

Imru Zelleke

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Name: Imru

Surname: Zelleke

Place and date of birth: Addis Abeba, 1923

Nationality: Ethiopian

Gender: m

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Camps of imprisonment:

Bejirond Zelleke Agidew's Residence, Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, 20th February 1937 - 22nd February 1937

Akaki Radio Station, Akaki, Ethiopia, 22nd February - beginning of March 1937

Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, March 1937

Danane, Somalia, End of March 1937 - autumn 1938

Akaki Radio Station, Akaki, Ethiopia, autumn 1938

Mayor topics and particularities of the interview (Summary)

Life before the war; the Italian invasion; racial segregation of Addis Abeba; the Graziani massacre; the massacre; deportation and prison experience in Akaki and Danane; participation of Italian civilians in the deportations and massacres; freeing in 1938; life after prison; the end of the occupation; rebuilding the nation; the international conferences and the failed attempts on justice.

Date, place and duration of the interview: 11th July 2012, ARD Studios Washington D.C., USA, 80'23"

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Fundamental elements of the meeting:

Studio-Interview at distance with researcher and interviewed not in the same studio, but connected with each other via broadband.

Special thanks to the Public German Radio SWR (ARD) for enabling the interview.

Researcher *Thank you very much for the time you spent, all this effort to come to Washington. May we start by introducing yourself, may you present yourself, born when, where, and your profession?*

Imru Zelleke My name is Imru Zelleke. I was born in Addis Abeba. I was working for the Ethiopian government mostly as a diplomat. And after the revolution, just before the revolution I was Minister of States for Commerce and Industry, and then after the revolution in Ethiopia I migrated here in the United States. And I got some work with a very large Wall Street Bank. It used to be called the Chemical Bank. So I was there Vice-President for Africa, for a while, and then I quit that work. I got

involved in Ethiopian affairs. But nevertheless I also worked with other companies as a business consultant for many countries. I've travelled Europe, Africa, China and so forth.

R *And you have been ambassador too, right?*

IZ Well, I was ambassador, my last post was ambassador in Sweden. My first post was in Germany actually. I started our embassy in Germany in 1954. And then I was back home, then I was ambassador in Ghana, I was ambassador in Scandinavia in all four countries.

R *And how long did you stay in Germany?*

IZ I stayed three years in Germany from 1954 to almost 1957. I was there when the Emperor made his visit. At that time Germany was still under four powers, as you remember. And Mr. Adenauer was the president, not the president, the prime Minister of Germany.

R *It was Adenauer in those times, yes.*

IZ Adenauer and the president was Mr. Heuss¹ I think.

R *Yeah. But in which year are you born?*

IZ I was born in 1923. I will be ninety this year. Next months.

R *Ok, that's great.*

IZ I'm a teenager.

R *(laughing) That's quite good. Well, maybe we begin a little bit with the time before the Italian war. What was life before the war with your family in Ethiopia?*

IZ Well, my family was always... My father was a member of the first cabinet of the Emperor. And he had also carried many missions abroad, including Germany. In fact I have a silver plate given by a German chancellor in 1930 as a souvenir to my father. So my father travelled a lot before the war. And then at one point he was Minister of Finance, he was Minister of Commerce, he was Minister of Agriculture. I grew up and then he was also accredited to France and to England, to United Kingdom. By that time embassies did not exist, (so) he was a Minister. And our Embassy in Paris was rather small, although the Emperor had a Villa in Vevey in Switzerland. So we lived there with the family.

R *In Switzerland?*

IZ In Switzerland, yes. And that's how I first learned French *(laughing)*.

R *You have been how old then?*

IZ I must have been maybe five or six. And we stayed about three years there. And then we returned to Ethiopia, when my father became Minister of Agriculture. And by that time the Italian war was getting more or less on the way, the invasion of Italy.

R *But you stayed in Addis Abeba, so you came back in 1932?*

IZ Yes, in 1932 we came back to Ethiopia yes, back to home.

R *And in these years before the invasion, how was the situation, did you feel anything of this aggression coming or was it just coming out of the...?*

IZ No, no, there was rumours which lasted quite a while actually. But of course they became more intense as the years go on. And, well you know, Ethiopia at that time, you can say we were living in the 17th century, you know, there was not many... I mean, it is, we didn't have armies, we just had the railway, and a telephone system that's all. No more than that. We had a few schools, two schools, I think, and a couple of missionary schools. And it was a very pastoral life, if you want to call it that way *(laughing)*. It was a medieval country at that time.

R *But there was also an elite, I mean you have a big culture, I imagine Addis Abeba...*

¹ Theodor Heuss (FDP) German president from September 13th 1949 till September 12th 1959.

IZ Oh yes, I mean, there was the church, the traditional church. Ethiopian Christianity started 1600 years ago. And Islam also started 1300 years ago. So we had both these religions who were there for 16 centuries. And prior to that, we had a form of Judaism also. And Ethiopia might not have been, let's say advanced, technology or this and that, because we were quite an isolated part of Africa. And we were always afraid of invasions, sometimes by the Italians, then before that the English, before the Turks. We have always been in the defensive. And we have been very proud of keeping our own territory and our own integrity. And we were always suspicious of foreigners. So we didn't allow a lot of foreign penetration in the country, because of all those adverse things we had. We had Emperor Theodoros, we had the British invasion. Emperor Johannes died with the Dervish Invasion. And then we had the Italian invasion, which thanks to God we repelled, in the battle of Adua. But it has always been in the defensive. So it did not give us much time, let's say to evolve properly. We had contacts with Europe somehow, but in those days, you know, it was not such an easy communication, you know. Travelling was not so simple.

R *Of course.*

IZ But sometimes we sent missions abroad, people came outside and so forth. And there were a few foreigners coming to Ethiopia, some like Mr. Ilg² who was counsellor for Emperor Menelik. We had also missionaries, like the Flett family who were from Switzerland. They are still there. I did Sunday's school with them. I see their granddaughters (*laughing*). And one of the sons is still alive, he is in Geneva.

