Voices of the Past and Present
Victims and Survivors of Genocide and Conflict Speak
About this book

This compilation is a collection of short narratives that we have written about witnesses, victims, and survivors of genocides and mass atrocities. The narratives are based on life experiences as told in diaries, books, and essays. In some cases, authors prepared original material for us. We hope that these compelling words inspire readers to explore the backgrounds and histories represented in these brief vignettes.
Contents
Lonely, American Indian Genocide, from 1495-present...............................3
Zara Bezhanyan, Armenian Genocide, from 1915-1918...............................5
Petr Ginz, The Holocaust, from 1933-1945.................................................6
Loung Ung, Cambodian Genocide, from 1975-1979 .................................7
Chicha Mariani, Argentinian Genocide, from 1976-1983 ............................8
Vedran Smailović, Bosnian Genocide, from 1992-1995.............................9
Alice Musabende, Rwandan Genocide, 1994 ..............................................10
Lim Hye-jin, North Korean Conflict, from 1948-present.............................11
Sophie Muta, Congo Conflict, from 1996-present ....................................12
Brian Steidle, Darfur Genocide, from 2003-present .................................13
Lonely, American Indian Genocide, from 1495-present

When I was very young, I had no shoes and my mother would carry me everywhere. She was always warm and happy. She would smile at me, but her eyes would turn down. I always listened to what she said, even though sometimes I didn’t understand. And I was never lonely.

When I was not-so-young, I had soft moccasins and my mother would walk beside me. She did not smile so much anymore, and we were sometimes hungry. We asked for help from our elders and our tribe, and they would always help us. They would tell us stories and we would always listen, and try to understand. And we were never lonely.

When I was older still, two men took me barefoot to a straight-brick building and gave me stiff shoes. I was hungry there, too, though they said I wouldn’t be. I asked for help in the same way I had asked with my mother, and I was punished. They said I couldn’t use those words here. They cut my hair and I thought that meant my mother had died. I would cry at night with all the other boys. And we were lonely together.

When I was old enough to run, they took my shoes so that I could not. They did not tell me of my family, but I knew. I knew they had been walked, walked, walked to a far-away place. I knew my friends, my family, and my mother did not make it to the far-away place. I thought that I was the only one left. At night I whispered words to myself, thinking it was up to me to keep them alive. And I was completely alone.

When I grew taller, they gave me baseball shoes. They taught me to run and swing and hit, and to only use my words to say I loved America. All other times were forbidden. I was not so hungry, because I was good at baseball. When I failed I could not ask for help, but my team lifted me up. They knew they would need help, too. So we were not so lonely.

When I was young and old, I put on my boots and left that place. I tried not to look back. I was lost in a new world, but I remembered my home. My first home, true and strong, that had helped me and my mother. I searched long and hard
and found them. They loved me and welcomed me back. And I thought I was not lonely.

When I was growing older, I slipped into new moccasins and told my family of my stolen-life. But they could not understand. They would smile at me and nod, but I spoke like a child. They welcomed me back but I was not the same. I could not fight for my people, or work for them, or spread our culture. I knew nothing of my own family. And I realized I was lonely.

When I was as old as I could be, I took off my shoes and felt the grass beneath my feet. I remembered being a child, and my mother’s warmth. I missed her. And when my mother pulled me close and cried into my long hair, I realized I was not alone.
Zara Bezhanyan, Armenian Genocide, from 1915-1918

My grandparents, Hrach Hakobyan and Hamaspure Avakyan, survived the Armenian Genocide that was perpetrated by the Turks of the Ottoman Empire during the years 1915 to 1923. They survived by fleeing from the city of Kars, now in modern Turkey, to Gyumri, now in the Republic of Armenia. My great-grandfather, Smbat Avakyan, accompanied them on their journey. Once they arrived, he returned to their family home in Kars to retrieve the last of their belongings. On his way back to his family and to safety, he was stopped by Turkish gendarmes, robbed, and brutally beaten nearly to death. Eventually, he returned to his family and was miraculously nursed back to health.

