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The Book Thief

“Separated by Age and by Continent, but United by Spirit to Survive”

By JIM DWYER

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The two men grew up on separate continents, speaking their own languages. One was not yet 20; the other was bearing down on 100.

Yet within half an hour of meeting each other this week for the first time, Henry Kabiyoona and Sol Rosenkranz knew each other's stories before the words reached their lips.

First, Henry.

Rwanda, 1994.

The Kabiyoona family tries but cannot outrun a genocide of Tutsi people: the Hutu government has ordered 500,000 machetes to butcher them.

The family is gathered in its dining room with relatives to pool and divide food before dispersing into the countryside, when the Hutu paramilitarists, known as the Interahamwe, burst into the house. They kill every last man, woman and child they find.

But not twin baby boys, age 9 months.

“They said, ‘Don’t kill those two kids, it’s a curse to kill twins, and they will not have not have food anyway or anyone to take care of them,’ ” Mr. Kabiyoona, 19, said.

Mr. Rosenkranz, 95, broke in, recognizing the tactic.

“So they will die anyway,” he said.

Mr. Kabiyoona nodded. “No one to feed them,” he added. “They will not have anything. They say, ‘They will die of hunger.’ ”

And yet, they didn’t.

One of them became Henry Kabiyoona, tall, gentlemanly, a student of history, economics and geography.

On Wednesday, he sat over lunch with Mr. Rosenkranz, a Polish Jew who survived Hitler’s genocide. They were one of five such pairs, of youth and age, African and European, who met at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in Lower Manhattan. All had been early in their journeys when they escaped organized extermination.

They swapped stories not of death, but of keeping on.

Originally from Krosniewice in Poland, Mr. Rosenkranz spent time in six concentration camps — two each in Poland, Germany and Czechoslovakia. At one point he organized an escape; on recapture, four of the six people in his family died in Birkenau. He and one brother were sent away and survived.

How?

“I don’t know how,” Mr. Rosenkranz said. “Luck. Faith. Perseverance.”

“Luck,” Mr. Kabiyoona said.

“We were days marching on the road, without a crumb, without a drop of water,” Mr. Rosenkranz said.

“No drinks a’tall,” Mr. Kabiyoona said.

How did the Kabiyoona twins make it?

“I don’t know how I survived,” Mr. Kabiyoona said.

After the slaughter, a grandmother arrived at their home, but saw no sign of the babies or another member of the household, Mr. Kabiyoona explained: “She didn’t find our house girl with the dead bodies.” The housekeeper, Sharamanzi, had hidden during the killings, then run off with the babies. In time, they went to the grandmother.

Henry and his brother, Eric, live in Agahozo-Shalom Youth Village in rural Rwanda, with about 500 others orphaned since 1994. Genocide, a civil war, AIDs and poverty have culled so many adults that 1.2 million Rwandans — about 15 percent of the population — are orphans, according to the Rwandan government.

Agahozo Shalom was created by Anne Heyman, who was raised in South Africa and worked in New York as an assistant district attorney, after she heard Rwanda described in a 2005 lecture as being bereft of hope because there was no systematic way to take care of orphans. “It popped out of my head: they should build youth villages,” Ms. Heyman said.

After World War II, Israel absorbed tens of thousands of children who were orphaned by the Holocaust and war, and set up youth villages as a way to nurture and educate them.

“There was a systematic way to take care of orphans,” Ms. Heyman said. She researched the practices in those villages, raised money, won the support of the Rwandan government, acquired 144 acres and built small houses. Since December 2008, the village has accepted 125 boys and girls per year, without regard to ethnicity, religion, health status or educational aptitude. They raise a little more than a third of their own food, and they study.

Henry, Eric, and three other residents of the village — Pascaline Niyigena, Yvonne Uwamahoro and Afra Uwase A Benie — came to New York to help raise money for the village. But they also made time to visit the Holocaust survivors, who, besides Mr. Rosenkranz, included Toby Levy, Sally Frishberg, Fanya Gottesfield Heller and Leon Gleicher.

They all seemed mightily impressed with one another: describing their pasts, but talking about what was ahead. “Henry has a tremendous future,” Mr. Rosenkranz said. “All he has to do is persevere. And not lose faith.”

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