R *Then you said you heard rumours, what do you remember of the beginning of the invasion?*

IZ Everybody was excited, because we didn't realise how the Italians were. We were still a primitive army, you know. People thought, the Italians were going to win the war, you know. They didn't think we had very much. But the Italians had an enormous preparation for this invasion. You can see it in the various reports of the time. So there was no way, we could have won the war. They had just over 700 tanks, I think, about 520 something aircrafts. They had all sort of modern armament and they had a very large contingent of troops, almost have a million including colonial troops. So there was no way we could win. But our people fought heroically to the extent they could, but that was it (*laughing*).

R *But you have been in Addis Abeba when war broke out?*

IZ Yeah, I was in Addis Abeba. I was about eleven years old at that time. And when the invasion, the actual occupation was getting near Addis Abeba the Emperor went abroad to appeal to the United..., to the Société des Nations³. And some of us, my father included, we went to Gibuti. We became refugees there. But unfortunately my father's health completely failed. So we had to go back to Addis, and we buried him there, a few days afterwards. And we stayed in Addis. And then the Graziani..., the assassination attempt came to Graziani and then there was tragedy. A lot of people were killed in the streets...

R *Excuse me, if I interrupt you, but before we come to the attempt on Graziani may we talk a little bit about the half year of occupation before that. I wondered how life changed in Addis Abeba after the Italians came into town. What was the first thing you saw?*

IZ I was not there actually when they came in, but as I told you, I will return a couple of months later. Of course it's an occupation, and also it introduced in Ethiopia a lot of new things, like they build roads. They actually were building the roads while carrying (out) the war, with thousands of trucks and new machinery which the Italians brought. And also the occupation, they spend a lot of money. They

² Alfred Ilg, a Swiss engineer and a confidant to Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfred_Ilg).

³ His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, 1936, Appeal to the League of Nations, http://www.nazret.com/history/him_geneva.php

were buying food and stuff, they were throwing money to workers, working in the fields and in the roads. There was a lot of economic input made because of their need for the occupation.

R *But you had also something like a racial segregation in town?*

IZ Yeah, it came a little later, the first months were ok. But then the segregation came and it was very clear, there was no in between about it.

R *But what was it like, like a township?*

IZ No, well they were moving us, because they didn't have time. Don't forget, this thing lasted only five years. And at that time there was also a lot of rebellion, a lot of patriotic resistance, where the Italians did not have that much peace. But they were introducing new things, so for instance, the Mercato – I don't know if you have been to Addis?

R Yes.

IZ That area for instance was the area assigned for the blacks, for us, for the indigenous people, and they were moving us away from the centre of Addis.

R *So you were forced to live in another part of the town?*

IZ Well, it did not come all at once, but a lot of new things were coming. They were moving slowly people out from there. They didn't expropriate property, they paid whatever they thought it was worth. But slowly they were pushing people towards that. But also you couldn't go to a restaurant, you couldn't go to a movie, you couldn't, I mean, it's like the black and white thing.

R *So like Apartheid?*

IZ Yeah.

R *So a sort of Apartheid before the term was invented?*

IZ Well, I don't know when Apartheid was invented, I think it was much before the Italians⁴, no? In South Africa the Boer and so forth, they had segregation a long time ago⁵. And you have it also in this country in America also before that.

R *Sure. So you stayed in Addis, and then there was this attempt on Graziani?*

IZ Yeah, the attempt, and then we were all arrested and some people were sent to Europe, others were sent to Danane. You have my paper, I have, I think you've got it⁶. And we stayed there about eighteen months. A bit more than eighteen months.

R *May we do it a little bit chronologically. What do you remember of the attempt on Graziani?*

IZ I was young. One day suddenly we heard a lot of shooting and then there was a big movement of troops. And then we saw people being arrested and getting killed and so forth. So it was a riot. Fortunately in our compound, which was occupied by the Carabinieri, in our compound proper, there was no shooting, but they arrested us, they put us in a cellar, in one of our villas, in our houses, and the rest outside, you could hear shouting, you could hear people running around. You know it was a riot.

R *They were killing a lot of people?*

⁴ Racial segregation in South Africa began in colonial times under Dutch and British rule. However, apartheid as term and official policy was introduced only after the general election of 1948. The new legislation classified inhabitants into four racial groups ("native", "white", "coloured", and "Asian"), and residential areas were segregated, including by means of forced removals (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apartheid>).

⁵ Pre-Apartheid legislation began in 1884, with amendments for special taxes, black people had to pay. Even restrictions in free moving for black people (as they could move only with a special passport) were established by authorities, but legislation till 1949 never included a distinct segregation (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apartheid_legislation_in_South_Africa).

⁶ Testimony of Imru Zelleke <http://www.campifascisti.it/file/media/Testimony%20of%20Imru%20Zelleke.pdf>

IZ Oh yes, absolutely there was no in between there. And for the three days it was a general massacre. And we were arrested we were put in the cellar of our former house. And from there they took us to a concentration camp they had built, very rudimentary just with a barbed wire fence, south of Addis.

R *It was in Akaki right?*

IZ Yeah, in Akaki⁷, yes. Not all the way down. You know, where the oil storages are? Or the silos, have you seen the silos on the way down south, well that's in that area.

R *It was an old radio station, right?*

IZ Yeah, but it was just the radio station, just there yeah.

R *So it was inside the building of the radio station?*

IZ No, no, it was in the open field. You just put a barbed wire fence all around. They had a big army, they could do that very fast. So they took (us) there and put everyone in there, in this camp, whatever it was. They put some open tents you know this military tents, just to cover you from the sun.

R *You say we, so all your family?*

IZ Yes, my family: my younger sister, my mother – my father died as I told you, he died immediately – but then my half brother who was an elder man, he was a civil engineer who graduated in France, him, my mother, my younger sister, my small sister, she was only two years old. They all put us in there. And it's not us (only), I mean, it's the people they gathered from all the other places, you know. It was not specific, they just gathered people and put them there.

R *How did they transport you?*

IZ By truck.

