

Second Place

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Genocide: Lessons from Survivors

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler was appointed as the German chancellor, setting in motion what would be the worst systematic slaughter of Jews and other minorities known as the Holocaust. In 1956, Elie Wiesel published his first-hand experiences in the Holocaust and the importance of faith in his acclaimed book, *Night*. 38 years later, an estimated 500,000 to 1,000,000 Rwandans were killed in the 100-day mass slaughter that was the Rwandan genocide. *Left to Tell* is Immaculée Ilibagiza's memoir of her survival, having survived cramped in a bathroom with 7 other women for 91 days. Only through her connection with God was Immaculée able to keep her sanity and get rid of her heart of hatred she feels towards the killers.

In times of crisis, many people find faith when encountered with the shadow of death. The thought of a higher being always being in control can sway minds away from the deepest and darkest thoughts that can happen when the sense of hopelessness overwhelm them. Faith can become anything the user wants it to be in any situation. With faith, the wielder can face the impossible and know that God can change it. On the other hand, denial of faith is the scariest fact of life if one only has faith. Elie's memoir perfectly illustrates the rise and fall of a survivor's faith in one of the worst events in human history, the Holocaust.

Many people's strength of faith were already dwindling due to Hitler's anti-Semitic rise to power. Soon this came to affect Elie directly when Hitler got word of discussions the Hungarian Prime Minister Miklós Kállay were making about an armistice with the Allies, on 12 March 1944, he ordered German troops to implement Operation Margarethe to capture critical Hungarian facilities, the place where Elie and his family lived. Despite the beliefs that Nazi antisemitism would be limited to their capital of Budapest, shortly after, German troops marched through Elie's hometown of Sighet. Only fifteen years old at the time, Elie spent much of his time and emotion on the Talmud and on Jewish mysticism, and him as his family were all Jews; therefore, enemies of the Nazis. Soon, Elie and his family were packed into cattle cars and shipped to Auschwitz. Furnaces were working day in and day out, burning the lives of countless women and children. Elie saw people lose their humanity and even kill their family for a morsel of food. Any normal person in that position would go insane at the amount of inhumanity the

soldier and the prisoners achieved, but although terrified, Elie promised himself that he was going to survive and tell his tale. Elie's resilience to the horrors of the Nazis, the most twisted of which was the death of a young boy. He had been suspected of sabotage and hanged in front of all the prisoners, but the boy's light body prevented a quick and painless death, causing him to linger on the rope and die a slow and painful death. Elie notes that for the first time, the prisoners cried for the boy, despite their beliefs that all their tears were washed away. It was this hanging, more than any other, that tore at Elie's heart and youthful faith, prompting Elie to doubt God. God would never let such an atrocious act to happen. Every human needs a reason to survive and hurt, and for Elie, that was his faith and his father. After the death of his father, Elie's only reason left was his faith, no matter how nonexistent it was. Faith can never be killed, and in his final moments of the book, Elie gives out a final prayer, a prayer seeking God's help, and it arrives in the form of the American army liberating the camp. Elie takes a look at himself for the first time.

Elie begins his journey losing his faith in a higher power, but as the story goes on, Elie tells the exact opposite. Only through holding onto faith was Elie able to survive the Holocaust, otherwise he would have given up on his life. After his experience with God and the Holocaust, Elie's faith was not diminished, but strengthened, as his only will to make an effort towards liberation was his faith. 50 years after the liberation of Auschwitz, Elie gave the world his powerful speech on what we have to do about genocide. Elie calls for us to remember the nightmares of genocide to have our children never experience anything like it. Only in the realm of memory will we as humans remember the injustice and hopefully prevent it from happening ever again. Sadly, humanity did not learn its lesson, as just one year earlier, the Rwandan Genocide began, thrusting another person into the horrors of genocide, Immaculée Ilibagiza.

