

'Miracle in Rwanda' gives voice to survivors of 1994 genocide

By [Barbara Hoffman](#)

Soon after the killing started, Immaculée Ilibagiza's parents and brothers begged her to save herself. The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda had begun, and a friend of her father's, a kindly pastor from the warring Hutu tribe, said he could hide her.

And so the 24-year-old college student huddled in his 3-by-4-foot bathroom with seven other women and girls — waiting, praying and teaching herself English with a French/English dictionary. Only when the slaughter stopped, 91 days later, did she finally emerge.

"It was 3 in the morning, and the [fresh] air hit me like an embrace," she tells *The Post*. "I remember watching the trees and mountains. I felt like they were crying, 'We're still here. People died, but we're still here.' "

The woman Rwandans call "our generation's Anne Frank" told her story in a 2006 memoir, "Left to Tell," which inspired Leslie Lewis and Edward Vilga's "[Miracle in Rwanda](#)." First performed by Lewis in 2007, that one-woman play is now running off-Broadway, through May 11. A Rwandan actress, Malaika Uwamahoro, who was 4 and living in Uganda during that 100-day siege, plays both the killer and the hunted. The play was staged April 29 at the United Nations, marking the 25th commemoration of that genocide in which 800,000 people were murdered.

The "miracle," Lewis tells *The Post*, isn't [Enlarge Image](#) that Ilibagiza survived — but that she was able to forgive those who killed her

parents and two brothers. (A third, then in Senegal, escaped the carnage.)

"I went back to Rwanda with Immaculée and a film crew and saw the bathroom she hid in," Lewis says. "A man came out of the fields and said that he was in the group that killed one of her brothers — and asked her to take a picture with her! And she did it, without rancor."

Forgiveness didn't come without struggle — or faith. Ilibagiza, now 49, says that while she and the others hid together, "every single minute, we were waiting for the killers to go find us. Not one day, we ever felt at peace."

She studied her dictionary, prayed the rosary and waited. Though the pastor slipped them food when he could, she weighed 65 pounds when she emerged, 40 pounds less than when she went in. "I could count every bone from my hip to my arm," she says. A French doctor who examined said she probably wouldn't survive, but she was determined to prove him wrong. (Two of the women died soon after.)

Ilibagiza says she has an almost out-of-body experience watching another woman tell her story. "I think, when I see the killer, 'You can't find me now!' " she says. The hardest thing is reliving the moments a friend recounted how and when her parents and brothers died.

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The bathroom where Ilibagiza and seven other women and girls hid for 91 days. Hay House Publishing



Immaculée Ilibagiza and Malaika Uwamahoro/Walter McBride/Getty

“I struggled to forgive,” she says. “I thought I’d avenge my family, but then I thought, ‘How can I hate what [their killers] do, and want to do the same? Do I want to be Hitler or Mandela?’”

Three months after she walked out of hiding, she interviewed — in English — for a job with the UN in Rwanda. She transferred to the US in 1997, and was still working at the UN when she decided to tell her story. Wayne Dyer, the late self-help guru, helped her get published.

“Never lose hope,” says Ilibagiza, a married mother of two, who now lives in Murray Hill and speaks to audiences around the world. “And don’t let politics divide you. We can destroy our world with anger, or we can learn to let go of it and forgive.”