R *How far was your home from Akaki?*

IZ Well, my home was..., our home was near St. George Church Menelik Square⁸. So, they had trucks, you know, military trucks, open trucks.

R *And it were soldiers?*

IZ Yeah, no, There were some soldiers, but mostly the people who were doing this were Carabinieri, but mostly was the fascist colonial police and the fascist cadre.

R *The militia? La milizia?*

IZ Yeah.

R *The so called Blackshirts?*

IZ The Blackshirts, yes. And then some also labourers. There was what they called *legioni di lavoro*. They had brought in a lot of unarmed Italians, to do the building the roads and to do mechanical work and engineering, infrastructure work. They had also all those people too.

R *But these people engaged, civilians engaged in deporting you to the concentration camp?*

IZ Well, once we were in the camp, you had the police you had, as I told you, the colonial police and so forth who were guarding that and the *fascisti*. And from there they picked up certain people they send to Italy, very few people. But most of the prisoners were sent down to Danane, big columns, truck columns.

R *But let's stay a little bit in Akaki. How many people have been there?*

⁷ **Akaki Radio Station** http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_campo.php?id_campo=114

⁸ At some 15 kilometres distance to the Akaki camp.

IZ I don't know, because hundreds of people were arrested. It was a continuous flow, because some of us, they transported us, we were not... We were the second bunch of people. And then it followed. So in Danane the total – from what I got from recent research – I understand there were about 6.400 people in Danane. And as many of them as half of them died, I think, because we had diarrhea, scorbout and all sort of diseases and malnutrition and the climate. So people just died.

R *How long did you stay in Akaki?*

IZ About maybe a week. Something like that.

R *What do you remember, some scenes, what did you see in the camp.*

IZ We see all these people, who were bewildered. Because many of them were peasants actually. People who didn't know what was it all about. They gathered them from all the country. And some people did not even understand why they did it.

R *So it was just indiscriminate imprisonment?*

IZ Absolutely indiscriminate. There was no ... I mean they had no time first of all to find (out) who is who, you know. It was just a general killing, and general arresting generally people. So some people came from the countryside who had absolutely not a clue of what was going on. There was for instance a peasant and his wife. She was pregnant. And at night in that camp she didn't know where the toilet was or whatever, it was not a toilet but anyway. She wanted to relief herself, so she started walking in the evening at night. She was walking towards the exit of the camp and the Italian guard, he saw this big fat women coming, he thought it was something... So he killed her. He didn't know, he was scared himself (*laughing*). I mean you had also incidents like that. People for instance when you were travelling from Addis to Danane, it took about over almost two weeks, because the roads were not built jet. So every, about ten, twenty kilometres a day, and it was, the winter had come, the rainy season had come. And the Ogaden, you know, the soil is very soft. So it became like a mud pool. So you had to get out, push these trucks out the mud and so forth. It took us about three weeks to get to Danane.

R *And how many prisoners have you been in this deportation to Danane?*

IZ In our column there must have been about 300 people in our group, if you call it a group. But it was a continuous (flow). There were people following us and coming somewhere before us, at arrive there. They had already built a sort of prison with a very high walls, and sentinels on top of the wall, you know, guarding. And then you had this thing. So they put all the men in this compound, a very big compound. They destroyed it after, during, when Italy had the trusteeship of Somalia⁹. And the women they put them out of the camp into large military tents. I mean, you know, people slept next to each other, there was nothing. I mean, you are absolutely zero. There is nothing. That's it.

R *But, I mean, you had a kind of discipline in these camps, also in Akaki, did you have counting in the morning or something like that?*

IZ No, nobody bothered. Nobody cared, once you where in, you where in (*laughing*).

R *So they just damned you there and that's it?*

IZ And then they came and said: "OK, now you go up in trucks and you go." That's it (*laughing*).

R *But you, all the family stayed together?*

IZ Yeah, we stayed together. All of them, we were a whole bunch of people just put together and they put us there. They didn't say, «stay here at this one». Later on maybe they have, during what I heard afterwards, they knew some of the educated people, who they were, because they had their own

⁹ The «Trust Territory of Somaliland under Italian administration» was from 1949 till 1960 a United Nations Trust Territory inside the territory of modern-day Somalia. It was administered by Italy following the exit of the British "administration" till 1941 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trust_Territory_of_Somalia).

spies, and also then who were in the military. So, all of them were shot. They gathered them and killed those ones, coming from the Holy Academy and many educated Ethiopians were eliminated there.

R *In Danane?*

IZ No, before even, in Addis.

R *In Akaki?*

IZ Yes. You know, they took them out of Akaki. You know even in Addis it is such a very confusing situation. Akaki is a sort of damping ground. But in town they had selected people, which they put in certain areas, and then they got shot.

R *Do you remember some names of these areas?*

IZ One camp was they called it, you know where the University where it is now?

R *Yeah.*

IZ And in the back of the University, you know, when you go back to Addis, not through Arat Kilo but on the back, there was a what you call it, ammunition depot there, an arms depot So that became a prison also. So they transferred people in there, some of them¹⁰.

R *To understand it, again, there was looting, there was killing, there was deportation, and the civilian Italians, did they support also the military forces? Did they engage in it?*

IZ Of course. They supported it. You know even if some of them were nice people, I'm telling you honestly, but they had no choice. You know with the *Fascisti*... are you joking? (*laughing*)

R *But they were taking part in this?*

IZ Yes, some of them did definitely, yeah. I mean you know, it's all, as I told you, they were colonial occupiers, so you know, they themselves were forced to do whatever they had started to be done.

R *Have there been also Askaris in Akaki?*

IZ Oh yes. Oh yes, there were Askaris there, Somalis, from Somalia, from Eritrea, from Cirenaica.

R *As guards in the camps?*

IZ No, the camps were guarded by Italians, but when we were transferred for instance towards Danane we were, they had Somali troops guarding us, because we were going to cross the Ogaden and were going down to Somalia. So they had Somali troops. Otherwise you had also colonial troops, in the Police, in everywhere.