The Rwandan Genocide, also dubbed the genocide against the Tutsi, took place during the Rwandan civil war, a fight between the Hutu-led government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which consisted of Tutsi refugees. Immaculée Ilibagiza and her family were devout Roman Catholics and from the Tutsi tribe. Although there were tensions between the two ethnic tribes, Immaculée never felt unsafe traveling from home to school. It all changed on April 6, 1994, when an airplane carrying Habyarimana and Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira, both ethnically Hutu, was shot down. Hutu extremists quickly blamed the attack on the RPF, just as Hitler blamed Germany's problems on the Jews. The fastest and strongest way to unite people is through common fear and anger and Hutu extremists did so terrifyingly quickly. Killings erupted the next day, and Hutu soldiers quickly systematically identified and slaughtered

hundreds of Tutsis. Immaculée was coming home for Easter when the genocide began. She and any other remaining Tutsi survivors were forced to find any shelter they could find and luckily, Immaculée found shelter with Pastor Murinzi. Despite being a Hutu, Pastor Murinzi risked his life to shelter Immaculée and seven other women. Although difficult, Immaculée managed to keep her sanity through faith. She prayed for hours on end and also remarkably taught herself English using only two books and a dictionary. One particularly horrific incident was when Immaculée overheard the pastor's son from inside the closet. He asked his father that "...if [the Tutsi] were still in power today they'd be killing us right now? So killing them is self defense isn't it?" (Ilibagiza 85). Not only were the Hutu killing tens of thousands of Tutsis, they were manipulating the youth and scaring them with false knowledge for their entire life. Immaculée also heard the radio announcement for everyone to go to churches and stadiums, not for protection, but to serve as the gravesites for anyone unfortunate enough to not be aware of the trap. Bodies piled up to the height of houses and the stench of the dead was omnipresent. Immaculée received more and more traumatizing as the days dragged on, but she did not shed a single tear. She only felt fury. Fury at the pastor for telling her such horrific details, at the government for "unleashing this holocaust", at other countries negligence to act, and most of all, towards the Hutu. Immaculée was so blinded by rage that she "wanted to kill everyone, even Tutsis" (88). If it wasn't for her countless days of prayer to calm herself down, Immaculée's animosity towards everyone would've likely gotten her killed. Through those day of prayer Immaculée learned "in God's eyes, the killers were part of His family, deserving of love and forgiveness" (94). Immaculée opened her heart to God, forgiving the killers and even asking to God to forgive their sins as well. For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, Immaculée slept peacefully that night. After a grueling ninety-one days of the uncertainty that they all could die at any moment, Tutsis were finally able to repeal the government militias and put an end to the genocide. Immaculée and the other women were taken to a French survivor camp where Immaculée learned that her whole family, except for her brother Aimable, have been killed. Although Immaculée felt anger and frustration towards her family's killers, through her faith in God, she was able to forgive those who hurt her and even the leader of the militia that killed her family. Immaculée's tone towards her family's killers reveals that her connection with God gave her peace and more importantly, allowed her to forgive.

Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Immaculée Ilibagiza's *Left to Tell* almost seemed to mirror each other, fifty years apart. Both Elie's and Immaculée's faith was their only light in the endless sea of darkness that is genocide. Through their incredible perseverance of faith and will to survive to

tell the world their story were they able to survive the worst atrocities in human history. They both had sacrificed everything they had. Elie had his family, mind, and nearly his faith stripped away from him from the cruel, cold hands of the Nazis. Hutus brutally slaughtered almost Immaculée's entire family, and those terrifying days trapped in a bathroom, where going outside spelled certain death, will never be forgotten by Immaculée. The faith of Elie and Immaculée were both strengthened after their experiences, although in different ways. Elie had almost completely lost his faith while Immaculée had found even greater faith. Those painful memories will almost certainly live with both of them indefinitely, having lived in the plane between life and death, with the only hope to live was to believe in their faith.

It shocks me that all these horrible acts were all based things that a person couldn't control, be your race, ethnicity, gender or countless others attributes that people are born and stuck with. People can't control if they're born Jewish or Tutsi, that's why we have to step up and act to stop this needless violence. Everyone would want a world free of genocide, but not many people would actively go out and try to make that a reality. Almost everybody agrees that any form of genocide is terrible, but if it's not directly affecting them, most people will be deeply saddened and troubled by these terrible and unthinkable acts, but they won't be compelled to act and do anything about it. "Never again" and "never forget" are common phrases describing genocide. By our memories of genocides we can hopefully prevent them from ever happening again. Forgetting genocides only allows for more genocides to arise. But is just remembering genocide enough? I don't believe so. People can't just believe that someone else can handle it, they have to take it into their hands. Achieving a genocide-free world doesn't require only thought and emotions, it requires hard work and determination to make the world a better place. We need to demand action if any signs of genocide appear and stop the enablers that finance genocide. We also need to make human rights and genocide prevention our core values to force countries to act. From the words of Immaculée Ilibagiza, "Rwanda can be a paradise again, but it will take the love of the entire world...and that's as it should be, for what happened in Rwanda happened to us all – humanity was wounded by the genocide."

Works Cited

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