

A Family in Hiding: Testimonial of a Rwandan Genocide Survivor

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Consolee Nishimwe is a survivor of the 1994 Rwandan Genocide and the author of the memoir *Tested to the Limit: A Genocide Survivor's Story of Pain, Resilience, and Hope*.

It is not easy for genocide survivors to tell their stories because they still struggle with the consequences of the genocide. There are few survivors who are able to tell their stories. I keep telling my story so that other survivors will have the courage to tell their own. You have to find the courage within yourself to continue to tell your story over and over again and it's never easy to find the words. Yet, it is important for people to listen to our stories so that our struggles and our people are not forgotten.

When the genocide happened in Rwanda I was fourteen years old. I was a happy child, living in a small village in the western province. The place where I grew up was one of the places that was most heavily hit by the massacres, meaning entire families were wiped out. There were families that I knew before the genocide that no longer exist anymore, so I do what I can to remember them.

I was lucky to have a beautiful family. For me, as a happy kid, even though I grew up in a country where Tutsis were discriminated against in every corner of the country, my home was filled with warmth and love. That is what my parents taught my siblings and me. Despite the discrimination, I felt the love of my parents.

As a fourteen year old, killing is never on your mind. The only thing you think of is a happy life, going to school, and dreaming of becoming someone someday. I wanted to be a journalist, and my father was a dedicated teacher, so he would do whatever he could to teach me everything he could. He and my mother were smart people. I could never have imagined that my life was just about to change, that my dreams might be cut short, or that I would lose the people that I did.

I can remember everything about the three months I spent in hiding. I remember the hateful messages that were spread on the radio. The radio was the one thing that everyone could listen to, so the government used it as a tool to spread its hateful messages, especially towards the Tutsis. The Hutus, in particular, accepted the ideology of hatred. These people who bought into the government's ideas were our neighbors, our friends, and people who worked with my parents. But then they turned against us and started to hate us for who we were. It got to the point where we started to fear for our lives. It was worse for my parents because they had already experienced this hatred in their youth.

When the genocide began, the Tutsis throughout the country went into hiding. It was not an easy thing to see our friends raiding our homes as we struggled to find a place to hide. In my area, we lived not far from the community offices, and the mayor was an organizer of the genocide. He ordered people to be taken to the stadium and had them killed there.

At the time, I was fourteen and my sister was eleven, and my younger brothers were nine, seven, and sixteen months old. We had to follow the crowd and run to find somewhere to hide. It was hard to see our lives change so quickly. The only thing was to hope to God for help that may or may not come. As the crowd made its way to the mayor's office, they sang to Jesus and God for help. This scene will forever be seared in my mind.

I felt scared. I did not know what to think, and I could tell that my parents were scared. It was the first time I had ever seen my dad scared, the way he looked in his face. As any other kid, you think your parents are the strongest people in the world, who can protect you from anything, so seeing my dad looking that way was hard for me to see.

So many homes were destroyed. The Hutus broadcast over the radio that any Tutsi, young or old, should be killed. They went through all of the homes and destroyed them. It hurt to see our neighbors raiding our homes. We thought these people were our friends. I had a hard time comprehending how another human being was going to kill me simply because of who I am.

My family and I hid in many different homes over the course of three months. Some people were kind enough to hide us, while others turned us away without a thought. When we were kicked out of one of the houses we hid in, we had to leave and hide in the bushes from the killers.

I remember one early morning especially well because as we hid in the bushes the killers were calling us names, cockroaches and snakes, as a way to dehumanize us. They carried around machetes and clubs, singing about how they were going to kill us. They used the gospel songs, but changed the lyrics to reflect their killings. The whole time, my mother told us to keep praying in our hearts. She was the only one who remained calm throughout. When we were moving out of the bushes, my aunt who was with us ran away. They killed her immediately, in front of the rest of us. They took everything from my dad, but let us live.

While in hiding, we had to avoid the main roads because there were roadblocks on them. We had to plan out where we would hide because we did not want to be caught. We thought it would be safer if we did not hide in the same place, so my dad went on his own. We found a place to hide in the ceiling of another house.

My dad was my best friend. I was the oldest, and we were very close. It was hard to not be in the same place as him because I did not know what was going to happen to him. Later that evening, as we hid in the ceiling, I had to listen to the killers below talk of how many people they had murdered. I heard as

they rewarded themselves with traditional beers. I will never forget hearing them talk about murdering my father. I wanted to come out of where I was hiding and have them kill me so that I could be with my father again. I do not know how my mother kept it together. We held each other and cried, and prayed that we might survive.

This was the beginning of our suffering, and it would continue for three more months. Throughout the three months, my mother had to carry my youngest brother on her back, and the rest of us kids followed her. It was the rainy season and we had to avoid the bushes because the killers were all over, searching everywhere. At times, we went hungry because we did not know who to ask for help. My baby brother cried the entire time; he wanted to go home and to eat, which made it harder on my mom.