R *In this transport, how many people died?*

IZ I don't remember, but the problem was, that there was no treatment. So people started to have diarrhea, things like that. So the only thing they did was to damp them on the ground, and go there. There is nothing, you had no time to burry people, dig the ground or something. Nobody did. So several people died, many people died on the road. Some of them were elderly people, some of them were sick, they just couldn't make it.

R *Did you stop – you said that you stopped – in some transit camps?*

IZ Yeah, we stopped in Dire Dawa for a day or so. And they allowed some people to go – some people had money with them – so they allowed them to go and buy some stuff. A few of them.

R *They left you the money, they did not take it?*

IZ No, they did not take the money, no.

R *But in Dire Dawa was there also a camp, were there other prisoners already there?*

¹⁰ Tige bet/Tyit-bet http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_campo.php?id_campo=169

IZ You know, out of town, there was a sort of a camp. I don't know how many, whether prisoners or not, were there. We stayed there for one or two nights. And then from there we started down. But it was out of town. It was not exactly in Dire Dawa, it was out of town.

R *But that was almost half the way, Dire Dawa, to Danane?*

IZ No, it would be about one third of the way. I mean, Dire Dawa is about 600 kilometres I think from Addis, and from there you have another 1.800 kilometres down to Mogadishu.

R *My god, how was that journey?*

IZ It took about three, four weeks. It was a very, very painful thing.

R *But then in Somalia the climate situation changed, or was it all the time raining?*

IZ No, it was raining mostly in the Ogaden, not down in Somalia. It is a hot area, desertic as you know, it doesn't rain much down there.

R *Then you arrived in Danane, what was the first thing that happened in Danane?*

IZ I think, we were just put in the camp. The problem was, a lot of people were sick. We had sixty seventy people a day were dying. And at that time, they themselves didn't have any facility or any doctor or anything. So you just died and people took you out of the camp and buried you. And it went on like that for a while. And then they brought in a doctor and they opened an infirmary. And things got better after that, because people could get malaria pills, they could get some, a few, medicines.

R *You were not used to that climate there, right?*

IZ No, they were all highlanders, most of them.

R *I mean, what is particular about the climate, the climatic change for you?*

IZ Well, it was very hot there and humid. It is on the seashore and the hygienic conditions were terrible in the camp. Once a week they allowed people to go down to the beach and clean themselves. On the other hand, water wells were..., they had wells near the sea shore. So the water was salted, the water you drank, was a bit salted (*laughing*).

R *And then of course many people suffered from that or not?*

IZ Oh yes, I mean, people were dying, 60, 70 people a day.

R *You said, there was a division in the camp, may you explain a little bit, what was Danane looking like, you said, this wall, but were there fences, armed guards?*

IZ It was a walled camp. About ten, maybe eight meter wall all around it. With a walk pass way on the top. And they had sentinels on each corner. You couldn't see out of the camp, nothing.

R *And inside they had also officers and guards, or not?*

IZ No, people managed, you know they organized. Ethiopians are quite capable of organizing themselves, so people organized. There were a few people who were interpreters. So for instance one was taking all the foods stuff, the other ones was helping with medicine and that things. And so it was orderly. People didn't have much of a choice anyway. And in the morning they took some people from the camp the older ones, those a bit major, take them out of the camp to work on roads, or cut wood and things like that. They were escorted by troops of course. I was too young to do any heavy work, so they assigned me to the infirmary. So I was helping there, helping wounded people, I don't know, all sort of things. I saw more misery by that age, than the rest of my life (*laughing*).

R *So you were working together with this doctor?*

IZ Yeah, there were also two Ethiopian nurses, one lady and one man who had some experience, had worked in hospital before, I think. So I was helping them. And there was another lady who was doing the cleaning, you know. We were about four people.

R *But you collaborated with that Italian doctor, you said, “there was an Italian doctor coming and things changed”?*

IZ He became resident there. He was, we helped him, of course we did, because people were sick.

R *Yeah, I mean but he was inside, because you said you were only Ethiopians inside the camp and outside the Italians.*

IZ Well there were Italians. What you call it, there was the camp commander, there were the troops. They had their own quarter, they are not in a prison, you know, they are outside. And the doctor came during the day, and tried to help whatever he could.

R *What was your impression of this doctor?*

IZ Well, you know, he was a nice guy I think, you know, he was a young man. He must have been around 30, 40 something like that, less than 40. And he was very empathic with the patients. He was a nice man.

R Do you remember his name?

IZ No.

R *He was called Iannuzzi¹¹.*

IZ It's possible.

R *But the commander, did you see the commander and do you know his name¹²?*

IZ Very rarely, he was an elderly, I remember, he was a rather heavy set short man. And I think he was, because there were a couple of Ethiopians also, who served as interpreters, some of them were educated people, they knew some Italian and they spoke French. And eventually he used to lend them some books and things like that. Yeah, they became friendly, they were not really... Once we were there, they were not violent. The conditions were violent. The people were not, you know, sort of coming in and hitting. Sometimes the guards, the Somali guards were a bit exalted, but otherwise the Italians... There were few Italians. The commander as I told you, the doctor, I think there were a couple of Italian sergeants, otherwise they were all colonial troops. Somali troops were guarding the camp.

R *And the Militia, the Blackshirts?*

IZ Yeah, there must have been one or two. Because we don't have much access, you know, we were closed in this camp. There is no thing that you go out and look at people. There must have been people doing some work there in the offices.

R *But was there no punishment?*

IZ What should there to be punished about?

R *Did nobody try to escape or refuse to work?*

IZ No, it is out of the question, because first of all, this way out, it is not that you could go. Secondly, the Somalis themselves were not sympathetic to the Ethiopians. So you could not rely on anybody helping you to cross from one area to the other. So very, I think two people tried to escape. We never know, what happened to them, whether they succeeded or not. We don't know. Crossing the Ogaden and going all the way to Ethiopia, to the high land, it's quite a bit you know. Even Harar was quite a lot, 2.000 kilometres or it could be more.

