

# PROFILE OF ZURA KARUHIMBI

## Candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize 2010



*"You can not die, you can not give up, we can defeat these evil people."*

*Zura Karuhimbi*

Karuhimbi Zura was born in Rwanda by Hutu family. During the 1994 genocide, Zura saved the lives of over 100 Tutsi hiding them in her home in Gitarama, the second largest city in the country, where the number of killings was particularly high. Zura is now an 84-year-old lady with a country life background as that of a simple Hutu woman: work children, work children and still work and children. Her husband died and some of her children are gone, replaced by numerous grandchildren, however. As she was young, in the late '50s and early '60s, she was very impressed by the efforts that her mother made during the first persecutions to save and help some Tutsis. These facts certainly inspired her as the same persecutions began again at the time of Hutu power in the 90s.

At the outbreak of the genocide her house became the refuge of many desperate people. Zura tried in every way to help the Tutsi refugees hiding them in her house, in nearby fields, on trees, and using her reputation as an animist healer. Zura has the reputation of knowing the traditional medicine and thanks to this knowledge she helps who needs her help. Just resting on the ancient Rwandan beliefs, Zura worked on her appearance and her village sorcerer's manners. In this way she succeeded in instilling fear and in taking away the Hutu extremists who searched out the Tutsis to decimate them. Once, as the militia intended to burn her house, Zura began to evoke her powers and convinced the attackers that they and their families were facing tremendous curses if they had carried on their threats. The other system that Zura used to protect Tutsis was to put big locks on doors and take always the keys with her. The militiamen, suspicious, often approached the back of her house to listen for coughs that could betray the refugees. Aware of this fact the old lady began to give her guests the traditional medicines that treated cough making imperceptible their presence outside.

At the end of the genocide Zura received a medal of honour by the President Paul Kagame. She always wears it along with the keychain that saved the lives of her brothers Tutsi. In 2009 a tree was planted for Zura in the Garden of the Righteous in Milan. Zura is a farmer and hasn't received a school education. One thing that is uncomfortable to her, for example, is to wear shoes. She never wore shoes, she has always

walked barefoot. When she wears shoes, she can't stay in balance. Her story is told by the people she saved.

**Wellars** was a married man, he had four children before the genocide. They were all killed and he remarried, now he has six children: When I arrived at Zura's house, there were many other people. A neighbour of her, girls, an old man named Bucyeye. They were the only ones who I was able to recognize. Zura hid us in different places. I will never be able to tell what she has done for me without betraying. Why? Not only she fed me, but when I wanted to make my needs, she gave me a kind of container, put some ashes in it, in order avoid the smell and went to empty it and clean it.

There was a checkpoint in front of her house. To cheer up, she told us that she had put things in front of her house and that no murderers could pass the entrance to her camp to kill us. One day the soldiers arrived. They were looking for amulets against death at the front. She complained for the murderers of this checkpoint, then gave something (I don't know what) to the military and they went away. Going away, they removed the roadblock. Sometimes she put a child on her back to save him and lied to the murderers, saying he was the son of her daughter and the baby survived. I also remember a murderer named Somaya, now he's dead, who wanted to rape an eight years old girl and there was a war between him and Zura. One thing however made me smile: the beliefs of Rwandans. One day the soldiers arrived at the house of Zura because they knew that she was a traditional healer. They came to ask for medicines that could shield them from bullets. She gave them products that I didn't see and assured them that they would not be achieved by bullets. How laughter! She said the killers that she owned some evil spirits and that she could deliver them if they had continued to annoy her. The military believed so much in her that they themselves lifted the roadblock which was outside her home and was managed by the Interahamwe. However, it is thanks to her that many people were alive. I begged Zura to come and live with me, because I believe she is in danger of death, but she refused.

**Emmanuel** is a kid who doesn't know his own age. The name was given by Zura, because he has been taken from the back of the corpse of a woman, supposedly his mother. Zura has named him Emmanuel Bizimana. Bizimana means (only God knows):

She made me so much good that I don't even know how to talk about it. Thanks to her goodness I am alive, because to her I owe my life. She was my mother, my father, my grandmother, my brother, my sister, everything. And she never let tiredness to overcome herself. Someone suggested her to abandon me with the pretext that I would be useless, but she resisted. Many times they wanted to kill me, she protected me. She was very poor, but all she could offer, she did it with such a love that I always liked everything. I never longed for something more.

We lived on nothing, as those who had everything. Together we were happy. For me she is my mother. She denied me nothing and I grew up seeing her. I was fed with her vacuum breast, which I liked, she bore me on her back, I remember all this.

She fed me at her breast with a bag of milk that was hidden under her shirt, this is why I love milk. She made a hole in a bag of cow's milk, tied the end to her breast and I thought the milk came out of the breast.

As I didn't not drink the entire envelope, she closed that end and we slept. When I awoke, I cried because I wanted milk. She made another hole and fed me. She always had also a thermos of milk by her bed and started to give me the milk with bottle feeding. Then she started to give me the baby food. She has a grandson who tried to kill me. He lied to me and said he wanted to give me a ripe banana. I accepted, I was too small. I was smaller than a pelican. I was like a mentally ill person, I think because of the small pieces of iron that Zura told me to have removed from my head when she found me on the back of my mother's corpse. He put me in a pit in which bananas were to be ripen, to make banana juice and beer. He closed me in with ropes and banana leaves, he put a table over there and went away. Bananas had been just removed and there was plenty of ants in it. They stung me, I cried and when I cried they came in my mouth. They entered in my nose and ears. Meanwhile Zura was looking for me. In the end she found me and

took me away, she screamed and cried, because I was full of ants all over my body, and came out from every orifice.

She lost her head, in fact. She took her sarong and began to dry my eyes as if she were rubbing on the floor, I cannot explain how I didn't become blind. She washed me with hot water, made me drink hot water, which was burning. She told me she had to kill the ants that had entered on my throat and stomach. She took them away from my ears. She took a blade of grass, put it in my nose and I sneezed so many ants, and slowly I got well. You cannot imagine all the good she has done for me, in the midst of enemies who wanted only my death. I am not the only one, though not all have give her recognition. I don't know how to talk about her because I'd never stop.