Surviving the Unthinkable

A Story of Hope and Resilience

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Liliane Murangwayire is a database administrator, a business owner, an author, a wife and mother – and a survivor. This is her first book, a memoir of childhood trauma and terrible loss, but also of strength and survival. Her intent is to bear witness to the extreme brutality of the Genocide against the Tutsis, and to explain the impact it had on those who were subjected to it, on all Rwandans, and on the country as a whole, so that the rest of the world can avoid anything that would cause genocide to happen again anywhere else. Liliane lives with her husband and four sons in Kigali City, the capital of Rwanda. She appreciates, perhaps more than most, the beauty, the culture and the recovery of her home country.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This was not an easy book to write. In fact, I began writing it in high school, but that was too soon. Putting the words on paper made me so sad that I realized I was not ready to relive the horrors of my childhood. I did not write again for many years, but always felt the urge to tell this story so that my family, and the world, would never forget what was done and what was lost. The need to tell this story has pushed me to become an Author.

Liliane Murangwayire

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FOREWORD

I was sitting in my living room in Woodstock, NY in April of 1997 listening to the latest news of the horror of the wild slaughter taking place in Rwanda. I found it too much to bear. My weeping would not stop.

How is this possible? How can we do these unimaginable things to each other?

That question which I have held most of my life comes in part from my own origins. I was born in a displaced person's Camp after the second World War to a Hungarian Jewish mother and a father who was a German soldier who saved her from being discovered by the Nazi's. Their love brought me into this world. That love sustained me and magnified my soul's interest in understanding how this kind of evil gets created in our world

I began reading as much as I could about the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. This led me to Vassar College one evening to hear a presentation by Genocide survivors. I went with the intent to be a witness to their pain. That is the night I met Immaculee Ilibagiza, who later wrote *Left to Tell*. That night after Immaculee told her story, she and I found ourselves walking toward each other and immediately engaged in deep conversation. We became fast friends.

One day Immaculee invited me to come with her to see her country. I hesitated. Fear rushed in. Might all the violence return? Might I be a victim of violence myself? Would I experience more of life's losses than I could tolerate? Finally, the fears abated and a willingness to go came forth. Some other stream in me was pulling forward to say, "Yes." That decision led me to meeting Liliane Murangwaire in 2005.

Liliane was a student at the Adventist University in Kigali and

attended a talk I offered to the students, entitled, *Is It Possible to Live an Undefended life*.? Liliane had been orphaned by the slaughter and was very affected by the perspective I offered. She reached out to me, asking if I would counsel her and eight other orphans who lived with Liliane and her husband. I told her I could not in good conscience help them, even though I was a professional counselor. I was only to be in Rwanda for three weeks. It would be too short a time to open them to such a traumatic experience. However, I was so moved by her request I invited her to come see me at the Jesuit Centre where I was staying as a guest.

As Immaculee translated, Liliane began to tell us her story of those dark days. Bearing witness, all we could do is weep. At one point, I reached out my hand, placed it on her arm and spoke these words: "You are not alone anymore. We are with you." In that moment, Immaculee, said, "Yes, and Judith can be your mother like she is mine." *Oh my God* was my inner response. A panic arose in me. I swallowed hard. How could I handle such a task? There was a silence that seemed too long while a *Yes!* and *No!* battled within me. *No* was my fear of the unknown. *Yes* was also a response to the unknown, but along with it I felt a beautiful intention to care for this dear soul who had lost so much.

In that moment something rather spectacular happened…I fell in love with this beautiful being in front of me and opened my heart. I jumped into what seemed like an abyss and finally spoke a whole-hearted yes, "Yes, I will be your mother."

Liliane and I have been connected ever since.

In Rwanda I learned that when you lose a parent, you look for someone to take their place. It has been an honor to be hers.

As you read Liliane's words you too may find places in yourself that

surprise you, may stretch you beyond your limits and take you to new places within your own heart. Is Liliane›s story hard to read? Yes, as all atrocities are. And, it is a gift and honor for me to invite you, the reader, to play the role of a witness as I have. You will not only hold her suffering but her great triumph as well.