Some of my mom's students lived at one of the houses we stayed at. They recognized her voice and begged their own mother to help us. They were compassionate, but their mom was part of the killing. As we kept begging for help, she decided to open her door. She told us that she only opened the door to us because her kids had asked her to. We did not know why she would hide us, but go on to kill many other people. This woman fed us, and we were able to rest for the night. Early in the morning she took us to a small abandoned house that belonged to her mother-in-law.

We thought she would keep the killers away from us, but her husband came to the abandoned house. She tried to distract them, but it did not work. They thought she was hiding someone, which she was. One of the people who came to the house with her husband grew up with my mother. He told her that he was going to kill her, as we hid behind my mom. He looked at us like we were not human beings. We were crying and begging, and by the grace of God, he stopped. He said that he would not kill us, but that someone else would. After that, my mother felt defeated because the people that she grew up with, the people that she had shared a life with, and the people she had cared for had turned their backs on her and her family.

At most places we went, a wife would help us until her husband returned home. So many people did not want to keep us for more than a night because they did not want to be caught hiding anyone. My mom started to give up because so many people's hearts had turned against us. At that point, it was just about going to anybody. She also had four children to take care of. We were hungry and tired and did not know how to carry on. I remember falling behind everyone as we would walk, and my younger brother would have to come back to help me carry on. We did not know whether any of our relatives were alive or where they were hiding.

At one of the places we were hiding, we were discovered by the killers. They took my mom and my youngest brother away from us. My mom thought that by going with them to our neighbor, he might help us because my parents had helped him go to school when his parents would not. My mom considered

him to be another son to her because she and my father were there for him when he had no one else. She went there, and the man refused to help her.

The killers then took her to another neighbor, where they left her. But the man we were staying with forced us to leave, so we went to try and find our mom. Because I was the oldest, I had to take charge, but it was my brothers who were the strongest. They encouraged me as we were searching for our mom. We found people who were able to help us get to a safe home. They were people who did not have enough, but who were kind enough to take us in. These were the first kind people we had met, and they helped us to find out where our mom was being kept. Early the next morning, we decided to go to where our mom was. I thought that it would be better for us to be together, no matter what happened.

During the genocide, most of the men were immediately killed. The women were left to be gang raped, which was why they were not killed immediately. When they found out that my brothers were still alive, that was when they started to plan their deaths. We knew that they were not going to survive. My mom told us that the only thing we could do was to pray. We prayed until the killers came for my brothers. My brothers got to a point where I could see the peace in their eyes. One of their killers was a neighbor of my mom, and my younger brother, who was attached to my mom, was taken away. We ran after them, screaming to be taken and killed with my brothers. My brothers went away from us, holding hands. They told us that they were going to join my dad in heaven.

After my brothers were murdered, we did not want to live anymore. The killers came back, and they decided that they did not want to kill us yet. They did not want to waste their bullets on us. Other times, people paid to be killed with a bullet because they did not want to be killed by a machete.

We did not know what else to do. My mom was barely holding it together. We continued to hide, but nowhere was safe. Rape was a weapon. I know too many women who were repeatedly, brutally tortured by so many different killers. I read a story about a fellow survivor who was twenty-three years old during the genocide. She was raped by thirty-seven killers, and afterwards they threw her into a hole. Her spinal cord was injured and she has been in a bed for the last twenty-three years. Some other women have children, others live with HIV, and still others are psychologically traumatized by what they went through.

Like so many women, my mom, my sister, and I were hiding. A neighbor came and took me away from my mom and sister. They begged to be taken with me, but he refused. He dragged me through the street and beat me with his sword. He took me not too far from his home, and he raped me. He left me there. I did not know if I was going to find my mom or sister alive.

I found my mom, and she took care of my injuries. I wanted to be killed. I felt like there was no reason for me to be alive anymore. I did not know why these things kept happening to my family and me.

We found safety in a small Muslim community until the genocide ended. The genocide ended when the Rwandan Patriotic Front came in. It was not easy for me, my sister, or my mom to find out how many of our family members were murdered. I was a teenager who was no longer a normal, happy teenage girl. I did not know if I would ever function again. My mom also carried the pain of all of us, the pain of losing my dad and my brothers, the pain of losing her family members, and the pain of what had happened to me.

The first year I went back to school was a year of nightmares and crying, but I continued to fight, fighting the memories that were inside me. It was almost like a movie playing in my head that would not stop playing. My mom helped me get through it. I saw so many women around me who had been through worse than I had and who had no one to help them.

I gathered the courage to get tested for HIV. It was not easy for me. I discovered that I was HIV positive as a result of the rape. In addition to the struggle of rape, I then had to deal with living with HIV. It is something that reminds me everyday of what happened to me. It was not easy for my mom to deal with it.

It took me a long time to be able to even express what had happened to me. My mom is one of the strongest women that I know. She encouraged me to never give up, despite everything we had been through. Being able to go back to school gave me the strength to move forward and be strong. It taught me that harboring hatred towards the people who had done these terrible things would do nothing. I realized that to have a healthy life, I should never carry any hatred within me. I make sure to tell myself that I am alive for a reason.