R *But you said, you were separated, so you were in this walled camp, and the women were outside the wall?*

¹¹ See Testimony of Vittorio Iannuzzi http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_testimonianza_full.php?id_tst=18

¹² See Testimonianza Eugenio Mazzucchetti http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_testimonianza_full.php?id_tst=20

IZ Yeah, they were in a fence, in another barbed wire fenced camp, where they had tents, you know, these big military tents who could hold maybe 50 people each. So there were about three of those things. So the women were put in there.

R *And did you have any contact, between women and men?*

IZ No, people who had family, could visit them once a week, but not in the camp. They could talk to them over the barbed fence, the barbed wire fence, they could talk so them say «Hello, how are you?», and that's it. No physical contact of any kind.

R *But you could see each other?*

IZ Yeah, they could see each other, yes but not all, I mean it is only the people who had wife or something, you know, direct family, otherwise they won't allow you.

R *But you got separated from your mother and your sisters.*

IZ Of course, because I was a man, and I stayed with my brother, and my sisters were, and my mother were in this camp, in the women's camp.

R *So once a week you met?*

IZ Yeah, me I got sick at one point, and they allowed me to stay with my mother for a few days, because I was really, I almost died of diarrhea and malaria. But then after I got well, I got back to the men's camp. And once a week, they allowed people to go, so we talked over the fence and said, «How are you?», whatever. And sometimes, the doctor, when he goes there, to the women's camp, he went to visit, I think he took the, this lady who was a nurse, and sometime he took me to carry goods, medicine and so on, so that was it.

R *So you could help a little bit?*

IZ Yeah.

R *But what was your mother telling about the conditions there outside in this women's section?*

IZ It was bad. There was nothing (*laughing*). I don't know how to describe it. You slept; each person was allowed something like 60 or 70 cm space. They gave you a grass matt and then that's it, and then you have your own clothes. And that's it. Nothing funny (*laughing*). There is nothing, I mean, you survive, that's all (*laughing*).

R *I heard that there was not only that work in building roads, but that there was another camp, next to Danane which was a working camp¹³, where men were sent. Did you hear anything about that?*

IZ No. I mean there was a prison in Mogadishu¹⁴ where they had some people that were held there. And out of Danane I don't know of any.

R *I mean, because, how long did you stay in Danane?*

IZ We stayed about 18, 19 months something like this. I'm sure if you get it, because, as I told you, Dominioni¹⁵ he has done, I think, a lot of research on this Italian period. There must be a lot of Italian documentation from the colonial area, you know.

R *Yeah, they hide it a little bit, that's the other problem.*

IZ I know, because some Ethiopians wanted to do some research there, they didn't allow them to go into to see this documentation. This was not a very graceful period for Italy. And obviously they don't want to show what happened.

¹³ Janaale http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_campo.php?id_campo=156

¹⁴ http://www.campifascisti.it/scheda_campo.php?id_campo=166

¹⁵ Dominioni, Matteo, 2008, *Lo sfascio dell'impero. Gli italiani in Etiopia 1936-1941*, Bari: Laterza

R *Well, you never heard something about working in Banana plantations, of the Duke of the Abruzzes?*

IZ Ethiopians working there? I don't remember, I have never heard of that. There might be, because we don't know. I know about the people who were in Danane, ok. But there must have been others they have sent, we don't know. Because, as I told you, they just gathered people and sent them out. So it could be anybody.

R *Did you have in the camp correspondences with other people outside, could you send letters or get parcels?*

IZ Yeah, after a while, after a few months, things (were) a sort of getting more or less a normal life. So you could write a letter, you give it to the office there, the commander or something, and they would take it away and send it. And sometime people sent money also, they sent it through the official, and this people gave it to the prisoners. Because there was a very small shop, where you can buy some sardines, some can food and something like that.

R *In the camp?*

IZ Out of the camp. So, you know, there were some of these fellows who work for the kitchen for instance who had to go out to buy vegetables and so forth. So you gave them the money they went and bought you something.

R *And this shop was run by Italians or by Somali people?*

IZ The shop? Owned by Somalis, but people who sent were prisoners, who went and bought it.

R *Talking about this, what did you eat in the camp?*

IZ First it was terrible. First there was what they called, they had this thing called *galette*. It is a square baked very hard biscuit, which the Italians have brought for the war. But that stuff had really gone bad. So they gave us that, and then you could see worms coming out of the *galette*, this biscuit (*laughing*). So what daily peoples made, they put their biscuits on the sun, and for some reason then the worms walked out (*laughing*) and people ate the crumbs. And then afterwards, still a little later, a few months later, they – because people were terrible. So they eventually organized the kitchen, and then they could get some vegetables from the market there and cook vegetables. We had some sort of food, cooked food, vegetable food.

R *And you cooked yourself?*

IZ No, there was the..., well we had no fire, how do you cook. Some people eventually bought a primus to make coffee or something like that. But otherwise it was a general sort of kitchen, you know, where people could pick up a bowl of soup or something like that.

R *But there were Ethiopians cooking?*

IZ Yeah, yeah, it was within the camp. The chief cook, let's say, the person responsible went out with the Somali guard and they bought vegetables and so forth. You know, they had a big half drum, so they brought all that and then they cooked it in this big drums, and then they give you a soup.

R *Was there any relation to the population around the camp, I mean, was there a town or was it outside?*

IZ Danane was a small fishing village, a very small fishing village maybe a hundred people and they had a few houses, that's all. So the main thing was the camp. Because per se it was a very small village. Maybe a hundred people a hundred and something, no more than that.

R *And it was directly on the seaside?*

IZ Yes.

R *But did you have relations with the fishers or something?*

IZ No, they'll don't allow you. You know it is, you stay in the camp, that's all. Fishers, they had their thing. Eventually I think, later on things relaxed a little bit, and some people could go out themselves and buy some food stuff and things like that. But very little contact with the people there. They won't allow you.

R *Was there any visit of Red Cross or other officials coming to the camp to see the conditions?*

IZ No, not that I remember. What Red Cross, there was none, then, you know. Italy was with Germany and all that, you now, more or less the war was going to start. In Europe things were not very happy, so I don't think any Red Cross had time to come and visit us (*laughing*).