Reading *Surviving the Unthinkable* you will find what holds Liliane together with such strength and resolve to go forward from her experience to create a whole new life. While she was fortunate to have had strong role models in her early life, she will describe a deep faith in a God which sustained her throughout her ordeal and into the present. For sure, Liliane holds a major *Yes* to life. As she says, "Everyone is born to win."

She wants that for everyone.

Judith Garten

CHAPTER 1

Foundations of division and the path to genocide against Tutsi

In order to understand how human beings who were once neighbors and friends could kill some of them, it's important to understand how powerful outside forces and internal power struggles can gain influence in a country and manipulate entire populations. We need to learn from the past to avoid repeating it. This is what happened in my country.

Much of the content of this chapter is taken from other texts to better understand the origins of this division. Because this chapter tells us the history that led to the genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, I did not know much about what was going on because I was still a child and I did not have the chance to relate to my great ancestors to tell me the history. Everyone who could tell me about it, was killed during the genocide.

The little I knew of this history before 1994, I have mentioned it in the chapter on the execution of the genocide.

The land of a thousand hills

Rwanda, known as "the land of a thousand hills," is a landlocked country in east-central Africa, surrounded by the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, and Burundi. Despite its small size, Rwanda's geography is varied, from hilly and green central areas to savannah plains, swamps, volcanoes, and mountains in the east and west. The country's rich volcanic soil and numerous rivers

and lakes make much of the land fertile and ideal for agriculture.

Rwanda's natural beauty includes forests rich in medicinal plants and wildlife, such as the mountain gorillas in Volcanoes National Park and diverse fauna in Nyungwe Forest, one of Africa's largest uncut forests (Des Forges, 1999, p.15).

Historically, the culture of Rwanda revolved around farming and cattle breeding, with three main social groups: the Hutu, known for crop cultivation; the Tutsi, primarily cattle raisers; and the Twa, forest dwellers who hunted and traded game. Before colonialism, these classifications were flexible and based more on economic status than ethnicity. A Tutsi family who lost their cattle could become a Hutu, and vice versa, and all classes were united by the Kinyarwanda language and shared cultural values (Mamdani, 2001, p.23).

Colonialist influence

Under the pre-colonial kingdom, Rwandans were united, with no significant conflicts over social classes. They considered themselves "Sons of Kanyarwanda," sharing the same language, culture, and values taught in the traditional school, *Itorero*. The king, though from the Tutsi class, had advisors from all social groups, reflecting a society where social mobility was possible based on wealth rather than fixed ethnic identities (Newbury, 1988, p.45).

During the years of European colonization, Rwanda was ruled by Germany between 1884 and 1916, and then by Belgium from 1916 until Rwanda's independence in 1962. These colonial powers introduced ethnic identity cards and systematically favored Tutsi initially, and later Hutu, in administration, education, and economic

opportunities. This institutionalized ethnic division fostered resentment and hatred, creating a legacy of inequality and tension that, over decades, escalated into the catastrophic violence of the genocide (Des Forges, 1999, p.32; Mamdani, 2001, p.58; Newbury, 1988, p.74; Prunier, 1995, p.101).

The role of the Catholic Church

In the late 19th century, the White Fathers and White Sisters were established by Cardinal Charles Lavigerie to spread Catholicism in Africa. Their strategy included aligning closely with local authorities to facilitate evangelization. By 1919, Bishop Léon Classe claimed that the Belgian colonial administration that was overseeing Rwanda's leaders was intensifying these divisions. In 1928, administrative reforms by Georges Mortehan and Charles Voisin disrupted Rwanda's balanced governance, excluding Hutu and Twas from central authority. This was the second major act of discrimination (Des Forges, 1999, p.45).

In 1933, the Belgian colonialists introduced identity cards specifying ethnic groupings based on cattle ownership and facial features such as nose and lip size – a clear manipulation of traditional Rwandan identity. This further divided Rwandans, undermining the principle of brotherhood and setting the stage for future conflicts (Mamdani, 2001, p.67).

