

# **My Father, Maker of the Trees**

**How I Survived the Rwandan Genocide**

**Eric Irivuzumugabe**

**with Tracey D. Lawrence**



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## In Loving Memory

This book is dedicated to all my family members who lost their lives during the 1994 genocide, though the list is greater than the seventy names here.

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?” Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.”

Matthew 18:21–22

Honoring you in Jesus Christ,  
Eric

- |                                |                            |                                 |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Senyamakweshi Nazri         | 24. Rurangangabo Jean Paul | 49. Bushayija Théoneste         |
| 2. Nyirasoni Félicitée         | 25. Kizayire Helena        | 50. Munyeshuri Samuel           |
| 3. Mutegwamaso Drocelle        | 26. Shyaka                 | 51. Nyirakanyana Espérance      |
| 4. Muvubyi Emmanuel            | 27. Seromba Noël           | 52. Frère Jean Baptiste         |
| 5. Nyiramajigija Verediane     | 28. Nkusi Emmanuel         | 53. Mukamurenzi Patricien       |
| 6. Kanakuze Mediatrice         | 29. Munyaneza              | 54. Mukamuganga Marie<br>Jeanne |
| 7. Umutesi Shushu              | 30. Musengimana            | 55. Dusabimana Claudine         |
| 8. Muhongayire                 | 31. Mukunzi                | 56. Ruzindana Leonard           |
| 9. Murindwa                    | 32. Gikudiro Senkunda      | 57. Kayitare Augustin           |
| 10. Dusabumuremyi<br>Cyriaque  | 33. Rwiyamirira Augustin   | 58. Kayitare Daniel             |
| 11. Mwenzikazi Vestine         | 34. Musanabera Verena      | 59. Kamandwa Jean               |
| 12. Mukandirima Drocelle       | 35. Gikudiro Rwiyamirira   | 60. Rurangirwa Ephrem           |
| 13. Mujawamariya               | 36. Dukunde                | 61. Oliva Jolie                 |
| 14. Mujawayezu                 | 37. Ruhumuriza             | 62. Vuguziga Mado               |
| 15. Rebero                     | 38. Sekidende              | 63. Shumbusho Figil             |
| 16. Munganyinka                | 39. Ruhigura               | 64. Iyakaremye                  |
| 17. Nyirakobwa                 | 40. Ntagungira             | 65. Kanyonga Concesca           |
| 18. Sehaya Népomucène          | 41. Rutuku                 | 66. Uwibambe                    |
| 19. Mukarugema Caritas         | 42. Remera                 | 67. Rafiki                      |
| 20. Christine                  | 43. Higirow                | 68. Muhashyi Daniel             |
| 21. Rujayana                   | 44. Kamanzi Charles        | 69. Gacakiranyi Caravel         |
| 22. Mukanyonga<br>Boudensianne | 45. Venantie               | 70. Mudaheranwa Joseph          |
| 23. Ryogori Xavier             | 46. Mukankusi              |                                 |
|                                | 47. Gakecuru               |                                 |
|                                | 48. Agnès                  |                                 |

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# Introduction

I feel in myself the future life. I am like a forest which has been more than once cut down. The new shoots are livelier than ever. I am rising toward the sky. The sunshine is on my head. The earth gives me its generous sap, but heaven lights me with its unknown worlds.

Victor Hugo

In my country, the cypress tree is known as “the tree of life.” As a child I admired these trees, which gave a beautiful border to my village. Like most boys, I found shade and pleasure in their beauty, often sitting at a bulky trunk with my thoughts and dreams. I also could never resist a good climb into their branches, imagining I was a mighty soldier escaping the enemy. And when I was tired of being a soldier, I let the staunch branches cradle me like a baby while I turned my face toward the nurturing sun. After school, I longed to hike

to the steaming, rolling hills where the cypress trees stood in clusters. Brilliant sky covered my homeland, and my boyhood playground was paradise.

I never imagined that this place of childhood delight would become a battlefield. Never did I think a cypress tree would become the tree of survival for me. Never did I think its branches would save me from the bullets and machetes of hostile militia. I am still haunted by my past as the evils of genocide visit me in night terrors. For fifteen days and nights, I hid in terror from the outbreak of violence and raging devils who overtook my village. But I must tell you, this horror is only a portion of my story.