This is just one of the heart-wrenching stories I grew up listening to, as told by my grandmother. But as sad as this story is, 1.5 million Armenians did not survive to tell theirs.

My grandmother would have never imagined that I would retell these stories here in Minnesota, where I immigrated to 18 years ago and now work as a Spanish teacher in Lanesboro, Minnesota. It is hard to imagine that a conflict that happened so long ago and so far away could possibly affect Minnesotans today.

I think about my grandmother’s stories and about the genocide that nearly eliminated my people every day. I believe I can speak for the Armenians when I say that we would like the return of our lost family, our lost homeland, and our lost culture.

But mostly we want recognition and remembrance of an event that lives with us to this day--recognition because this genocide is a defining part of our existence, and remembrance because the last victim of genocide is the truth.
Petr Ginz, The Holocaust, from 1933-1945

My name is Petr Ginz. I grew up in Prague, Czechoslovakia.

My life was normal until I was twelve. I lived with my parents and my younger sister, Eva. I loved books, especially ones about outer space. I even wrote novels myself.

When the Nazis occupied my country, everything changed. People were sent to concentration camps. My father was Jewish. My mother was not. According to the Nazis, they had a mixed marriage. Children of mixed marriages, like Eva and me, were labeled “Mischling”. The rule was that Mischlings were sent to concentration camps when they turned 14.

I began keeping a diary when I was twelve. I wrote about my daily life – and the Nazi brutality.

I got very nervous as my 14th birthday approached because I knew I’d get sent to a concentration camp. I was deported to the concentration camp called Terezin that was near Prague. I left my diary behind and it was found after the war.

I was imprisoned at Terezin in 1942. I lived in a barracks with a hundred other boys. I organized them to publish an underground magazine called Vedem, meaning “We Lead.” We published Vedem every Friday for two years. It helped me escape from the reality of the Holocaust.

A few months after I got to Terezin, my sister Eva was sent there, too.

Soon I was put on a train to Auschwitz. I was immediately sent to my death in the gas chamber. I was sixteen years old.

15,000 children were sent to Terezin. Only 132 survived. Of the hundred boys who wrote Vedem with me, only 15 survived. 800 pages of Vedem were hidden until Terezin was liberated. Today, the entire collection is in the Terezin Memorial in the Czech Republic and it was published as a book in 1994. I died – but my words live on.
Loung Ung, Cambodian Genocide, from 1975-1979

My name is Loung Ung. I was born in Cambodia, and I was five years old when my family was killed in the Cambodian genocide.

I was five years old when everything I knew about life was thrown into chaos as the Khmer Rouge communists took control of Cambodia.

I grew up in a happy, upper-middle class family. One day, when I came home from playing hopscotch with my friends, I found my family loading our things into my father’s truck because the new government considered us “unclean” due to our social class and ethnic background. We were forced to join thousands of others who were leaving the city, where we walked for days, constantly hungry and thirsty in the brutal heat. We were eventually loaded like cargo onto military trucks and taken into the countryside. This was all part of the government’s plan to make Cambodia into an agricultural society. They abolished anything that didn’t fit in to this society: schools, banks, hospitals - even families.

My family was eventually sent to a labor camp where we worked like animals. We were constantly abused, hungry, and exhausted. I was forced to become a child soldier.

The worst trauma came when my family was separated. My two older brothers were sent to hard labor camps. My older sister died from dysentery. My father was abducted and never seen again. My mother sacrificed herself so that my two younger siblings and I could escape.

I found a new home in America. I now write books and speak to people around the world. I have been back to Cambodia many times to work on healing the wounds of genocide.

My experience is not unique. Millions died and countless others suffered. Still more are victimized in Cambodia today. I share my story so that the world might hear our plea.
Chicha Mariani, Argentinian Genocide, from 1976-1983

My name is Chicha Mariani. I’m 88 years old, and I’m totally alone in the world.

