

Machetes no match for heroic Mama Zula

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Mama Zula slowly approached the podium, her steps frail with age. She greeted each of the dignitaries with a handshake and a big smile, but saved her warmest greetings for the man at the end of the line.

To the delight of the crowd, the 91-year-old widow pulled Rwandan President Paul Kagame toward her and planted a firm kiss on each of his cheeks. She had long admired him for his role in helping stop that country's brutal genocide in 1994 and wanted to give thanks.

But, despite her gesture, this ceremony was not for the president. On this day, Mama Zula was the hero.

She was being honoured, along with other ordinary Rwandans, for extraordinary acts of courage and sacrifice during one of the worst mass killings in human history, which began 13 years ago this week.

From April to July 1994, more than 800,000 Rwandan men, women and children were slaughtered, mostly by machete, as propaganda-fuelled hatred spread like wildfire through this tiny central African country.

But in the midst of the violence, countless Rwandans risked their own lives to save others in remarkable examples of humanity. Like Mama Zula, who hid 100 people in her modest home at various points during the genocide, shielding them from sure death.

Her story has become legendary to many Rwandans since the genocide, and we wanted to learn more about her. So the day after the ceremony, we joined Mama Zula at her house for some tea.

Still proudly wearing the medal the president had given her, she told us about how she warded off the militia for nearly 100 days to protect the people in her home.

"It was a Friday," she said in a quiet voice, "some time in April," when the militia first entered her town. They began burning down all the houses and looking for people on their hit list – mostly members of the country's Tutsi population.

A neighbour whose house had just been burned came running to her, pleading for help. He was a Tutsi, and the militia was looking for him.

"You can't die," Mama Zula told him. "You can't give in."



REUTERS FILE PHOTO

Human skulls are seen inside an open mass grave in the yard of the church in Nyanza, Rwanda, April 4, 2004.

That's when she decided to hide the man. She ushered him into her home and told him to be quiet. As the flames spread, she hid even more people. Soon her house was full.

Then the militia pounded on her door. She wasn't Tutsi, but they suspected she was hiding people and they demanded she hand them over. If she didn't, they said, they would burn her house down too.

But she refused.

Instead, Mama Zula stood at her doorway and told the weapon-toting soldiers that she would cast a spell on anyone who entered her home or hurt those inside. As the local witch doctor, her threat was taken seriously. Their machetes were no match for her courage, and they left her alone.

As the violence spread, her home became a safe haven. From neighbours to local mayors, people found safety with Mama Zula. She cooked for them every day, even mixing cough syrup in the children's food to keep them from making too much noise.

The militia often came back to her house, looking for the Tutsis inside. But each time, she frightened them away. At this point, she was caring for so many people that she had to use a second house to hide them all.

After three long months, the genocide was over. Many of Mama Zula's friends and neighbours had been killed, but thanks to the extraordinary bravery of one mild-mannered grandmother, 100 Tutsis escaped death.

Sitting in the very same home in which so many others were able to survive, Mama Zula pulled out a set of keys to show us. She said they were from the locks she used to keep the militia out of her house during the genocide. She kept them as a reminder of the horror that unfolded in her country.

As we finished our tea, we asked what drove her to risk her life for people she did not even know.

"They came to me," Mama Zula explained. "They needed help."

It was a simple, yet profound message from the unlikeliest of heroes.

And it's a message worth remembering now, as another genocide slowly unfolds in a country not far from Rwanda.

Since 2003, residents in the Darfur region of Western Sudan have been brutalized by the Janjaweed militia. Villages are being attacked and burned, leaving hundreds of thousands of people homeless. As many as 400,000 civilians have been killed.

But as was the case with Rwanda, the international response has been slow.

Without urgent action, history will repeat itself. Let's not leave it up to grandmothers like Mama Zula again.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of Free the Children and co-authors of *Me to We*. With this column, they are exploring the impact of global issues on young people in developing nations and what it means to youth in the GTA.