.

Find out more...

The Holocaust: hmd.org.uk/holocaust

Other resources for educators: hmd.org.uk/educators

Henriette Mutegwaraba



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Henriette Mutegwaraba was born in 1972 in the Butare province of Rwanda. Her parents were farmers and owned land. She was the firstborn of the family and had two brothers and three sisters. She says that life was 'not too bad' before the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Henriette's parents sent her to Burundi before the genocide, where she lived when the genocide took place in 1994.



'Three months after the genocide, I received a letter from my younger sister, Chantal. She told me, "All our family has been killed... Aunt Marie Rose and I are the only ones who survived. Why don't you come back? I need you, please come back." My family was still alive. I decided to go back to Rwanda.'

By Henriette Mutegwaraba

Before the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, my whole family would gather at Christmas and other feast days to share and socialise. That was really fun! The kids from our extended family never wanted to leave our house because Mum took such good care of them and gave them all they needed. Mum never worried about anything in life; for her everything was simple and straightforward.

I knew about my ethnic group when I reached Primary Four at school. The teacher told pupils of one ethnic group to stand up, and so I stood up without having a clue what it was all about. When I got home, I asked my parents about my ethnic group, and they told me I was a Tutsi.

In 1990, I was studying in a boarding school in Gitara. That year, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) troops had invaded the country and as a result, Tutsi students were threatened, beaten and sometimes killed by their fellow students. I remember that at mealtimes there were 15 of us around the table and we used to have fun passing meat from one person to the next. But in 1990, things fell apart. No one wanted to share with me anymore. Whenever I passed by, people would call me a 'snake'. They even spread a rumour at school that I had some poison and was plotting with a group of other Tutsi students to kill all our Hutu colleagues.

Because I was at school, there was no way that I could let my parents know what was happening. At the same time, people had started to threaten our family; soldiers would go to our home and search for guns, and some people from my extended family were arrested as presumed 'traitors'.

The following year, I moved to a new school close to my Aunt Marie Rose's house. There were plenty of roadblocks on my way to the school, and I was stopped every day. I was always late at school because of that. Then Kigali started to be affected by the chaos: people were being murdered, buses were exploding here and there...

I went home during this period and Mum told me:

'We're trying to arrange for you to go to Burundi. We're doing this because young girls and women are the most targeted group in this war, and we don't want you to get hurt.'

But going to Burundi was dangerous and a lot of people were killed trying to get over there. It was really hard to find someone to help who wouldn't betray you.

Fortunately, a Burundian Hutu businessman agreed to help two of my cousins and me – all girls. It was very complicated because we needed people who lived near the border to accommodate us for a few days before we crossed into Burundi. The problems came when people noticed us. I don't know how they did, but they always knew we were there and so we would have to move back for a couple of days. Then we would try again, staying in a different house near the border. Altogether we slept in five different houses over about two weeks as we tried to find a way of getting into Burundi without being noticed.

We finally found a way in December 1993, but we had to cross the river Akanyaru that runs along the border between Rwanda and Burundi. There was no boat, so we paid two men to carry us across the river on their shoulders.

There were already some Tutsi refugees in Burundi. They helped us until I met an old man who had been adopted by my grandparents. My face looked familiar to him; he stared at me and asked, 'Who are your parents?' When I told him, he said some members of my family were living in Burundi. He offered to get in touch with them so they could shelter us. A few days later, we went to Bujumbura and lived with them.

About four months later, some people who had fled from Rwanda told us that all my family had been killed in the genocide. That message hurt me so deeply. I had never felt so much bitterness in my life... I decided never to go back to Rwanda. There was no point in returning because no one had survived.

But three months after the genocide, I received a letter from my younger sister Chantal. I don't know how she managed to trace me, but I got the letter. She told me:

'All our family has been killed... Aunt Marie Rose and I are the only ones who survived. Why don't you come back? I need you, please come back.'

I was so happy to know that at least someone from my family was still alive. I decided to go back to Rwanda.

Back in Rwanda, I went to the place where we used to live. The whole place was a ruin; you couldn't even tell there was once a house there. Chantal told me she had seen some of our family's bodies. She told me whenever she heard how other children in the family had been killed. I never believed it. I was still hoping to see them some day.

After the genocide, life was so hard! There was trauma, pain, hunger and sorrow each and every minute of every day. I didn't know how to help my remaining family without a job. So I started looking for a job and fortunately got one. The salary was very insignificant, but it helped us to carry on somehow.

Today I work as a guide at the Kigali Memorial Centre in Rwanda, where I meet many different people, especially survivors. My work has helped me a lot to understand the pain of genocide survivors. I never used to like interfering in people's personal affairs before but today I feel it's my responsibility to hear people out and help them as much as I can.

Photo: Henriette Mutegwaraba from We Survived: Genocide in Rwanda pp.121–126 Henriette 2006 © Aegis Trust

This resource has been produced with the support of Aegis Trust

Find out more...

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

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

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Learning from genocide – for a better future

Henriette Mutegwaraba

Easy to read life story



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Key words

Rwanda – A small country in east-central Africa

Burundi – A small country south of Rwanda in east-central Africa

Tutsi and Hutu – two main groups of people in Rwanda

Genocide – When a group of people are murdered because of who they are, for example, because of their religion or their race or ethnicity.

Henriette lived in Rwanda. She had two brothers and three sisters. Henriette remembers how much fun Christmas time was with all of her family.

Henriette's school teachers told her that she was different to her friends because she was a Tutsi and they were Hutus. Her friends stopped sharing food with her and spread rumours about her. People began to say they would do bad things to her family. Soldiers said they would kill all Tutsis.

Going to school was difficult because people blocked the roads and stopped her. Henriette's family decided that because it was dangerous Henriette should go and live in Burundi. Henriette had to hide in people's houses and try to sneak into Burundi when no one was looking. Eventually she paid two men to carry her on their shoulders across a big river into Burundi.

In Burundi Henriette met an old man who said that she looked familiar. He told her that she had relatives in Burundi. Henriette went to live with them. Henriette thought that all of her family had been killed by Hutus in the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda until one day she got a letter from her little sister. Her sister said she was in Rwanda with their aunt. She wanted to see Henriette again. Henriette was happy to learn that her sister was alive. She went back to Rwanda.

Henriette found it hard to live in Rwanda because it reminded her of the bad things that had happened. She works at the Kigali Memorial Museum helping survivors and telling everyone about what happened. Henriette wants people who are different to be friends and not fight.

Henriette's family were killed in Rwanda by their neighbours because they were different. Henriette survived because she made a journey to live in Burundi. Henriette made another journey to come home and care for her sister.

Henriette works telling people about what happened when people in her country turned against those who were different to themselves. She does this because she hopes it will stop something bad like that from ever happening again.

Photo: Henriette Mutegwaraba from We Survived: Genocide in Rwanda pp.121–126 Henriette 2006 © Aegis Trust

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