R *Did you have any information of what was going on outside politically?*

IZ Absolutely nothing. We knew, that there was going to be a war or something, you know. And there was a man which we liked very much. He is a relative of mine. He was very imaginative, he used to say, «Oh you know, we are going to be free, soon», as he heard there will be a war or something like that. And also everybody was *laughing* at him, and say... You know, the French news agency called Havas? It's a news agency in France - we used to call him Agence Française, Agence Havas (*laughing*). Because he had his imagination in his own thing. But we had very few rumours. Even the Italians themselves they didn't know much.

R *But then one day you were liberated or how did you get out of Danane?*

IZ No, one day they came and they picked about 150, something like that of us, and they said, «You are freed. We are going to, back to Addis». So they transported us back to Addis. And we went back to this Akaki camp. And then a few days later, one of the Italian governors, including an Ethiopian Ras came and he said, «You have been pardoned by his Majesty, the King of Italy,» and so forth, and they released us.

R *But did they tell you why?*

IZ No.

R *I mean, did they tell you, why they imprisoned you in Addis, in Akaki?*

IZ No, nothing, absolutely nothing.

R *So no reasons given, just one day caught and one day liberated, and you don't know...*

IZ We don't know, why we were in and why we went out either. My brother not. He was, from there he was transferred to another prison in Eritrea. So he stayed there, he was in prison throughout almost the four years of occupation.

R *In which prison?*

IZ There was one called Okra, Docra?

R *Nocra?*

IZ Nocra, yes, he was there.

R *In the Dhalak Islands.*

IZ Yeah.

R *What did he tell about the Nocra prison or camp?*

IZ It was terrible, he said, there was a colleague of him also, Dr. Adamwork, who was a veterinarian, so they were both there and some other people not many, probably some Eritreans. And it was bad. They just managed to survive.

R *But how many people have been there in Nocra?*

IZ That I know, I know my brother and a friend of my aunts, Dr. Adamwork, I don't know the rest. I don't think there were many people in Nocra from Addis or something, I think most of them were probably from the north, from Tigray or from Eritrea.

R *But you met your brother afterwards?*

IZ Yeah, my brother was freed and he came back to Addis.

R *So he told you some things, or didn't you speak about it?*

IZ Oh we spoke about it. He said it was bad, you know, bad food. He said, «We had fish there». It was easier, but there was, it was hot, bad climate, and they were isolated there. They didn't know what was going on either.

R *Did they have to work there?*

IZ No, nothing because there ...

R *Because I heard something about an AGIP plant which was there, a fuel plant.*

IZ I have no idea. I don't recollect of any, I don't remember really.

R *Of course. Is he still living your brother?*

IZ No, he died some years ago.

R *I'm sorry for that. (pause) OK, then you were freed you said, or you were said to be pardoned, you don't know why, but when you know, which day was it?*

IZ I don't remember the day (*laughing*), but anyway, they released us and we went back to town, to Addis, and we went to our own compound. We found, that our house was occupied, everything had been stolen and everything taken. So we had, in the compound we had stables for mules and horses (*laughing*). So we went to stay in the stables there.

R *And the Italians accepted that?*

IZ What could they do? Where can we go? Anyway, they didn't bother, they didn't care about the stables.

R *But you were still under surveillance or something?*

IZ No, they didn't bother. In our compound, as I told you, there were already Carabinieri there, they had got in Addis in our compound. So it was ok. More or less nothing. So there was a gentleman, a friend of my family, he was close to, he was Ethiopian, and he was married to an Italian. He was a professor and he tried to help. He helped me till he got me a job. I was very young and he said, you know, my mother – there was no school. So my mother asked him, if he could help me. So he went in – there was a branch of *Banco di Roma*. I spoke French at that time. And Italian. Of course in prison we learned Italian, all of us (*laughing*). Not perfect, but anyway, we spoke Italian and French. So he took me to this bank and I became a filing clerk.

R *A what?*

IZ A filing clerk, you know I was filing papers (*laughing*).

R *OK. But this was still under occupation?*

IZ Yes, yes.

R *So from concentration camp to engagement in the Bank of Rome?*

IZ Yes, but engagement as a small clerk, you know, like (*laughing*) just filing papers, you know, the forms, the bank form you put them in this file and that file. It took about a few days to learn how to file, and that was it.

R *But did they pay you?*

IZ Yeah, I got a small salary, I could buy some clothes at least.

R *And how did they treat you?*

IZ Well, nobody, nothing. The Italians generally are friendly, you know. It is, when they become frenetic is when they are pushed by some reason, especially in that era. I don't know if you have lived in Germany or in Italy or in these places where dictatorships grew.

R *I'm German and I live in Italy.*

IZ But you lived there in the fascist time?

R *No.*

IZ So you don't have that experience. Because people you know, the Italians... I remember in this Carabinieri place in our compound, when we were in that cellar down for a couple of days, we used to hear people screaming. And one day I just wondered, I said, «what is going on?» So just like that I saw there were some Italians and prisoners which they were flogging. Maybe they were opposition, I don't know, chiefs, I don't know. Butt (they) really were giving them hell. And during the Italian (period), they made people drink litres of ricin oil, the *Fascisti*. They were very rough. I mean, this you can find by yourself with the Italians, there was no joke. Even some of the clerks in the bank there, you know, every Sunday came out in the piazza in Addis, and they all had this black uniform and their knives and so forth. And then *saluti fascisti*, they were screaming «murder» there, every Sunday. And every Italian had to go there and parade, no joke!

R *So there has been discrimination and repression?*

IZ Oh, the Italians had to keep the line. I mean, not all of them were particularly violent or particularly..., but they had to follow the line.

R *Sure. But how has situation changed in Addis Abeba, when you came back, two years in between, so it was '39 when you came back?*

IZ Yeah. There was a lot of movement going on, you know, roads were being build, there was a lot of construction going on. The Italians were moving masses of people, so you had a lot of activity, there is no question about that. I mean, an occupation, I don't know how to describe it. But that's the way it goes, when war starts and people start occupying and that's it.

