

Testimony of Michael Blatta Bekele Hapte

Name: Michael

Surname: Blatta Bekele Hapte

Nationality: Etiopie

Gender: m

Date of imprisonment: July 1936

Camps of imprisonment:

Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, July 1936

Harar, Ethiopia July/August 1936,

Mogadiscio, Somalia, July/August 1936

Danane, Somalia July/August 1936

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. 16-17: Extract from Affidavit No. 18

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: Blatta Bekele Hapte Michael, age: 52 years, profession: Judge of the High Court of Ethiopia, address: Addis Ababa, do hereby take oath and say as follows: [...]

(5) When Dejazmach Fikremariam and Dejazmach Abara Kassa attempted to recapture Addis Ababa¹, the Italians suspected everyone of taking part in the attack; and so I too was arrested and taken to prison. On Nahase 9th, 1925² (E.C.), Italian carabinieri (gendarmarie) suddenly entered my house at midnight and wakened me from my bed, put me in chains and took me to Mogadishu. The persons who were taken to Mogadishu with me were Lij Banjaou Nadou, Ato Matafaria Garmame. Ato Geto and Ato Gabre Mariam, who was Alaka Sertu's servant.

(6) When we were loaded on the train they tied my hands together by wire, but the rest of the prisoners were tied together in pairs. We passed the day without food and arrived at a station called Hawash in the evening, where we passed the night; also in the same circumstances without food and still tied by wire. Next morning we started and were taken to Dire Dawa. On arriving at Dire Dawa, we were taken directly to the prison billet of the town, where we were put among many other prisoners. This prison was completely full of bugs. No one was able to sleep in such terrible conditions. We stayed there for two or three days and then we were taken to Harar tied in the same way. When we arrived at Harar also, we were put among many other Ethiopian prisoners. There we were given black bread for our main meal. Moreover there was one latrine in that prison for nearly 200 prisoners. The prisoners were deprived of air and were suffering from such a suffocating condition. It was prohibited for us to receive any kind of food from any sympathetic person who might know us. Once a prisoner called Ato Hawash sent to his fellow-prisoners some provisions which were sent to him from

¹ July 1936

² which would mean August 15th 1933. The date must be wrong.

his home; an Italian brigadier saw the boy who brought the provisions and tied both his hands together and hanged him from the ceiling of the latrine for 24 hours.

(7) After passing, three days in the Harar prison we were taken to Mogadishu. We were not released from our chains until we reached Mogadishu. Besides being tormented in many different ways we were at the limit of starvation and thirst.

(8) When we arrived at Mogadishu we were put directly into the central prison there, and next morning we were taken to Danane. There we were put among 200 war prisoners, who were captured on Ras Desta's front. The Italian commander who brought us from Mogadishu handed us over to the commander of the Danane prison camp. We assumed that they were going to put us among the captives, but. Contrary to our expectations, we were put among criminal murderers. The food which the Italians gave us was very bad for our health. The food was rotten biscuits with many worms in them and we also got tea and coffee alternately. As we were not accustomed to what they used to give us for food we all became sick because of unsuitable food. When we were imprisoned in the criminal jail, the commander of the jail was Brigadier Leyopadel Baroni. We repeatedly complained to him about the food, but he said he could not do anything about it, because it was ordered by his superiors. Even if we possessed a small amount of money we were forbidden to buy any kind of food from the neighborhood.

(9) Soon after the attempt on Graziani's life the Italians brought about a thousand Ethiopians to Danane and confined them in the concentration camp, specially prepared for the confinement of Ethiopians near the criminal prison where we were imprisoned. Before the said thousand Ethiopians came, the concentration camp was occupied by 60 Ethiopians who were brought from Harar and Addis Ababa; and we were also taken out of the criminal prison camp and put in confinement with them. Afterwards we were mixed with the rest of the confined Ethiopians. The food conditions were even worse than before. As I mentioned above, we were about a thousand Ethiopians who were confined in that camp, and because of the lack of sufficient latrines, the filthy conditions and the lack of suitable food in the camp, many persons got sick, and the death rate was four to five persons daily.

(10) When relatives were ill in the prison camp, wives were forbidden to nurse their husbands and husbands to nurse their wives, and relatives to nurse a relative.