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Surviving a Bloodbath:
Immaculée Ilibagiza's Life during the Rwandan Genocide

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Ninety-one days. Twelve square feet. A Bible and a Rosary.

This was Immaculée Ilibagiza's life during the Rwandan genocide. From April 11 to July 7, 1994, Immaculée hid from the prying eyes of the Hutu people along with seven other endangered women. Just outside the thin walls of their bathroom sanctuary there was blood, scattered bones, and massacred bodies, but inside that tiny haven Immaculée found the will to fight for each breath she took. "I realized that my battle to survive this war would have to be fought inside of me... I could rely only on God to help me fight" (80).

In her book, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*, Immaculée describes in vivid detail her experiences during the 1994 tragedies in the heart of Africa. From learning of the Rwandan president's death, to coming face to face with the man who killed her family, she takes the reader through the nightmare she was forced to live.

The genocide was the product of years of discrimination between the three largest tribes of people in Rwanda: Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. Primarily between the Hutu and Tutsi, the minute differences in appearances created a huge rift. Historically, the Tutsi people were taller, had

lighter skin, displayed sharper noses, and possessed more wealth and cattle. The Hutu were supposedly the exact opposite. Small stature, dark skin, flat noses, and low incomes defined them. While these dissimilarities were cosmetic and peripheral at best, their ability to tear apart a country was astounding.

When Immaculée was ten years old, she began attending the school for older children in her village. On her first morning in the new classroom an ethnic role call was taken. In Immaculée's home, race and ethnicity were not topics of discussion. Her parents welcomed everyone regardless of physical appearance, religious affiliation, or ancestry. Because of this, Immaculée was in for a shock when her teacher yelled at her for not knowing which tribe she belonged to. Explaining her parents' hesitancy to delve into the differences between Rwanda's tribes, Immaculée says, "my parents themselves had some horrifying experiences at the hands of Hutu extremists" (15).

One may wonder how this family, sitting above lake Kivu, could be so welcoming to the people that kept destroying their lives. In 1959, Immaculée's parents were targeted along with neighboring Tutsis. In 1973, their home, along with many others, was burned to the ground. Though Immaculée was just three years old at the time, she remembers her mother holding her "tightly in her arms" as they fled from their hilltop paradise (15). Through all of these tragedies, how were they able to open up their lives and their home to anyone other than fellow Tutsis? The most evident answer is that they trusted God. Immaculée's parents were Catholic, but truly were Christians. They loved their Lord and loved their village as He did. Her parents were the best role models for Immaculée. It is partially due to them that she has been able to forgive the brutes that caused their deaths.

When the war began, Immaculée was in her third year at the National University in Butare. There, she reconnected with old friends and made new ones, such as her boyfriend, John. During her first two years at school, the tense feelings between Tutsis and Hutus began to rise. In the north, a rebel group of Tutsis fought against the President's Interahamwe, a "Hutu-extremist militia" that "spread across the country like a virus" (33). In spring of 1993, Immaculée witnessed the Interahamwe's brutality for the first time. As a woman was walking down the street, a group of men bombarded her, stole her groceries and jewelry, tore off her clothes, and forced her to the ground (34). Immaculée was adamant that the police be called, and the woman be helped, but John discouraged her from doing so, saying that the militia would kill her too, because she was a Tutsi. The Hutu-controlled radio constantly spewed anti-Tutsi war cries. The Tutsi people were called cockroaches, and the Hutu called for their complete extermination.

After receiving a letter from her father, Immaculée returned home, intending to stay a week and return to school for final exams. She was able to enjoy time with her family, if at least for a short while. One of her brothers, Damascene, soon revealed to the family that he had seen Interahamwe in the village with grenades. He also confided that there were rumors of a list of Tutsi families. A list that had their names on it. Damascene was certain that the killings were meant to begin that night. He pleaded with the family to pack up and leave immediately, but their father, who was undoubtedly the leader in all things in the household, dismissed his son's fears as empty worries. Early the next morning, Immaculée found out from Damascene that President Habyarimana's plane had been shot down just the night before. April 6, 1994, marked the beginning of the Rwandan genocide.

