

## Testimony of Michael Tessema

Name: Michael

Surname: Tessema

Nationality: Ethiopian

Gender: m

Date of imprisonment: after Yekatit 12, February 1937

Camps of imprisonment:

**Dejazmach Latibalu Residence**, Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, February 1937 - March 1937

**Akaki Radio Station**, Akaki, Etiopia, March 1937

**Alam Bakagni Prison**, Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, April 1937

**St. George's Prison**, Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, April 1937 – September 1937

**Akaki Radio Station**, Akaki, Etiopia, September 1937

**Dire Dawa**, Etiopia, September 1937

**Danane**, Somalia, September 1937 – December 1940

**Ufficio Politico/Commissariato**, Addis Abeba, Etiopia December 1940 – 5<sup>th</sup> April 1941

Source: Command of his Imperial Majesty (Ed.), 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, p. 11-13: Extract from Affidavit No. 32

Note: *The affidavits were collected after the war from many parts of Ethiopia and each was sworn before a judge or magistrate or public official. In cases where the witness was illiterate his deposition was written down in Amharic and then read over to him before the Judge or official appointed for the purpose. English translations were prepared for submission to the United Nations War Crimes Commission, and these have since been revised and checked with the originals for publication.*

I, the undersigned, name : Michael Tessema, age : 40 years, profession : Employee at the Ministry of Justice, address : Addis Ababa, do hereby take oath and say as follows [...]

(4) A few days after the attempt on Graziani, two captains, one marshal and four soldiers came to my house, arrested me and took me to Colonel Didato's house, now belonging to Ato Makonnen Wolde Yohannes, who was then one of the political officers. From there they took me to the police station, which was situated in Balambaras Girma's house. From there I was taken to another police station which was situated in Dejazmach Abachewo's house, thence to the police station which was situated in the house of Fikade Selassie Hirui, lastly at four o'clock in the night they took me to the police station which was at Dejazmach Latibalu's house, where I stayed for some days in the cell. In that prison it was dark, dirty and narrow. We were allowed to use the latrine for five minutes during 24 hours. During the 32 days which I stayed there, they did not give me any kind of food nor any water. Fortunately, there was a certain man called Tesfaye, an Eritrean shumbash, whom I knew and who used to be my friend formerly, and was the keeper of the key of the jail. He used to give me food and water which was brought from my house secretly. During those 32 days, the Italians used to put various questions, to me from midnight till morning continuously. The interrogators used to be changed each time. In this prison there were many other persons in other cells. While I was in my cell I used to hear them crying out, some of them from torture, and some of them from hunger and thirst.

(5) While I was still in that jail, for my sake my relatives engaged an advocate, who was an Italian colonel of *intendenza*, and gave him 60,000 lira : but this advocate was refused by the Italian

authorities. He was not allowed to represent political prisoners. Then I was told that they had commuted my death sentence to life imprisonment.

(6) Immediately after they had informed me about the sentence passed on me, they fastened my hand, together with chains. They took me to the wireless station. where the prisoners' assembly field was situated. I stayed there for five days. On this field there were approximately 3,000 prisoners. The prisoner, were fed on dry biscuit (*galeta*) and water alone. the atrocities which I witnessed while I was in the field prison were as follows:

(a) The females who were captured from Ras Desta were absolutely naked. There was not even a piece of cloth to hide their delicate organs day and night.

(b) There were many aged people who used to cry from hunger, because they did not possess teeth with which to eat dry *galeta*, and so we used to distribute a little food among them from the provisions supplied from our homes.

(c) When the prisoners went near the fence to take the food which was sent from their houses, they used to be whipped by the Italians - also those who brought the food.

(d) I also saw brigadiers and marshals of *carabinieri* torturing *dejazmaches* and *captains*, who were captured from Ras Desta's army, by putting their ears between two pebbles and squeezing them. But I cannot remember their names.

(e) There was a certain prisoner, a woman, who had a baby approximately one and a half years of age. The baby died there, and a good many persons asked permission to bury it, but a cruel Italian brigadier forbade us and ordered the mother herself to dig the grave and bury her child. Standing behind the barbed wire we witnessed her being forced to carry the spade to dig with and the body of her child and go outside the fence: and while she was trying to dig with the spade an Italian colonel came and whipped her, and sent her away from the prison to find another place to bury the body, ordering her to come back afterwards.

(f) Each afternoon at about two o'clock the Italians used to tie persons with handcuffs and take them away by trucks. When the Italians returned, we asked them where the prisoners were taken to, and they used to say boastfully : " We have killed them, and it will be your turn next." During my stay of five days there, I saw 27 persons taken like this.

(7) On the fifth day at about two o'clock I was taken round many departments in Addis Ababa, and after many consultations I was taken to Alam Bakagni prison at midnight and put on the bare cement floor. While I was in this prison, I saw an Ethiopian suffering from the wrapping round of ropes from his feet up to his neck. At three o'clock in the night I was taken to St. George's Prison. In this jail an Italian colonel, whose name I do not know, said to me: " No person can enter this jail before he has been flogged," and ordered the brigadier to fetch a whip. When the whip was brought, I argued saying that a political prisoner is killed, but not flogged, and caught him by his cravat. While we were struggling, the administrator of the jail, a man called Bellissimo, came and stopped us. Then I was put in a little house among 250 prisoners. I was kept for four and a half months in this jail. The conditions in this prison were as follows :

(a) As the room was very small, people had to sit on one another.

(b) A prisoner, before entering the jail, was flogged.