King Mutara III Rudahigwa's advocacy for independence in the late 1950s met with resistance from the colonial administration and the Catholic Church. His mysterious death in 1959, after an injection at a hospital in Bujumbura, remains unsolved but is viewed with suspicion due to its timing (Newbury, 1988, p.89).

The road to genocide: escalation of hate and division

The 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda was the tragic culmination of decades of deepening ethnic division, entrenched discrimination, and the systematic spread of hatred toward the Tutsi minority. Several key developments set the stage for the genocide, beginning with the *Hutu Manifesto* of 1957, which marked the formalization of ethnic politics in Rwanda. The manifesto argued that Tutsi and Twa individuals were obstacles to Hutu development and, therefore, should be excluded from power. This led to the founding of the Parmehutu party by Grégoire Kayibanda, a political movement that cemented Hutu nationalism in Rwanda's political landscape. Amid these rising tensions, Joseph Habyarimana Gitera introduced the "Ten Commandments of the Hutu" in 1959, a set of exclusionary principles that articulated anti-Tutsi sentiment and promoted Hutu solidarity. Later, in 1990, *Kangura*, a Hutu extremist magazine, republished these commandments with even more extreme, inflammatory language, openly calling for discrimination, isolation, and hatred. These two versions of the commandments played critical roles in normalizing division and inciting violence, shaping the path toward one of the most devastating genocides in modern history.

Gitera's "Ten Commandments of the Hutu" (1959)

In 1959, Hutu nationalist Joseph Habyarimana Gitera issued his "Ten Commandments of the Hutu," intending to promote Hutu unity and resistance to Tutsi influence. Rwanda was on the brink of independence from Belgian colonial rule, and the growing tensions between Hutu and Tutsi were being politicized. Gitera

used his newspaper, to widely disseminate these commandments, which framed Tutsi as barriers to Hutu success and promoted economic and social solidarity among Hutu. This early version of the commandments focused on reinforcing Hutu power and independence while encouraging the exclusion of the Tutsi from spheres of influence, education, and business.

Gitera's Ten Commandments of the Hutu (1959):

1. Hutu unity: Hutu must place loyalty to one another above any ethnic divides.

2. Economic independence: Hutu should prioritize supporting fellow Hutu economically, avoiding Tutsi-owned businesses.

3. Social exclusion: Hutu should refrain from marrying or forming close relationships with Tutsi.

4. Political solidarity: Leadership roles should remain in Hutu hands, excluding Tutsi from government positions.

5. Religious alliances: Hutu should favor Hutu religious leaders, keeping Tutsi influence out of churches.

6. Prioritizing Hutu education: Educational access should be reserved for Hutu, limiting opportunities for Tutsi advancement.

7. Resisting Tutsi influence: Hutu should remain vigilant against Tutsi influence in social, political, or economic settings.

8. Exclusion from media: Hutu should only engage with Hutu-led media, avoiding Tutsi narratives.

9. Land redistribution: Hutu must advocate for fair land distribution, prioritizing Hutu over Tutsi landowners.

10. Commitment to Hutu empowerment: All Hutu must commit to the cause of Hutu empowerment, rejecting any compromise with Tutsi.

Gitera's commandments were significant in shaping early anti-Tutsi ideology. Though less explicit in its hostility than later propaganda, this version laid a dangerous ideological foundation that framed Tutsi as inherently incompatible with Hutu goals. By establishing a strict separation and portraying Tutsi as untrustworthy, Gitera's commandments cultivated a climate of ethnic mistrust and resentment that set the stage for more extreme rhetoric and policies in the following decades.

From Kayibanda to Habyarimana: the escalation of ethnic tensions

The presidency of Grégoire Kayibanda marked a period of intense and sustained violence against the Tutsi, with significant massacres occurring as early as 1963. Media outlets, including newspapers and, played a pivotal role in spreading ethnic hatred, deeply embedding the ideology of division within Rwandan society. This media-driven hatred continued to escalate through the 1970s and beyond, culminating in the establishment of the Kangura newspaper in the 1990s. This publication, along with others, republished Joseph Habyarimana Gitera's 10 Commandments of the Hutu, inciting further hatred and division (Newbury, 1988, p.156).