R *Yes, but I mean the Italians committed a lot of atrocities, also.*

IZ Yeah, but then it stopped. After that thing it stopped. And then they started building their own thing and of course people were excluded most of them. And people were scared also, of trying to provoke anything. But the Italians, for instance they didn't expropriate us. They even paid us some rent for some of the paces. And as I told you they were gradually pushing out people towards segregation. They were already in the big farms, had settled on the Ambo road, they were building all sort of things. So there was a lot of activity going on. A big army, you know consumes a lot, so they bought food stuff, they bought all sort of things.

R *But then occupation was coming to an end. The British were coming. How did the Italians react in that situation?*

IZ Well, when the war started and Italy, we knew that (in) North Africa the Germans were already fighting there, France was occupied, and we knew, we all hoped. The elder people, like my brother and so forth, they followed more closely events, because they could buy Italian papers and read them. And so we knew that at one time or the other the liberation would come. And the Italians were trying to negotiate with the patriots trying to subdue them by peaceful wins and so forth. Because after the Graziani massacre even for the Italians it was too much. So they withdrew the thing and they put in the Duke of Aosta as governor general. So they were trying to pacify people. But then it was too late. And then of course the Emperor had messengers, sending contacts and so forth. So we were expecting this thing to come any time. One day I saw British troops, a few British tanks and so forth coming in and so we knew, «*la guerre est finie*». And that was it. A few weeks later the Emperor came in. And then the Italians were evacuated by the British completely. In fact we had to hide some

Italians, because there were no mechanics, nothing was working any more. And the British took as much Italians as they could to Kenia and other places, and they made them work there. The excuse was, that their life would be in danger by the Ethiopians, which in a way is true, but not all together. So the British came and of course the war continued up to Gondar, and of course we all had excitement of the liberation, and so forth.

R *You said you had to hide some Italians, what is that story?*

IZ Well some of them had to be hidden, because some of them for instance were mechanics.

R *And you personally hid them?*

IZ Not me, some people hid them, because there was no way you could run all this Italian junk that was left there.

R *And you had to keep it running?*

IZ Yeah. The electricity had to run (*laughing*). So there were a few, I'm talking about maybe a hundred people or so in total, not much more than that. You know some of them were not really violent people. They were ordinary people, working people, you know.

R *All of your family survived except your father who died before already?*

IZ We all survived. Yes.

R *So how was life then, after the occupation?*

IZ Well, we got back our properties we got back our houses and we moved back to our own houses and, you know, it was a very exciting time, because for Ethiopian government at that time had nothing, The British was almost another occupation, the British. Personally I got employed by the Duke of Harar, I became his private secretary. We are relatives. So that helped. And I went to Harar with him.

R *He was called how?*

IZ The Duke of Harar, Prince Makonnen¹⁶. He was Duke of Harar. So I went to work with him. At that time there were very few people with experience, and the British were giving very, very difficult in many ways than one. So the few of us, I mean, at that time I was about 18, 19 years old, I knew Italian, I knew French, and I knew some English, because an Uncle of mine, Dr. Martin. I used to attend some school in his house, with his children, he had an English teacher there. So I also had learned some English with him. So, you know, I could understand this and that. So we went down to Harar. I stayed with the Duke about ... Everything was occupied by the British. So I went back to Addis, and I went to work for the Ministry of Interior. So at that time they were trying to organize the things so we did all these translations, all sorts of things like that. And in 1944 I joined the Foreign Office.

R *In these years how was society reacting, I mean did you talk about this occupation and your prison experience with other people?*

IZ Of course, that was the subject of the day. Everybody was talking about this experience, everybody was talking about. Some they had, as patriots, some they had their own experience, some – the Italy – who worked with the Italians, they took in some of us. Of course I mean, that was part of the thing. It was a period of exhilaration, because we were so exited about the return of our independence. You didn't have to think much about the rest. And the Emperor also was very magnanimous, he said, you know, «No more enemies, no more this and that, lets work and peace, finished.» And that was it. So everybody collaborated and it was a matter of building the country from scratches. It was, you know,

¹⁶ Prince Makonnen Haile Selassie, Duke of Harar (Araya Yohannes; 16 October 1923–13 May 1957) was the second son, and second youngest child, of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and Empress Menen Asfaw (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prince_Makonnen).

we were working beyond our ability. We were trying to translate books, translating regulations, trying to adapt this and that, you know. It was just a period of, a very exhilarating period.

R *But did you also elaborate this experience, on the official level, did government search justice, for these atrocities committed?*

IZ Yes, there was... We presented a whole case, but nobody listened to it. We were fighting two fronts, one was the Italian, and the British, who wanted to make Ethiopia a protectorate. So, you know, there was really no time to consider all sort of things, because the war crimes yes, we did, we presented all sort of documentations for that, because when the peace treaty came we did all that. But the war was still going on. In 1945, that was my first trip to England with the Foreign Minister, I was his secretary, and it was the first general assembly after San Francisco¹⁷, in London¹⁸. And London was just the bombing had just finished, the war had just stopped '45, and everything was destruction, everywhere you went, there was nothing. There was no food, no this and that, ration. And it was a difficult time for all of them, all of us, Ethiopians, the British, whoever you call it, the French. So the whole took time mostly to rebuild and try to normalize life.

R *Of course, but if you look at it from today how do you feel about that you never got compensation or justice?*

IZ No, Italian got..., we have got some reparations, but not what we were asking. And then by that time we had little support also from anyone. Because this was a competition between Russia and the West, you know the big confrontation, so we were in the middle of nowhere (*laughing*). No one listens to us. The Italian communists were trying to court the Italians. You know, the Italian communist movement was very strong at that time. Also the one in France, the same thing in England, you have the socialist government, the conservative failed and the socialist came. In all this turmoil let alone think of concession. The main thing, the first priority was to maintain our integrity our independence. That was our first priority.