(c) When a new prisoner was admitted he was thrown on us.

(d) The prisoners were allowed to go out only for twenty minutes every morning.

(e) When we went out to take air for twenty minutes every morning we used to find dead bodies of prisoners who had been tortured during the night.

(f) Noxious insects like bugs, lice and fleas were innumerable.

(g) As our latrine was a petrol tin, it used to overflow and drench us, or when we tried to take it outside it poured out over its.

(Ir) Our main food was one loaf of bread for 24 hours.

(i) One of our fellow-prisoners called Ato Worku was caught while trying to escape from the prison. He was flogged with a whip, and the Italians bit him with their teeth; then they tied his lags together and turned him upside down, putting his head inside a tin which was filled with human excrement.

(8) After four months I was taken by a truck to the radio station held where they used to assemble prisoners. When I was being taken out of St. George's Prison I met my personal servant Wogayu at the gate and instructed him to fetch me some money, food and clothes ; but the Italians refused to allow me to have them. Immediately after this they shut me in an iron railway wagon and took me to Dire Dawa. In Dire Dawa there were many Ethiopians confined in a sandy field, surrounded by barbed wire, without shelter or water. They were fed on dry biscuits (*galeta*) for 36 hours. All the prisoner; were tormented by lack of drinking water. I myself told a sergeant to buy me water for 500 liras from the money which I kept in secret, but the sergeant felt pity for me and brought me a bottle of water without accepting the money. When he did this, he was wriggling on his stomach, to avoid being seen by the Carabinieri. After 36 hours, at midnight, we were put on trucks and taken to Italian Somaliland. the conditions of our journey were as follows:

(a) I heard a Colonel saying that the trucks (lorries) in the convoy were more than 800

(b) Each truck was crowded with prisoners sitting one on another and the trucks were fully covered with canvas which was fastened onto the trucks.

(c) We were forbidden to get down from the trucks for sanitary purposes or for fresh air for 18 hours from Dire Dawa to Jigjiga. For this reason, males and females were depressed because of the desire to relieve nature. From this place up to Danane we were allowed to go to latrines twice in 24 hours, and were also given water and *galeta* regularly. From Addis Ababa we reached Danane on the eleventh day.

Besides this bad treatment, the other cruelty which I saw and specially remember was that a woman whose name I cannot remember just now, who was the wife of Fitaurari Gululate, was sick since we started from Addis Ababa and she died on the truck when we arrived at the orchard of the Duke of Abruzzi. The carabinieri took her body and threw it into the river Webi Shebeli while the truck was moving, when we were passing over the bridge.

(9) I stayed three years and three months in Danane prison. The conditions in this prison were as follows :

(a) Three prisoners used to live in a little tent provided for one soldier. The prisoners were not given any kind of cloth, blanket or carpet to sleep on.

(b) At first, the food was four hard biscuits (*galeta*) in a day.

(c) As we used to drink sea water the daily death rate was between six and thirty persons, who died from dysentery. A total of 3,175 persons died. I was able to know this, because while I was a prisoner myself there I was given a job as a medical assistant, and so records of the sick persons and obituary notes were kept by me. Up to the end the Italian authorities never provided potable water for prisoners at Danane.

(d) From 6,500 persons, who were at Danane, 3,175 died. The reason why not all of them perished was because the prisoners used to receive some money from their relatives and bought "aqua minerale" which was brought from Italy in sealed bottles, and churned milk from Somalis. For food, after about a year, we were given bread, macaroni, rice, tea and meat once a week. For the sick there was also some improvement. The administrator of the Danane prison was Colonel Mazekeki. Tile pay

master was Captain Rossi and the medical officer was Captain Antonio. I cannot recollect the other names, but the staff included a total of about sixty Europeans.

(e) From among the Italians who were there, Brigadier Baroni, Sergeant Tosato, and a marshal of carabinieri whose name I have forgotten, used to whip prisoners, saying that the prisoners did not salute them or that they did not work hard enough. The sort of work which the prisoner; used to do was to clean away dirt, to go to a place called Ganale and work in the garden, to collect and fetch firewood, and build roads.

(f) Those females and males who were tired and refused to work were tied by their hands behind their backs and hanged on the wall for seven days without their feet touching the ground. Because of this cause the arms of two persons swelled up and were amputated.

(g) When prisoners became very sick, Captain Antonio used to say it is better for them to die. And killed them by giving them injections of arsenic and strychnine. Also when some of them came for treatment he used to tie them down by force and perform operations against their will.

(10) In 1939 A.D. General Nasi, who was deputy to the Duke of Aosta, I think because of the world war, released all the prisoner; and sent them to their respective countries<sup>1</sup>. Even though we were told that we had been pardoned, when we arrived at Addis Ababa, those of us who were political prisoner; were allowed to go to our respective home; only in the night time, and were not given complete freedom up to the time when the British army occupied Addis Ababa<sup>2</sup>. We were arranged in groups of 20 to 40 persons and were put in small houses at Ufficio Politico and Commissariato from morning till evening. As we were in this manner prohibited from working for subsistence, our sufferings were as great as when we were in prison.

---

<sup>1</sup> Time confusion. Michael Tessema said before, he had been 3 and a half years in Danane, which would mean till dicembre 1940 and not 1939. The camp of Danane in any case has never been closed, but liberated by the British Army on their conquest of Italian Somaliland on April 18<sup>th</sup> 1941.

<sup>2</sup> April 5<sup>th</sup> 1941