

Immaculée Hedden



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Immaculée Hedden lived and worked in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, before and during the genocide there. She was protected from danger many times; finding refuge with family, at an orphanage and in the basement of a cathedral in Kigali.



'Rwanda is my motherland and the country that I love. I never thought life would change.'

Immaculée Hedden (née Mujawingoma) was born in Rwanda. Her parents had many children to look after so, as a baby, she was given to her aunt and uncle. This was common in Rwandan culture. Sadly, Immaculée's aunt died when she was two, and she was then brought up by her much older cousin. His daughters became her sisters and she had a happy childhood.

In Rwanda at the time, there were two main social groups – the Hutus and the Tutsis. They had been in conflict for many years. Many Tutsi people had fled to other countries surrounding Rwanda, where they lived as refugees to avoid violence and killings.

Immaculée's biological parents were Tutsi and living in exile in the Democratic Republic of Congo. In 1980 she was reunited with them and for three years she lived and attended school there. Unfortunately, her school was closed due to teacher strikes so Immaculée did not finish her education. She returned to Rwanda, eventually finding work in a dress-maker's shop. Immaculée's life at this time revolved around work, church and choir. She sang in *Chorale La Fraternité*, a group made up of different denominations, ethnic groups and people from across Rwanda.

In 1994, Immaculée attended a Christian conference an hour's bus ride from Kigali. While she was there she heard about killings happening in Kigali. After the conference Immaculée took three days to pray and fast for her country at the Centre of Scripture Union back in Kigali. Soon after, on 6 April, the President Habyarimana, a Hutu, was killed when his plane was shot down. Although it remains unclear who was responsible for this attack, the blame was immediately placed with Tutsis, and it was not long before existing killing groups known as the *Interahamwe* began the mass genocide of Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The *Interahamwe* were civilian fighting groups, supported by the Rwandan Army.

The next day, while Immaculée was at her cousin's house, her roommate was killed. Relatives phoned with news that family members had also been murdered, then the phone line was cut off. Immaculée feared the worst for Tutsis in her country.

'On the hate radio – Radio-Télévision Libres des Mille Collines – they were saying "Those cockroaches and their spies must be killed because they had killed the president". This was their code language and the signal to kill Tutsis, who they called cockroaches.'

Immaculée stayed hiding at her cousin's house. The compound wall hid the house and garden from the outside. There was very little food and the water supply was cut. Immaculée prayed and water came running through the taps. When it rained they filled every container. They always had water to

drink, which felt miraculous - Immaculée believed God was answering her prayers.

One day, late in May, a soldier jumped over the wall of the compound and saw Immaculée. He said, 'Come outside you cockroach and I will finish your life right now!' She replied, 'I'm reading my Bible. Peace be with you'. Immaculée went outside, handed him her identity document and waited. She knew she could be killed, but stood firm, her eyes fixed on the soldier and prayed: 'Lord if this is my time to come to you, receive my spirit, but if not I command the evil at work in this man not to touch me, in Jesus' name.' He looked at her card and left.

Two weeks later, the *Interahamwe* killed a neighbouring family and Immaculée and her cousin realised they had to leave. Her cousin's older children had already moved to Gisimba Orphanage, and the women decided they must go too. The orphanage was only a few hundred metres away, but to reach it meant passing two roadblocks guarded by *Interahamwe*. The women decided it was safer to travel separately. Her cousin left first at 4.30am. An hour later, Immaculée stuffed her night clothes under the dress she was wearing, with her Bible and her identity card, and she left the house. The Hutu house girl came with her - she could pass freely through roadblocks and checkpoints.

At the first roadblock were two men from the *Interahamwe*. As they walked towards them, Immaculée chatted with the house girl, trying to look busy. The men looked surprised but remained seated and said nothing. The women walked on. At the next roadblock there was a loud explosion and the ground shook. Everyone was running away from a nearby explosion, leaving the roadblock abandoned; Immaculée arrived safely. The orphanage was overcrowded, because so many adults had taken refuge there. Some of the children were suffering from malnutrition. There was hardly any water so sanitary conditions were very poor and they were always thirsty. But the owner of the orphanage, Damas Gisimba, looked after them, preventing the *Interahamwe* from murdering the people there.

On 1 July 1994 a Major from the government's army arrived and told the adults to prepare the orphans for evacuation. People were scared – without the (mostly Hutu) orphans they would lose their protection from the *Interahamwe*. They feared they would be massacred. While the children were moving outside towards the buses, the adults were told to run to the buses too. They had five minutes before the killers entered the orphanage. Militia had surrounded the building and people expected to be shot. When they went outside the militia saw some political refugees who they had thought were already dead. They were so shocked that they threw their weapons down rather than firing. Remarkably, everyone made it safely onto the buses.

They were taken with the children to the basement of a Catholic cathedral where people were already hiding. The windows were covered with blankets to stop anyone looking in and to offer some protection from bombs shattering the glass. A rumour spread that the *Interahamwe* were planning a final big massacre on 5 July, but on 4 July Kigali fell to the Rwandan Patriotic Front. By 18 July the genocide was over. Some survivors started to dance, but Immaculée instead thought about all the people she had lost, people she had loved.

'My hope for Rwanda, which I believe is God's hope, is to see Rwandans reconciled and united. There is a Rwandan song: *To others God has given gold and diamonds*. For us our gold and diamonds are peace and unity among Rwandans.'

Today Immaculée is a counsellor and public speaker. She lives with her husband Richard in the UK. Together they have written a book about her experiences called *Under His Mighty Hand*.

Find out more...

The Genocide in Rwanda: hmd.org.uk/rwanda

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

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