I wasn’t always alone. Years ago, I had a son Daniel. In the 1970s, he and his wife Diana were members of a leftist guerilla movement in Buenos Aires. On November 24, 1976, Diana was at home with their little baby Clara when their neighborhood was attacked and bombed. Diana was killed. She had hidden Clara in a bathtub.

After the attack, a soldier found the baby still alive, carried her out to the street, and gave Clara to two police officers. Daniel had left for a meeting before the attack and he was shot dead eight months later.

I have spent the past 36 years searching for Clara, but that is all I know about what happened to her. She is still missing.

I’ve turned Daniel’s house into a museum. The bombed rubble is enclosed in plexiglass. I run a foundation named for Clara.

I was always expecting to find Clara, but lately, I find that hope has been more difficult. Every morning I wake up and I think, “I don’t want to wake up. I don’t want to go on.” After a while, I think, “But if I don’t move, what will happen?” And so I get up and go out to search for her. Who will look for her when I am gone?

Through the efforts of grandmothers like me, more than 100 stolen children have been found. We abuelas have been nominated four times for the Nobel Peace Prize for our efforts to find the true identities of these stolen children.

But there are 400 who are still missing; four hundred grandmothers, abuelas like me, whose hearts are still grieving for these lost grandchildren.
Vedran Smailović, Bosnian Genocide, from 1992-1995

My name is Vedran Smailović. I am a cellist from Sarajevo, Bosnia, and I witnessed the mass killings during the genocide in Bosnia.

My beautiful country, Bosnia and Herzegovina, was one of the six republics united as Yugoslavia. We hosted the 1984 Olympics and had world-renowned authors and artists. I was a cellist in the Sarajevo String Quartet and the Sarajevo Opera.

After our president, Josip Tito, died in 1980, our new leaders began to plant seeds of hate in the minds of the people.

Not long after the Olympics, my neighbors turned against each other. Our offices, bridges, libraries, and homes were shelled. We were targets of sniper rifles and victims of rape.

Some of the worst brutality was in Sarajevo. Serbs surrounded us. For five years, I was trapped under mortars, bombs, and sniper fire. Ten thousand of my neighbors were killed, including 1,500 children, in the Siege of Sarajevo.

One day in February, I witnessed a terrible tragedy at the Markale marketplace. Bombs went off while people were doing their daily shopping. Sixty-eight Sarajevans were killed and 144 were wounded.

I felt compelled to pay a tribute to my dead neighbors. I started playing my cello in the rubble of buildings amid the wreckage of humanity, trying to honor the dead.

People around the world were inspired by the power of my music in the face of the atrocities. My experience, and the experiences of the other survivors and victims, inspired books, plays, and songs around the world.

In 1995 NATO dropped more than a thousand bombs to try to bring peace, but I did not witness this bombing. I had finally escaped.

I commemorate atrocities through music in hopes of a brighter future.
Alice Musabende, Rwandan Genocide, 1994

My name is Alice Musabende. I am from Rwanda. I am a survivor of the genocide. I was fourteen years old and I became an orphan.

It was a regular day when my mother sent me to my cousin’s house on an errand. Although my mother told me to come right home, I stayed overnight.

I returned home to a nightmare. My entire family had been murdered. Everyone. My mother, my father, my twelve-year old sister, my nine-year-old and my two-year-old brothers, and my grandparents. They were gone.

Over the course of a hundred days, 800,000 people were slaughtered. That’s 10,000 people a day, 400 people an hour, seven people a minute.

My aunt and I survived the chaos of those 100 days. We searched for the bodies of our twelve dead family members. But we only found the remains of two of my aunts. They are part of a memorial site to remind us that the past must not be forgotten.

After the genocide, I went back to high school and then I graduated from college. I moved to Canada for a master’s degree.

I went back to Rwanda several years ago. Going back was scary but I knew I had to do it – for my mom, for my family, and for the survivors. I had to see it again.

I worked as a journalist in Canada and I am now studying at Cambridge University in England to become a human rights lawyer.