My name is Eric Irivuzumugabe, and I am a genocide survivor. My hope is that my story will bring you closer to the almighty God, who saved me from the trenches of evil. I am one of many Tutsi (pronounced *toot-see*) people who did not perish in the largest massacre of Rwanda. The heinous bloodthirst that invaded my homeland in April of 1994 is something I will always carry with me this side of heaven. But now God is also helping me to carry hope in my heart.

The evil of genocide is not something that can be easily explained. I still don't have a satisfying answer as to why humanity does not learn from history. Six million Jews were murdered at the hands of the Nazi regime just over sixty years ago. Over one million Tutsi people were murdered just over fifteen years ago. Holocausts continue to happen today, even in the modern world. Racism, hatred, and greed are alive in this fallen world as humanity continues to give itself over to empty and destructive ambitions. Because of hate, millions

who bore the image of God have been slaughtered. Such evil is hard for most of us to grasp. Yet I know this: I serve a God who is not wasteful, and he is using my history to bring hope to others. Isaiah 55 reminds me that his ways are higher than mine, and so the mystery of suffering will continue to be with me until his return. I know he saved me from the hands of my enemy so that I might serve my hurting generation. I know now that his sovereign signature marks every tree. I believe God spared my life to extend hope beyond the borders of Rwanda, to orphans, to those who have lost family, to those who feel like God has abandoned them.

No matter what your current circumstances may be or what trials you face today, I am living proof that God can take a shattered life and breathe new life into a broken heart. My hope for you is that as you read my story, you experience healing from past hurts in your own life and find God as your source of comfort. No one has to live as a victim. Whether you have to face the scars of abuse, have lost loved ones, or have physical or emotional pain every day, God sees you and has not forgotten you. He is waiting for you to reach out to him and answer the call that is on your life. I humbly offer my story to you so that you too might be convinced that the power of God is at work, even in the darkest of worlds.



**PART 1**

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# **The Coming Threat**

## A Family of Survivors

The LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the LORD will drive you.

Deuteronomy 4:27

I remember the day my grandfather gathered my whole family together to instruct us how to flee. “Be careful. Don’t separate from each other. I know we will be killed, but stay together as a family at all costs. You will not be spared, but flee as best you can.” He knew firsthand about the evil days we would have to face as Tutsi people.

I come from a family of survivors. The genocide of April 1994 was not the first in my country. My grandfather, Senyamakweshi Nazri, survived the genocides of 1959 and 1972. Considering the grim odds of survival, he shouldn’t have lived to tell his personal accounts of those two massacres. Yet

Grandfather was alive to witness the evil cadence of genocide drawing near once again.

The terrors began on April 7, the day after our president's plane was gunned down. We were told to stay in the house; no one could go out and play. This was not an easy thing for my ten-year-old brother, Mugabo. I remember coming inside from the pasture with Mugabo and my uncle Canisius to find my other siblings already gathered. Umutesi Shushu, my fourteen-year-old sister, had been helping my mother tend to baby Murindwa, who had been crying. Murinzi Daniel, age six, had been peacefully napping on the floor. My sister Muhongayire, age eight, stopped her play with dolls to listen to what Grandfather was about to tell us.

We were all shocked to hear that our president, Juvénal Habyarimana, had died in a plane crash. We weren't sure who was behind the assassination, whether it was Tutsi rebels or Hutu extremists. Regardless, it set into motion the bloodiest one hundred days our country has ever known.

Warnings of the coming threat surrounded Mburabuturo, our village. You could feel the tension as family members scurried to one another, whispering plans of escape. We knew genocide was coming again to Rwanda. The Hutu extremists, known as the Interahamwe, had begun their manhunt. It would be only a short time before they would reach the region of Rwamagana where all my relatives lived.

A cloud of smoke drifted down to the valley, and we could see houses burning in surrounding villages. I could taste the soot and ash, carried by the brewing storm; we knew it was time to leave our homes. I could see our dear neighbor Ki-

mony Antoine's home on the outskirts of town disappear into the raging flames. The enemy quickly began looting, killing, and destroying homes, beginning at the edge of the hills and working their way through the village to dominate every Tutsi home until all was destroyed. The evil drone of violence grew closer and closer by the moment. My mother, my brothers and sisters, my aunts and uncles, and my cousins all headed together down a path that Grandfather showed us. We took nothing with us except our beloved dairy cow, Indibori ("multicolored"), in hopes of providing milk for any surviving children. That was the last time we all would be together.