The creation of the Radiotélévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) in 1993 was another critical step in this ongoing propaganda effort. It served as a powerful tool in directly inciting the Hutu majority

to target the Tutsi minority, marking a severe escalation in the campaign of hatred (Prunier, 1995, p.178).

This backdrop of escalating tension and propaganda set the stage for Juvénal Habyarimana's regime, which began in 1973 following a military coup that deposed Kayibanda. Habyarimana governed with an authoritarian, repressive style. His government was predominantly composed of Hutu from his native region in the northwest. This favoritism fostered significant ethnic and regional disparities, further exacerbating tensions between the Hutu and the Tutsi (Mamdani, 2001, p.95).

Under Habyarimana, the state apparatus was systematically used to oppress the Tutsi population, who were discriminated against in employment, education, and access to public services. The regime also propagated a revisionist history that portrayed the Tutsi as foreign oppressors, fueling further ethnic hatred.

Tutsi respond to oppression

The establishment of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in 1987 marked a pivotal shift in Rwanda's politics. Composed mainly of Tutsi exiles who had fled due to ethnic violence in earlier decades, the RPF sought to secure the rights for refugees to return to their homeland and to end the systemic discrimination and violence against the Tutsi within Rwanda.

The international community, alarmed by the escalating conflict and humanitarian crisis, facilitated the Arusha peace negotiations between the RPF and the Rwandan government in 1992. These talks aimed to create a power-sharing government and integrate the RPF into the Rwandan armed forces. Despite reaching an

agreement in 1993, the peace process faced significant challenges, with Habyarimana and his close allies reluctant to implement the accords for fear of losing control (Mamdani, 2001, p.113).

The reluctance to implement the Arusha Accords and the continuous state-driven propaganda exacerbated the plight of the Tutsi, who continued to face severe repression and violence. These tensions ultimately culminated in the genocide that began on April 6, 1994, following the assassination of President Habyarimana. This event triggered a meticulously organized campaign of mass slaughter (Newbury, 1988, p.142).

The 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi

Over approximately 100 days, over a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed by Hutu extremist militias, known as the Interahamwe. The RPF intervened, capturing Kigali in July 1994 and ending the genocide. This forced the Hutu government and militias to flee, marking the end of one of the darkest chapters in Rwanda's history (Des Forges, 1999, p.189).1

A new dawn

Today, Rwanda is a peaceful nation where all citizens live without division or harassment. The country has universal education, access to healthcare, and good infrastructure. The journey from a past marked by division and genocide to a present of unity and peace underscores the resilience and determination of the Rwandan people. The memory of the past remains a powerful reminder of the need to cherish and protect the unity that has been so hard-won.

CHAPTER 2

Family memories

I was born on November 25, 1982, the fourth of ten children, to my parents, Martin Karemera and Marthe Kampororo. We lived in Kigali-Ngali Province. This was right in the southeast sector of the country.

I remember the many trees and grasses that grew around our village and the swamp near our home that was crossed by the Akagera River, which was deep and had a powerful current during the rainy season this river swelled and nearly reached our house. It was so powerful that it carried hippopotami close to our house. In the morning, you would find their footprints in areas where they had trampled, and their excrements showed that they had not digested all the grass they had eaten.

I also remember that during the rainy season, there were so many fish on the banks of the river that you could take a pan and scoop them up to take home. Sometimes the children came from the neighborhood and took them into the village to sell at a low price.

The roads in my village were very narrow and unpaved. The swampland around us was cultivated to grow many types of vegetables and fruits, including beans, sweet potatoes, Irish potatoes, pumpkins, butternut squash, carrots, tomatoes, celery, onions, and sugarcane. Since the land came right up to the roads in many places, the produce was harvested and sold near the road to people coming back from the city.

Village homes were typically built with wood and mud, and had thatched roofs. Because of my father's creativity, our family home was built with bricks.