R *Of course. But did you take part in these attempts of the government, it was the Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Information, who did this two Volumes you surely know, these Volumes for the War Crimes Commission of the United Nations¹⁹. You never saw them?*

IZ No, I did not, I'm sorry.

R *In the Ministry of Justice and Information they issued these Volumes with the documentation of the war crimes committed, and they tried in 1949...*

IZ Yeah, that was much later. I don't know when it was published, I don't remember...

R *It was in 1949.*

IZ '49, yeah that I know, because when we presented the Eritrean case, also that was the Peace treaty. Because it lasted from '48 to '49, and we presented that and also the reparation thing. But nobody paid much attention to us.

¹⁷ The United Nations Conference on International Organization, in San Francisco between April 25th and June 26th 1945) established the United Nations (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/521161/San-Francisco-Conference>).

¹⁸ The London Conference of The Council of Foreign Ministers between September 11th and October 2nd 1945 was unable to reach any agreements on the peace treaties with Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, or Romania. The conference broke up over the issue of Chinese and French participation in the negotiations and revealed a growing rift between the Soviet and Western Allies (<http://www.indiana.edu/~league/1945.htm>).

¹⁹ Command of his Imperial Majesty (a cura di), 1949, *Documents on Italian War Crimes submitted to the United Nations War Crimes Commission by the Imperial Ethiopian Government, Vol. 1: Italian Telegrams and Circulars*, Addis Abeba: Ministry of Justice; Command of his Imperial Majesty (a cura di), 1950, *Documents on Italian War Crimes submitted to the United Nations War Crimes Commission by the Imperial Ethiopian Government, Vol. 2: Affidavits and published documents*, Addis Abeba: Ministry of Justice ; Ministère d'Information, 1946, (Département de la presse et de l'information du Gouvernement impérial d'Ethiopie) *La Civilisation de l'Italie fasciste en Ethiopie*, 2 Vol. Addis Abeba

R *But why?*

IZ Because people were busy with their own thing, you know, nobody was going to listen to Ethiopia at that time. And we, you know, as I told you, the world was divided and the war, the whole thing was still boiling, you know. Germany, the division of Germany, Berlin, and all those problems were all over the place, the confrontation between Russia and USA, the Japanese. You can visualize yourself the kind of condition there were. And we were not in a strategic position to search that maybe people would say, you know, «Maybe we better satisfy Ethiopia.» We were in East-Africa and the Minister of Colonies, the British had occupied, they wouldn't leave half of the Ogaden for 10 years after liberation and all that. So we had a lot of problems. And we had difficulty to impose and ask for this because nobody was backing us, the French were not backing us, the British neither on the contrary. It was the Americans, but the Americans also had their own problems.

R *In the years after that, was there something like an elaboration on the level of Ethiopian society? How did society come up to terms with this experience of occupation, this violence and atrocities?*

IZ It did very well actually, the society recovered very fast. The fact that the liberation in itself was absolutely exhilarating. And then the concentration was in trying to rebuild the country, the administration, the justice system the whole thing.

R *But did you talk or commemorate this experience of colonialism?*

IZ Of course we did. We talked about it day and night, every time we could, we talked about it, but we were very, very busy trying to build the country. So it's not that you talk. You talk about it, but the main priority was to rebuild the country at that time.

R *Maybe as last question, how do you personally feel about it today, if you look at these things, you never got an excuse, I imagine, from the Italians, right?*

IZ No, eventually in the 50s they send a delegation, they did that, I don't know. The Emperor, his policy was, you know, to make friends and he said, «Let's forgive what happened». So it took slowly but the relation established. It took time. Of course the Italians did not have much influence on our thing. A few of them lived there. Our relations were mostly with Western Europe, with America particularly. And the Italians had really a small role there, not very much. But the Emperor decided that it was not worth going pursuing, insulting. Because it was a big fail.

R *But you personally I mean, wouldn't you like to get a compensation an excuse or something heard or given by Italian government?*

IZ Well they paid a reparation, very little. We had a mission there to negotiate with the Italians. But the Italians were extremely reluctant and they gave us very little, really.

R *When was that?*

IZ In the late 40s. We got very, very little and our delegation stayed in Rome almost negotiating for about five, six, eight months, I think, but we couldn't. And we didn't have the backing of the Americans or anybody, because everybody at that time wanted to please Italy, De Gaspari, and all that. They wanted to normalize. And don't forget, they have a big Italian community here in America. And also in France they were more or less sympathetic to the Italians. Who the hell is going to sympathize with an African country, tell me? [Pause] At that time Franco was still kicking around and they had Peron in Argentina, so when you're looking all this, Ethiopia was the last (*laughing*) problem for the world. And the Russians were also isolated by themselves. And we didn't want anything to do with them, because of their communist regime. So we were stuck in on our own. We had to pull ourselves by our own strings. It was a very difficult period for us. From 1941 passing the occupation, you know. For instance when the British left, they took everything of evolution the Italians had brought. Every movable thing they took away. The British troops when they withdrew. So we were left with nothing. Some junk trucks and so forth. They took everything. So we had to start from scratches to rebuild, number one.

And from that period on, there were no trained people, there was not much money, because we couldn't even collect taxes at that time, there was no structure. And all this has to be done from A. And you have very few trained people. Because the patriots were a great guide, fighting a war and so forth. But they had no training of any kind, in terms of administrating the country and so forth. So it was an appeal fight all through. And really it is a lot of good will and a lot of patriotism, with this good spirit that we were able to rebuild the country. And from the foreign front, as I told you, we had all our problems, domestically the same thing, so all this has to be handled. And fortunately people who collaborated, everybody was very eager and from 1941 to let's say '54 in 15 years we did miracles, I must say.

R *Thank you very, very much Mr. Zelleke, I don't know if you want to add something, I don't know how much time we have left, but I think we got almost through it. Is there anything you would like to add?*

IZ *No, for the moment I think, ... If you have any questions, ask me, but that's it.*

R *Well I could ask so much more questions, but I think we have no more time, because we have the studio for 90 minutes and we are almost at the limit right now.*