

Denise Uwimana



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Denise Uwimana lost many of her relatives in the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. She survived, but faced a difficult journey to forgive her neighbours who had murdered her family and stolen from her home. Hers is an inspiring story of courage, forgiveness and reconciliation.



'If we forget, we create the conditions needed to let history repeat itself. It is important to forgive, but not to forget that Rwanda still needs rebuilding.'

Denise Uwimana was born in Burundi to Tutsi parents, who had fled Rwanda due to the violence and discrimination they faced. Following decades of tensions between the two main groups in Rwanda, Hutus and Tutsis, Tutsis were facing increasing persecution. Growing up, Denise's Christian family always discussed and encouraged forgiveness.

After meeting her husband, Charles, and getting married, Denise moved to Bugarama, a village in South West Rwanda, where she and Charles both worked at Cimerwa, a large cement company. They had a happy life together, and loved walking and travelling. Although they had both Tutsi and Hutu friends, Denise noted that these groups of people in Rwanda treated each other with suspicion.

When a civil war began in 1990 and violence increased in Rwanda, Denise was subjected to discrimination. She felt isolated and rejected by her Hutu neighbours.

Discrimination and propaganda were common on the radio and in newspapers. Charles was arbitrarily imprisoned, and subsequently went into hiding in Kigali for a year and a half, sometimes sneaking back to visit Denise at night. In April 1994, Denise was nine months pregnant with their third child and missing her husband. Tension and violence were increasing, but Denise could not have imagined the systematic genocide that would soon begin and last for over 100 days. The streets of Bugarama were busy with the *Interahamwe* - trained, armed Hutu militias. Denise worried about giving birth and protecting her children. Some family joined her in her home as it had a secure gate and they thought they would be safe there. On the morning of 7 April 1994, Denise's Tutsi neighbour informed her that the plane carrying Rwanda's Hutu President had been shot down. Blame was placed on the Tutsis and the *Interahamwe* began creating roadblocks and killing Tutsis and moderate Hutus.

When the militia came to her village, Denise had a few minutes warning that they were on their way to find her. Everyone in her house said their prayers together and hid in different rooms as the killers broke into her home. Denise hid in the bathroom with her youngest son on her back. Terrified, she spoke to God and said 'you promised to protect me, but you disappointed me'. Suddenly, she lost her fear and felt that God gave her strength.

When they broke through the bathroom door, the killers asked Denise for money. She went into her bedroom to retrieve the money and found three of her family members dying and the room covered in blood. They threatened Denise too, but decided she was not dangerous and left. Tragically, they killed many of her extended family.

Denise found her older son alive with their Hutu house helper who informed her that the killers had said they would return to kill her. Denise gave her youngest son to him, hoping this would keep him safe, and hid under her bed with a cousin. They lay in a pool of their relatives' blood for hours - until she felt her waters break. Denise crawled out from under the bed, washed herself and crept next door where a Hutu neighbour reluctantly sheltered her. On her own, she quietly gave birth in their guestroom. She could hear the militia next door, stealing and threatening to kill her. She hid and remarkably, they did not find her and the grenades they threw did not explode. Denise and her new baby survived, along with her two other children, with the help, kindness and bravery of Hutu friends. They sheltered at the Cimerwa health clinic for six weeks, constantly fearing for their lives.

When the genocide ended in late July, Denise took leave from Cimerwa and, following an exhausting and harrowing journey to the Congo and Burundi, found that her parents, two sisters and seven brothers had survived. She had no news of her husband, Charles. Denise and most of her family moved to Kigali. She was deeply traumatised, but relieved to have found some of her relatives.

Denise was offered a job back in Bugarama and against advice from her parents, she returned with her three young sons. Moving back to the place where the killings occurred, among her former Hutu neighbours and colleagues, was extremely difficult. Denise was a young widow in mourning and felt she had lost her dignity. Her house had been ransacked and her possessions were seen around the village being worn or used by others.

Denise felt forgiveness would be impossible. She fasted and prayed and, despite her anger, decided to find a way to co-exist with former friends and neighbours. She says she argued with God and felt he was, in response, urging her to give grace to others and help them take responsibility for their actions, to turn from darkness to light so that they may receive forgiveness. From that moment, fear and hatred no longer held her back. At a village meeting she confronted her neighbours and said that she would make peace with them if they would admit their crimes and repent. Eventually, some shouted 'forgive us'.

Later, Denise returned to Kigali when offered a Manager role. Despite her success, Denise said that her spirit did not feel healed. She started leading prayer meetings. After learning of the work the Solace Ministries were doing to support survivors, Denise began supporting them, and attending meetings for widows. Through caring for and sharing the pain of widows and children in need, Denise felt that her own soul began to heal.

Over the years, Denise tried to find Charles, but gradually realised that he had been killed. She eventually met theologian Dr Wolfgang Reinhardt, a German man who was helping survivors to share their stories in Europe. They later married and she moved to Germany. In 2015, together with Wolfgang, she founded Iriba Shalom International e.V., a non-profit organisation which works with former Hutu and Tutsi people to encourage and support healing, forgiveness and reconciliation after the genocide.

Denise now has 'a new perspective of life to be a witness of hope and reconciliation with action'.

Find out more...

Read Denise Uwimana's book:
From Red Earth: A Rwandan Story of Healing and Forgiveness

Genocide in Rwanda: hmd.org.uk/rwanda

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