I am one of 400,000 orphans of the Rwandan genocide. I lost my childhood. Help prevent these tragedies and protect the world’s children.
Lim Hye-jin, North Korean atrocities, from 1948-present

My name is Lim Hye-jin. I am 35 years old, and I still feel guilt from a career I ended 15 years ago.

When I was 17, I became a guard at one of North Korea’s prison camps: Camp 12. There, the prisoners are forced to grow corn and peppers. However, I quickly discovered that the camps revolve around sheer brutality, torture, and dehumanization.

I once saw a woman be burned alive simply for annoying a guard, and prisoners were forced to stone two brothers to death after they had briefly escaped. After this last incident, I felt so sick that I couldn’t eat for days. I remember how all the prisoners were constantly fighting hunger, sometimes resorting to eating snakes or insects to survive. They were forced to work 16 hours every day, which ensured that they were all overworked, sometimes to the point of death. The prisoners were at constant risk for beatings, and injured people were left to die in the snow.

Most of the prisoners were never told why they were there. And their crimes were often as insignificant as not dusting their picture of the supreme leader, Kim Jong-un.

Despite seeing the horrific treatment that the prisoners got, I had no idea how unjust and undeserved that treatment was. As a guard, I was taught to see the prisoners not as human beings, but as animals with dispensable lives. Twice a week, all guards were forced to attend brainwashing sessions where we were told that the prisoners had committed terrible crimes and we should not feel any sympathy for them.

However, I was eventually arrested for conducting trade deals in China. After a few years there, I realized the truth and I escaped. Now, I feel so betrayed by my leaders. I truly believed what they told me about the prisoners, and after learning the truth, I am traumatized. That is why I am speaking out: to undo the wrongs I committed at Camp 12.
Sophie Muta, Congo atrocities, from 1996-present

“African-American”

African-American
That's what I am, that's who I be
Made in Zaire, but yet I'm Congolese
product of a kleptocracy
that not only robbed us of our riches, stole our identity
But because I left when I was 3
I'm robbed of my voice.
My name isn't among the walking dead
so the tears that I've shed, are faux¹.
How dare I advocate when I don't even know.
Been in the U.S. 19 years, this is the place of my upbringing,
African-American
that's what I am, that's who I be
but I was made in Zaire and we're both Congolese
My Le Trente Juin² is bittersweet
for while I'm partying, the three sisters - greed, war, and murder - are ebbing at
my history
gnawing at what it means to be, me
Niko mwana ya kivu, my one constant
60 years, 5 flags, 4 governments, 3 names, 2 coups, 1 country.
A Congolese woman living an African-American life.
Made in Zaire.
African-American that's what I am.
Congolese is who I'll forever be.

¹ French word meaning ‘false’ or ‘fake,’ pronounced ‘foe.’
² This is French for June 30, the date of Congolese independence from Belgium. French was the language used by the colonizers.
Brian Steidle, Darfur Genocide, from 2003-present

My name is Brian Steidle. I was a captain in the US Marines - and a witness to genocide.

I was twenty-seven years old when I took a job in Sudan as a military observer for the African Union.

I heard about a conflict in Darfur, the western part of the country, and I went to investigate. I had no weapons and no authority to intervene. I just had a pen, a notebook, and a camera. With those tools, I submitted over eighty reports documenting the atrocities that I witnessed.

The Sudanese government was trying to exterminate citizens who wanted more rights in their own country.

The government gave weapons to a militia called the Janjaweed, who annihilated people in Darfur, village by village. They mutilated, raped, and murdered the villagers, and then burned everything to the ground. Survivors fled to camps for internally displaced people and refugees.

I witnessed, recorded, photographed and reported on the genocide in Darfur for six months. No one listened. When my contract with the African Union ended, I returned to the US, but I couldn’t forget what I saw.

I contacted the media, and I found a more willing audience. The New York Times published my story and my photographs.

After that, I wrote a book about Darfur called The Devil Came on Horseback and it was made into a film. I have given more than 500 speeches and I have testified before the U.S. Congress, the British Parliament, and the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

The International Criminal Court has charged Sudan’s president with genocide – but people are still dying.