

Henriette Mutegwaraba



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Learning from genocide -
for a better future

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

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