

Testimony of Imru Zelleke

Name: Imru

Surname: Zelleke

Nationality: Ethiopian

Gender: m

Date of birth: 1925

Date of imprisonment: after Yekatit 12, 20th February 1937

Camps of imprisonment:

Bejirond Zelleke Agidew's Residence, Addis Abeba, Ethiopia, 20 February 1937 - 21 February 1937

Akaki Radio Station, Akaki, Ethiopia, 21 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

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My personal recollections of those tragic days are somehow confused, I hope to be excused if memory fails me, and for not mentioning thousands of deeds that should be told and a plethora of people that should be remembered. The horror that happened after the attempt on Graziani's life is an unforgettable incident and probably the most distressing life experience that has marked many of my generation and myself.

After the attempt made on his life, Graziani gave free rein to all Italians, military and civilian alike, to kill, beat and arrest any Ethiopian at their whim. There ensued a terrible period of massacre and violence on the whole population. This episode of absolute terror lasted three days. Thousands died and were maimed by the Italians who were using guns, bayonets, knives even picks and shovels to prey on people, indiscriminate of age and gender. The Camice Nere (Black Shirts Fascists cadre), the Legione di Lavoro (Workers Legion) and the Polizzia Coloniale (Colonial Police) had a field day. Our house overlooked Menelik Square, from the second floor I could see many Italian military, civilians, and policemen killing and beating people who in panic were trying to take refuge in the Municipality. In my young mind what shook me to the core was the extreme and indiscriminate violence inflicted on peaceful people, which even today after witnessing the unfolding of so many dramas, I find difficult to rationalize. The massacre occurred all over the country, it is impossible to estimate how many people were killed, some say thirty thousand, I am sure there were more victims than that.

At the time our compound, in Arada, was occupied and had become the Headquarters of the Carabinieri. A day after the attempt on Graziani, my mother, my two sisters and I were arrested. I was twelve years old, my sisters Ketsela and Zena were nine and two years old arrested. We were kept prisoners in the basement of a villa by our property. We passed a horrible and terrifying first night because there were some Italian prisoners that were being interrogated and were screaming in agony, (these Italian nationals were probably anti-fascists or criminals). The next day they brought us upstairs on the veranda and from there we were transferred to Akaki (Nefas Silk) where they had setup a large concentration camp. My half-brother Mesfin Zelleke was 22 years old, a civil engineer graduate from Lausanne University and the Ponts et Chaussées (Bridges & Roads Faculty) of Montpellier University was also arrested and we met him in the camp. Hundreds of prisoners were brought there from all

over Ethiopia. Many of them were country people and simple farmers, they did not know what was going on and why they were there. The camp was a sort of distribution centre from where the prisoners were sifted and sent to various prisons and concentration camps.

We were crammed in large military tents with no facilities and sleeping on the ground with no cover. This was our initiation to the horrid realities that were to follow. Nothing exceptional happened in this camp but for one incident: an Italian sentinel bayoneted and killed a pregnant woman. The woman and her husband were peasants who had never been out of their village and did not understand why they were detained. The woman who wanted to relieve herself, went to the camp gate to ask for direction. It was very dark at night, when the sentinel saw this big fat woman accost him, he was so scared that he simply impaled her with his bayonet. Her husband, a fellow named Wolde Gabriel, went stark mad on the spot, became very violent and was put in chains. He was sent to Danane, where still chained, raving and screaming around the camp, he died after a few months.

We were kept in the Akaki camp for about a week, in the beginning of March 1937, they began sending the detainees to the various destinations where they would be jailed. Some groups were taken to Italy, a small number of intellectuals were sent to Nokra in the Dahlak Islands, the worst prison of all. The bulk of prisoners in Akaki went to the Danane concentration camp in Somalia, forty kilometres south of Mogadiscio. We were amongst this last group.

If I remember correctly the journey to Danane took about four weeks. There were hardly any roads but for tracks made by the army during the invasion. The prisoners were crammed in covered trucks without sides, there were no benches. The trucks were so crowded that no other position but sitting or standing was possible. Prisoners were allowed down from the trucks for a couple of short spells a day, to relieve themselves. Otherwise they had to stay in the trucks all the time. A small amount of food and water was given every day, mostly galletta (a hard piece of bread) and some tomato paste. When we arrived in Dire-Dawa, we camped outside the city. By then many people had become sick with malaria, diarrhea and other ailments.

At Dire-Dawa a few people who had money on them, were allowed to go shopping under guard. The worst part of the journey was crossing the Ogaden past Jijiga. It was raining heavily and the grounds had simply become a mud pool. Whenever the trucks sank in the mud and could not move, all prisoners had to climb down and push them. The convoy could travel only a few kilometres a day. Even more people became sick of exhaustion and hunger. Some people died - as there was not time to bury them, the bodies were left by the road. The Somali askaris (colonial troops) that were guarding us were irascible and very cruel; they did not give any help to the prisoners. They would beat a prisoner for any excuse.

The Danane prison (was completely erased by the Italians when in the 1950's they were administering Somalia under UN trusteeship) consisted of a very big compound surrounded by eight meters high walls, with guard towers. The compound was divided in four sections of which one contained the administration offices and the infirmary. The other three sections were for prisoners. Inside there were tukuls to house the prisoners. However, because of the large number of prisoners open sheds were also built around the walls, where a straw mat and a space of about eighty centimeters was allocated to each person. The walled camp was only for men, the women's camp was outside in a separate area adjacent to the prison walls. The women's compound consisted of some large military tents surrounded with barbed wire. Later on, when the number of prisoners increased they had to build yet more camps with tents and fences. Inside the camps relatives, friends and acquaintances tried to stay together in order to support each other.