### **My Boyhood**

As a boy, I was very happy. The rivers laughed with me as I followed their courses at play. Rwanda's orangey-red soil nourished my family's crops of maize, coffee, and banana trees. We were very blessed. I always had plenty to eat and plenty of love. We were a close family, and I was especially close to my father, Nkubana John. He was a businessman and farmer who lived generously—he gave when his harvest was bountiful and when it was sparse. In fact, when he really liked someone in our village, he would give them a cow. He sold coffee, bananas, and other crops to help support our family. Everyone liked Nkubana John, who was known for his agreeable disposition and fun-loving sense of humor.

I could tell my father anything; he knew I was a serious boy. I wanted to be seen as responsible, and I wanted to grow up to be like him, a man respected and admired.

In Rwanda, our roads are not just a place for transportation and automobiles; they are where we walk as friends and family, sharing our thoughts and building relationships. My father and I enjoyed daily outings on those roads, walking up and down the hilly countryside. He often knew what I was going to say before I spoke.

I was a contemplative young boy, so I asked a lot of questions about life, where it was going to lead me, and what my purpose might be. He knew what bothered me and was very attentive to my feelings. Our routine walks helped me unravel my ponderings, and they provided a rhythm in my day that settled me.

When I began to ask questions about the prejudices I experienced in school, my father began to share the history of genocide in Rwanda with me. Tension between Hutus and Tutsis wasn't anything new to my homeland. As rumors of another genocide plot began to increase, we talked more and more about this evil. I began to understand why schools were segregated and why I didn't feel like I had the same rights as some of my Hutu classmates. My father explained carefully to me that we were Tutsis, and that many Hutus wanted to kill us and dominate our country. He shared with me stories about relatives I had not met who were forced to flee to safety in other African countries.

“Father, my relatives who are living as refugees, are they okay? . . . Do you think such persecution could still happen to us today?”

“Yes, Eric. I must be honest. Genocide could happen again.”

“Is this persecution you are telling me about the reason you didn’t go to university? Will I not be able to go to university?”

“My dear son, I know your heart is to continue your education. You are so bright, and I know you would excel in college, but I must tell you the truth. You are not likely to go because you are Tutsi. We are not given the same opportunities as Hutus.”

Though I could not fully understand such hatred as a nine-year-old boy, I felt secure knowing my father loved me and would take care of us. On my walks home from school, I found my thoughts wandering back to things my father said, and I tried to figure out what genocide really was. My thoughts began to gather as a dark cloud that overshadowed my boyhood. As my father continued to tell me of the persecution he had experienced as a boy and as a man, my own awareness of the evil of prejudice rapidly increased.

School became very difficult for me. All the students were given identification cards that classified us as Hutu or Tutsi. They wanted us to be divided, but as innocent children we befriended one another. I remember the way teachers would punish Tutsi children. Often we were removed from the classroom, though we had done nothing wrong. The teacher would make us go outside so we could not learn like the Hutu children. To me this was the cruelest form of punishment and hard to accept as a young boy eager to learn. No matter how well I performed, I never achieved enough in the eyes of my Hutu teachers. My school was once a place where I felt freedom to discover and dream, but right before the genocide, it became a place that smothered my ambitions. With my

father's help and encouragement, I desperately tried to rise above the discrimination I felt.

## **Young Dreams**

Before the genocide, my father knew I was suffering from the same painful treatment he had experienced throughout his life, but he always tried to remain positive, to believe and hope for a bright future. Around the time the persecution started, he asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. Since college was not possible, I said I wanted to be a driver and chauffeur people around. Most people in Rwanda do not have cars. As a boy, along with my brothers and sisters, I used to play with colored wire that could be bent into different animals and objects. Mine always ended up being a car of some kind.

Despite the discrimination around me, I was a content child. I had many friends and was well liked in my village. The younger generations didn't feel the tribal tensions—we all just wanted to play together. Relationally I was very rich. My family gave me the nickname Kidamage, which means “beautiful child.” Sometimes it was embarrassing when my mother called out, “Kidamage!” in front of my soccer friends.

