

# The Northbrook Tower

<http://www.northbrooktower.com/school/young-activist-shares-story-rwandan-genocide-wood-oaks>

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## Survivors' Stories

### Young activist shares story of Rwandan Genocide at Wood Oaks





Emmanuel Habimana, an orphan of the 1994 Tutsi Rwandan Genocide, speaks to eighth-graders at Wood Oaks Junior High School about his experiences on Wednesday, March 19. PHOTO SUBMITTED

COVER STORY

# A firsthand testament to how it began in Hungary

Holocaust survivor tells her experience at Maple

DAYNA FIELDS, Editor

On March 19, 1944, German troops marched into Hungary with Adolf Eichmann, who was sent to establish special details for implementing the "Final Solution" of the Hungarian Jews.

On March 19, 2014, Magda Brown told her story of living in Hungary, a German ally, and how conditions rapidly changed from bad to worse to unimaginable while addressing a crowded room of junior high students at Maple School who were studying World War II.

"There was no resistance, no gun shots — nothing. The Hungarian military openly welcomed them and cooperated to the fullest," said Magda Brown, 87. "With their help, they were able to move people out of their homes ... and to their death."

Brown is a Skokie resident and a member of the Speaker's Bureau of the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center since 2006. She has told her story in Germany and in New Zealand, and she mostly speaks to church groups, senior clubs and universities.

The kids at Maple were the youngest she has ever addressed, and it gave her an opportunity to reach a generation of soon-to-be leaders.

"I have a mission, and 'never again' should better mean something," she said after the room emptied. "I cannot bring back the death of my large family and all the tragedies that took place, but if I can talk about and tell these young people how to create a better world, how to avoid intending genocide, then I feel like I accomplished something."

Magda (Perlstein) Brown was just 17 when the Nazis occupied Hungary. By that time, Germany had already invaded other Eastern European countries like Latvia and Poland.

Before that time, Magda was still living a normal life as a teenager with her family in Miskolc, Hungary.

Her father owned a butcher shop, she attended school and her brother had joined the army.

"I was just like you," she told the engrossed young listeners. "We are still sleeping in our own beds, we are still going to school up to a point, we are still having a job and living — certainly a much better existence than our fellow Jews in Poland."

But things began to change quickly, she said, as the government began to pass anti-Jewish laws. First, no interfaith marriage. Next, all Jews had to wear a yellow Star of David on their sleeves. Then, they had to forfeit their businesses to the government. Finally, Jewish people were no longer allowed to have a job.

That final law made all the Jewish families in Hungary poor and starving.

"Now there was no such a thing as a welfare system, so the Jewish community had to pull their resources and support these people. And that's when you learn to give and share," she said.

Although life was hard, Brown said no one could ever imagine what was to come.

Just a week after the invasion, Jewish families were notified that they had one hour to pack a bag and line up on the street. With young fathers serving in the Hungarian army, this mostly meant mothers and children. They walked five miles to a designated ghetto in Miskolc, where Brown and her family lived.

Soon, Magda was forced to share her home with 34 additional people, and Magda's family tried to feed and clothe them as best they could.

"Now you have to think of their emotional parts, too, because people are behaving differently," she told the students. "There are old people and young people, there are sick people and healthy ... and there were quiet people sitting in the corner, praying."

No one was allowed to leave or enter the ghetto. Over the next couple weeks, the police confiscated cash, jewelry, radios, bicycles and anything of value from the homes.

"Up until this point, the police had protected me just like any other citizen. No longer," she said. "The money they took from us paid the Hungarian railroad worker to take us to our death."

On June 11, 1944 — Magda's 17th birthday — she and her family were crowded onto a railroad box car with 80 other people. Each transport held thousands of people, including children and the elderly. They traveled for three days without food, water or any idea where they were being sent.

Magda described the pain of three days of thirst to the students and the sight of others who died during the trip.

The guards told them that they were needed for work to help the war effort.

"We heard throughout sources that the allies are ready to land in



Magda Brown holds her eighth-grade photo from 1941 while speaking to a room of middle-school students at Maple School in Northbrook on March 19. PHOTO SUBMITTED

Normandy, so that gave us extra hope that the war was coming to an end," she said. "We figured we'll go to another country, we'll do our jobs, the war will be over, and we'll come home and life will continue. Unfortunately, it doesn't play out that way."

The final destination was the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland.

After arriving, Magda was separated from her mother, father, aunts, uncles, cousins and friends. It was the last time she saw them — they were sent directly into the gas chambers.

"Now stop and think, under these difficult, difficult conditions, when you are suffering and more suffering — but they give you those beautiful words: 'The family will stay together. You don't resist. You follow them like a sheep. Whatever

they tell you to do, you do," she said to a silenced room.

The deportation of Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz-Birkenau started on May 15, 1944 and lasted until July 7, 1944. Nearly 440,000 — half the Jews in Hungary — were deported. On average, three out of four people in each transport were gassed immediately upon arrival.

Out of her extended family of 70, only six cousins had survived the Holocaust.

"Think before you hate," were her departing words for the young crowd. "I'm not telling you not to hate. Just think before you hate."

## After the war

DAYNA FIELDS, Editor

After two months of hoodlums' torture and imprisonment in Auschwitz, Magda Brown was "selected" to work at one of Germany's largest munitions factories filling bombs with chemicals, which turned her skin yellow, her hair orange and her lips purple.