There was no communication between the compounds. After a while they allowed married men to visit their wives on Sundays. There was no physical contact; they simply talked over the fence for the short time that was allowed. Because I was young I was allowed to go and visit my mother and my sisters.

At one time I was so sick with malaria, they let me stay with my mother until I recovered. Outside the camps an isolated tent, called Lazaretto that served as a last resting place for those who were moribund and could not take care of themselves. They were simply left there to die. A young nurse and I were the only ones that went there to give them some water and food. Few lasted more than two or three days before they passed away.

I am not sure of the number, but I think there were, according Italian documents found in later years, some 6200 prisoners in Danane form which only 3000 survived. (** M. Dominioni, Study Piacentini 2004 photos) The first few months were terrible. Food consisted of boiled vegetables and gallettas that were already rotten and full of worms. Drinking water was drawn from wells dug in the vicinity of the sea, which made it salty. In the beginning there was no medical treatment, although later they assigned a doctor to the camp. People got sick with malaria, dysentery, scurvy, typhus, tropical sores and all sorts of diseases, caused by malnutrition and extremely bad living conditions. Several hundred died during the first few months, On the whole I think that more than one third of prisoners that were taken to Danane died there. Conditions in the main prisons were terrible because of the high walls surrounding it, there was not enough air circulation. The hot climate of the area made it suffocating and very unhealthy. There were only eight or ten holes in the latrines, you can imagine what it was like with hundreds of people suffering from diarrhea.

Every morning the adult males were taken out of the camp to gather wood and do some arduous work that the camp commandant had ordered. In the evening people prayed and cried 'Igziyooo!', a group prayer chant. As I couldn't do any heavy manual work because of my age, I was assigned to the infirmary where I helped cleaning and doing odd jobs. There, I saw more death and human agony than for the rest of my whole life. Otherwise there was not much to do; a lot of time was spent in reading the Bible and some religious literature that was available. Some of the educated took to teaching the young. Actually I learned Italian and many other subjects from them, especially from my brother. Chess and gebeta, played with rudimentary boards, were very popular games. Or else our time was taken up in arguments and speculations about our fate, religions, politics and history that led to endless discussions. There was no attempt to escape because the people in the surrounding areas were hostile. I heard later, though, that two men had escaped and made it home.

On Sundays we were allowed to go to the beach where we could wash ourselves and launder our meager clothing. Thank God, the climate was hot and whatever tattered cloths we had were enough to cover ourselves. Some people become skilled even at sewing some garments out of any rags they could find. Occasionally people were allowed to write home, they also received letters from their families. Spirits were generally high, there was always something to laugh or cry about, people had not lost hope they believed firmly that they would be free and that the Italian would go away someday. People helped each other in whatever way they could. There were no ethnic divisions, poor or rich, high or rank, everyone helped everyone. Compassion and generosity are indeed ingrained in the Ethiopian character; they are particularly manifest in such dire situations. Some of the people I remember are: Fitawrari Haile Zelleqa, Major Asfaw Ali, Major Bahru Kabba who died in prison, Ato Tewodros Mengasha, Yassu Mengasha (Lt. Gen) Tigre Makonnen Hailemariam, Ato Wolde Endeshaw, Ato Bekele Tessema, Ato Yassu (?), W/ro Tsigie Mengasha, W/ro Atzede Wolde Amanuel, W/ro Shitaye Wolde Amanuel, Ato Bayou Wolde Giorgis, Ato Mokria Makonnen, Fitawrari Ambaw Gulilate, Fitawrari Wossene Awariss , Ato Tekle Tsadik Mokria, and many others.

There are countless anecdotes about the Ethiopian moral fiber during the Italian occupation; some are funny others are sad. Here are two samples: one tragic-comic the other heroic: This story is about a remarkable man, it happened in Addis Ababa Tyit-bet (that was converted into a prison), where he was detained. His name was Dr. Alemework, he was a veterinarian graduate from the UK. The prison authorities had put him in charge of the infirmary. Not only did he not know anything about human

ailments, he had no medicine to treat even a headache. His only real function was to register the dead in the prison ledger. So, on the column that said 'cause of death' he wrote in Italian 'Morto per la Patria' (Died for the Country). When this was discovered and he was interrogated his reply was that, since he didn't know what caused their death, he thought appropriate to register the real reason for which they were jailed. The Italians authorities were not amused, and they sent him to Nocra prison, where he stayed for five years. The other story is about a hero: His name was Captain Bezuayehu (later Dejazmatch). He was a member of the Imperial Guard. In Danane he used to tell us that as soon as he was freed, he was going to kill a few of the enemy and then join the resistance. Which he did.

Sometime in the fall of 1938 some three hundred of us were returned to Addis Ababa and freed. By that time Graziani, because of his excessive brutality and the spreading Ethiopian resistance, was replaced by the Duke of Aosta as Viceroy. The Italians had reversed to their former pacification policy and wanted to show clemency, which I suspect was the reason for our release. My brother was not freed; he was transferred to Nocra prison, in the Dahlak islands, where he stayed for another year. The remaining political prisoners were released from time to time, and all those who survived, some seven hundred out of about three thousand, returned home. We returned to Addis Ababa after another gruelling journey across the Ogaden back to the camp in Akaki where we had departed from. A few days later came Cerulli, who was then Vice-Governor General, accompanied by Ras Hailu Tekle-Haimanot and Professor (Negadras) Afework, and told us that thanks to the clemency of the King, the Duce and everybody in the Fascist firmament we were pardoned for our crimes and set free.