Soccer was one of my favorite pastimes, and I loved to be out on the hills with my soccer ball whenever I could. If I wasn't chasing a ball, I was just roaming outside. Whether I was with my friends, chasing a storm, or alone chasing my private dreams, the bush was where I felt most alive. My favorite subjects in school were science and history. I enjoyed trying to figure out the world, exploring what might be possible.

I'm grateful for my memories of family, especially those I have of my father. He did not have to endure the genocide of 1994, as he became ill and died before the militia began to attack. I had always cherished any time I could be with him—talking, playing, or reading. He helped me plant dreams in my heart. He used to read me the Bible. Because he liked it, I began to enjoy reading it on my own too.

I was very young, so I don't recall the exact details or even what kind of illness my father had, but I remember going to the hospital in Kigali where he died. I remember the last thing he said to me: "Eric, be strong and courageous. You can be a hero to many." Losing him broke my heart. We buried him back in our village. His last loving words have stayed alive in my heart, even through the sinister days of genocide. I hear my father's voice echo in me even now.

Though I had lost my father and grieved like so many in our village, I never felt like an orphan. We were able to survive because we had a strong family that surrounded us with support. Everyone helped my mother provide for me and my brothers and sisters so that she would not have to work. My grandparents and aunts and uncles all shared their income, while my mother continued to care for all six of us. Life was good in my village, despite the growing threat of genocide. We continued to laugh, cry, celebrate, and carry on as a family. My sister wrote beautiful poetry; my mother sang like an angel and danced gracefully. Sometimes we all danced for hours, trying to muster up the grace our mother possessed. No one could dance like she danced.

Rumors of attack tried to rob us of our future hopes; instinctively we fought to hold on to the splendor that surrounded us, the everyday beauty that we were meant to stop and notice.

### **Tribal Tensions**

The strife between the Hutu and Tutsi people has been a bitter seed plaguing my country for decades. In the 1920s Belgian ethnologists analyzed the skulls of Tutsis and Hutus and declared the Tutsi people to be the superior tribe. They redefined who we were, telling Rwandans how each tribe should view themselves, and they were threatened by the fact that we were a unified country, cohabiting as peace-loving neighbors. From the 1920s through the 1960s, the Germans and Belgians ruled Rwanda indirectly through Tutsi monarchs and chiefs. Prejudices and fabrications continued for decades, severing relationships, as some adopted the colonialists' belief that the superior "race" were Tutsi because they were from northeast Africa—Egypt or Abyssinia (Ethiopia).

By the 1930s the colonizers conducted a census, and Rwandans adopted an identity card system indicating ethnicity—Tutsi, Hutu, or Twa (pigmy). These identities were ingrained in our Rwandese culture up to 1994. In the 1958 "Hutu Manifesto," Hutu leaders declared that the tribes were different races, which demonstrates how embedded the ideology had become, for in reality we were the same race. Tutsis and Hutus spoke the same language, shared in the same religions, and intermarried. These unfounded prejudices paralyzed our

country with sinful sentiments of dominance, subordination, exploitation, and suffering.

The truth is, it is difficult to tell who is Tutsi and who is Hutu by outward characteristics. According to Belgian colonists, typically Tutsi were thought to be tall, fairer-skinned, and more elegant in stature. Hutus were generalized as short, flat-nosed, darker-skinned people. The Belgians imposed their authority over the Hutus and elevated the Tutsi people, causing Rwandans to become a divided people. The colonists knew a divided country could not stand, and indeed the country began to be destroyed by this evil ideology. Genocide broke out in 1959 and in 1972 as hostile feelings continued to rise among the tribes. No battle the Interahamwe (Hutu extremists) executed was just. There was only one aggressor. Tutsis fought only to survive. Ultimately, no one would declare victory, for genocide has no victors.

The colonists' dogma never left the minds of Rwandans, generation after generation. Such dynamics caused genocide to reoccur in 1994. This genocide was carried out primarily by two extremist Hutu militia groups, the Interahamwe ("those who fight together") and the Impuzamugambi ("those with the same goal") during about one hundred days, from April 7 through mid-July 1994.

Over one million people died.