At the end of March 1945, Magda and her group were sent on a death march to Buchenwald. On the way, she bravely escaped by hiding in a nearby barn for a day in a hay. Then, two American Armed Forces discovered her and the other women and liberated them.

After the war, Magda made contact with aunts and uncles in the United States, who sponsored her immigration to Chicago in 1946. Eventually, with the help of the National Council of Jewish Women, she attended classes. In 1949, she married Robert Brown and raised two children.

Magda was recently honored an honors doctorate from Aurora University for her many speeches given in its interfaith program.

For more information about Magda Brown, visit [www.MagdaBrown.com](http://www.MagdaBrown.com).

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Online version did not have the full text story.

COVER STORY

# Young activist shares story of Rwandan Genocide

Wood Oaks social studies class hears firsthand account

ALAN P. HENRY, Staff Writer

Twenty-six-year-old Emmanuel Habimana, an orphan of the 1994 Tutsi Rwandan Genocide, took eighth-graders at Wood Oaks Junior High School on a journey of both despair and hope on Wednesday, March 19.

"Our neighbors turned into our killers," said Habimana, who survived the assassination of his parents and four of his eight siblings when he was 9.

He was then left to fend for himself and live as a servant of the Hutu militia before nearly starving in a refugee camp in Congo.

The eighth-graders at Wood Oaks are studying the Rwandan Genocide as part of a unit in their social studies class. Habimana, a human rights activist for the past decade, has been recently visiting high schools in Lake and Cook counties. His visit at Wood Oaks on Wednesday, March 19, is his only stop at a junior high school.

To the young students, Habimana had a simple but powerful message. "I would tell you to grow up and make a difference... say to yourselves, 'How can we change the future? How can we make the world better?'"

From 1973 to 1993, Rwanda President Habyarimana, a Hutu, ran a totalitarian regime that excluded all Tutsis from participating in government. That changed when Habyarimana signed accords that weakened the Hutu hold on the country

**"Part of my responsibility is to tell the true story."**

Emmanuel Habimana — A Rwandan Genocide survivor and public speaker on why he traveled to Northbrook on Wednesday, March 19

and allowed Tutsis to be active in the government.

On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying President Habyarimana was shot down while approaching Kigali International Airport in Rwanda. It was never determined who was responsible for the assassination, but Hutu extremists profited the most from Habyarimana's death. Within 24 hours, they had taken over the government, blamed the Tutsis for the assassination and begun the slaughter of approximately 800,000 Tutsis.

Hatred of the Tutsi by the Hutu had been building for decades, and the plane crash "was an excuse" for the genocide, Habimana told the Wood Oaks students. He recalled, for example, how the Hutu would count the number of Tutsi in every classroom as a means to control how many Tutsi were given an education.

"They wanted to marginalize them," he said.

Habimana said in 1990, when he was 6 years old, he started to realize the hatred that surrounded him.

"I started to think, 'What's wrong with us?'... We were seen as cockroaches and



Emmanuel Habimana, an orphan of the 1994 Tutsi Rwandan Genocide, speaks to eighth-graders at Wood Oaks Junior High School about his experiences on Wednesday, March 19. PHOTO SUBMITTED

sauces," he said. "We could feel the danger that was coming [after the plane crash]."

Almost immediately, Hutu soldiers walked from door to door in his community, looking for Tutsis who they felt posed a threat.

"I was lucky because I was a kid. If I was 16, I would probably be dead," he said.

In 2004, Habimana began working for a student-based group for genocide survivors in the Rwandan capital of Kigali. As a peer counselor, he found that his personal history as a genocide survivor could be used proactively to help counsel severely traumatized children.

This led him to become the president of the Nyakabanda Youth Association in 2008, an organization aimed

at promoting unity across ethnic lines between members of Rwandan youth.

In 2009, Habimana became a student ambassador for interdisciplinary Genocide Studies Center in Kigali, which receives groups of students and educators from the United States annually to do field research on the genocide and its aftermath.

In 2010, Habimana spent five months at NET Television in Lincoln, Neb., co-producing a documentary about the lives of orphans in post-genocide Rwanda and speaking at institutions that ranged from middle schools in Nebraska to Human Rights Watch in Washington, D.C.

The Hutu government that was in power during the

genocide was overthrown, and the new government had "a new direction," said Habimana, a law student at Kigali Independent University.

"They say, how can we unite the people?" he said. "[There is an ongoing] process of healing. We have hope."

Habimana has embarked on his own process of healing as well.

"Part of my responsibility is to tell the true story [of the Rwandan Genocide]. History has to be told more," he said.

He now takes it upon himself to help "prevent evil," which involved teaching "equal rights and respect."

"To give opportunities to people, no matter how different they are. Give them

an equal chance to compete on the job market," he said.

Social studies teacher Chris Beck said he was impressed by Habimana's ability to connect with the students and "really teach the lesson that differences are positive things."

"He is empowering them to be able to be the next generation that can make a positive change in our society," said Beck.

"We want the kids to be able to be active citizens, and with what they are learning, make a change for positive for the world."

"When they hear a survivor story, understand that and try to learn from that so that things aren't repeated, they take what they are learning and make a difference."

## Northbrook Tower Article

Emmanuel Habimana

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“They wanted to marginalize them,” he said.

Habimana said in 1990, when he was 6 years old, he started to realize the hatred that surrounded him.

“I started to think, ‘What’s wrong with us?’ ... We were seen as cockroaches and snakes,” he said. “We could feel the danger that was coming [after the plane crash].”

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*Typed by Becky Scheckel. Online version did not have the full text story.*