After some run-ins with Interahamwe, Immaculée was told to go stay down the road at the house of Pastor Murinzi. Not long after, she was told that her home had been burned down,

that her parents were missing, and that her brothers had to leave. Immaculée's goodbyes to Damascene and Vianney in *Left to Tell* is heart wrenching for even the most stone-faced of readers. From that point forward, it seemed as though no sliver of hope was allowed anywhere near Immaculée. In just four days, her whole life fell apart. The next three months were spent in a tiny bathroom in Pastor Murinzi's house, which quickly became a crowded prison cell.

A normal human being would have, most likely, gone into complete hysterics the moment they realized the bathroom confinement was not to be brief. Immaculée had her bouts with fear, but time and time again, she fought against those scary whispers.

...I'd listened to the dark voice, letting it convince me that we were about to be slaughtered. Every time I succumbed to my fear and believed the lies of that poisonous whispering, I felt as though the skin were being peeled from my scalp. It was only by focusing on God's positive energy that I was able to pull myself through... My father had always said that you could never pray too much... now I see that he was right. (80)

It is clear that Immaculée's faith kept her and the other women alive. Through fervent prayer, Immaculée was granted a brilliant idea. She begged the pastor to move his large wardrobe in front of the bathroom door. This hid the door to the secret sanctuary and spared the women's lives many times.

Immaculée's faith did not come easy to her. It may be simple to believe that God exists, but it is not simple to fully believe in His singular omnipotence. Even Immaculée, who never had a hateful or vengeful bone in her body, longed for a gun, grenades, a bomb, anything that would bring death to those horrible Hutus (88). Each day, the devil tried to crawl into her ears and infect her mind. All he told were lies. The only way to block him out was to praise the Lord unceasingly. Every waking hour was spent deep in meditation with God. Prayers of thanks, rosary devotions, and silent recitation of scripture kept Immaculée near to Jesus. Eventually,

Immaculée was able to get a Bible and a French-English dictionary from the pastor so that she could continue strengthening her heart and mind in the middle of the sinful chaos.

The killers were evil. Pure evil. Immaculée could hear it in their war cries and murder songs, and could see it in their drunken, bloodshot eyes. “Kill them, kill them, kill them all; kill them big and kill them small! Kill the old and kill the young... a baby snake is still a snake, kill it, too, let none escape! Kill them, kill them, kill them all!” (77). The sounds of the wicked, government funded Interahamwe droned on and on. For those three long months, the only music the women heard were songs of death. Screams, pleads, and cries could be heard outside the bathroom walls every day. The feminine instincts of the women made them itch to break down the door and tear through every murderer in sight to protect the babies that were being hacked to pieces in the dirt. Yet they stayed in place. The women stayed, trapped in their frail cocoon of hope, never daring to risk the weeks of hiding they had already so painfully endured.

Immaculée battled with God on how she was supposed to forgive the killers. He told her simply that they were His children as was she. Their souls were not evil, but the actions they had committed were. They did not understand that they were causing irreversible destruction that would forever affect the world in a sad, sad way (94). After ninety-one days, the eight women ventured out of the now filthy bathroom and eventually made their way to a French camp, well equipped with both food and soldiers. From there, Immaculée was able to find a home in the city of Kigali, and a job at the United Nations.

However, the nightmare Immaculée had been living was not over yet. She saw the ruins of her childhood home. She came face to face with the remains of her best friend, her brother, Damascene. She buried him along with their mother in the middle of the now non-existing home they once all shared. She looked their killer in the eyes. She looked him in the eyes, and by the

Grace of God, she forgave him. That man had taken everything away from her, but Immaculée realized that the work of his hands had not been his own but had been the devil's. The strength Immaculée possessed at that moment is inspiring, to say the least. She held on to her faith through the bloodbath that we now call a genocide and was able to live to tell her story. It is only through God's power and love that anyone can accomplish such feats as Immaculée.

About the author

Eleanor (Ellie) Strickland is a Georgia Southern University student, studying history with a minor in philosophy. She enjoys using history to examine peoples' lives and tell important stories that might otherwise be forgotten. When studying philosophy and religion, Ellie appreciates how interconnected those subjects are with history. She hopes to continue her education to earn a PhD in history.

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