

Commemorating Yekatit 12

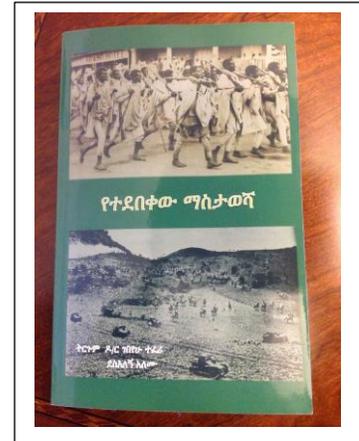
Book Review of “The Hidden Memoir “in observation of the 81st years Anniversary of Fascist Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

By: Berhane Tadese

Yekatit 12 commemorated by Ethiopians and friends around the world every year in many ways. To remind folks of all ages about our past Ethiopian history, a book review could be one of the venue to commemorate by highlighting the event.

The book was written by Dr. Harald Nystrom in Swedish. It is titled "With St George on the death ride" and have 238 pages of memoir and diary of Swedish doctor about the Italian and Ethiopian war of 1935 to 1936. It was translated in English by Dr. Thomas P. Coleman in April 2012. Then Dr. Gebeyehu Teferi and Desalegn Alemu translated the book to Amharic and published it on June 2014.

Dr. Harald Nystrom is a Swedish national and born in 1898 in small hut in Eritrea. His parents were living as missionary in Eritrea. At age 21 he went back to Sweden and Beirut for higher education. He returned in 1928 to Ethiopia as medical Doctor to work with Emperor Haile Selassie’s Body guard army unit.



With St. George on the death ride

The Amharic translators supplemented the book with coined title to reinforce the central idea of the book by naming it “The Hidden memoir”. The book content remained unchanged. It is an eyewitness account of a Swedish doctor “embedded” with resistance guerrilla patriots in the Northern front of Ethiopia during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935.

The first few pages of the book portray his life in the Ethiopia. Dr. Nystrom involvement began when Emperor Haile Selassie's Government foreign Minister Beltane Geta Heruie approached and requested him to fly to north of Ethiopia called "Dabat" in Beghemder area to treat one of the sick Patriotic man by the name of Dejazmach Ayalew Birru. Although the Doctor expressed his fears going to war zone because of the inherent danger that war poses, he finally agreed and proposed a financial compensation for his work and insurance for his family. The Haile Selassie government agreed to pay him the compensation.

Dr. Harald Nystrom journey started on a small plane from Addis Ababa. He headed to “Debat” ዳባት with his some medical supplies. As he flew over the mountains, gorges, and rivers he expressed his admiration of the beauty of the natural terrain of Ethiopia. Everything went well on the flight, except he had scary landing experience at his destination. There is no proper landing strip. He said that “the pilot turned the plane six full circles to avoid the hills and to find good area to land. After few scary leaps the pilot managed to stop the plane before it crushed.”

He was greeted by Dejazmach Ayalew Birru’s men. Dr. Nystrom appears to be the first white person ever been in this area. One can only imagine how he felt to be a complete stranger. Just by being a white man there was a chance he could be mistakenly killed by Ayalew’s men or by other warriors as enemy.

He was prepared to cope with any difficult situations. What help him most to assimilate with local people was his familiarity to the culture and most importantly speaking Amharic language fluently.

After he rested well at this first stop, he continued his journey on foot with Ayalew's loyalist to Ayalew's camp called "Tegeta" ጠገዴ. As he continued his treacherous trip on foot with small group of Ayalew's followers, he climbed on chain of Simien Mountains, saw a hauntingly beautiful forest, and looked out enjoyable scene of the flat land of the region. During this journey, he friended with the group and learned the cultural history of the region. Finally he arrived at Ayalew's camp. He met Ayalew and his commanders. Ayalew got the badly needed medical care and his condition gets better very quickly.

Ayalew was a fifty years old man. He fought side by side with Menelek II's in many occasions and proved to be the best warrior. At very young age Emperor Menelek II promoted him to Dejzmach title and was served as the governor of Keffa -.

During the Author's stay at the Aeylaw's camp he described what he observed about the Habesha's behaviors, the primitive war camp life, and the warriors readiness for battle. He described the situations in great details in particular the size of resistance force, the type of foods they eat, the diseases, the challenge of treating the wounded patriots, the lack of medical supplies, suspicion among the war front leaders, the social composition, how they carried out their fight to the unmatched highly skilled enemy forces, and the banditries problems they encountered from time to time. He also wrote about other front leaders such as Ras Imru and Ras Mulugata. Despite the odds against them, their stiff resistance at the war front slowed down the advancement of fascist Italian army. He reflected an interesting fact about the diversity of Ras Mulugata patriotic army. His army unit includes the Kemabtta warriors from South of Ethiopia. It is a validation of Ethiopia freedom fighters has been multiethnic all along. The multiethnic freedom fighters unity, endurance and sacrifice is duly recognized as one of the great landmark in Ethiopia history. Hence, Ethiopia has existed as an independent country for a very long time.

The Author focused about the relatively little known of Dejzmach Ayalew Birru's stories. In spite of Ayalew heroism, the Emperor had suspicion of Ayalew's loyalty. The book described how the Emperor always was checking the loyalty of him in indirect ways. As result, his hometown people sang for him" አያሌው ሞኝ ሰጧ አማኝ.

Undoubtedly, Ayelew had the best warriors under him who contributed the most for his success in the battle field. It is interesting to briefly indicate an impressive story telling on couple of battles in particular at "Dembeguna Pass" and "AF Gaga pass" battles (on page 87 & 109). Despite the Italians military supremacy in airplanes, tanks and poison gas usage on the battle, two of his commander of Ayalew Birru's guards by the name Balambaras Tessema and Fitaurari Shifferaw were the war heroes at "Dembeguna" battlefield. (I.e. Balambaras means "Commander of the fortress, and Fitaurai means "Commander of the vanguard") This account of the story testify to the fact that real patriots are honest to their words and rarely lie. On page 55, prior this battle, while he was staying at the war camp the Author mentioned about Tessma breaking a basic camp rule that prohibited making fire for cooking. The rule was set for security reason. The smoke could be seen by the foe, may expose them for attack. Balmabaras Tessema was sentenced forty lashes for breaking this rule. The book described this terrified moments vividly, hearing the lashing and seeing the physical pain. It is clear that after just one round of lashes could suffer instantly bruised skin. But Balambaras Tessema was not showing any of his pain. Surprisingly after 40 lashes, he got up and bowed to the leaders and walk away without grudge.

Later on “Dembeguna battle” he performed incredibly fight with the enemy. On this battle the Italians were using, tanks, Libyan horsemen, askaries (Italian and Eritrean native soldiers) and air attack. Shifferaw and Tessema men were fiercely fighting. The patriots were fighting with outdated rifles, sword, and spears and hand to hand fighting. The patriot’s morale was high. The Italians could not use the air power due to hand in hand fighting. In middle of fierce fighting, Tessema run to one of the tank, and climbed on top the tank and started hammering the tank’s door shouting “open” the door, the Italian tank gunner appears to be confused and opened the door. Balambarase Tessema quickly shoot in the open door, the gunner tried to do some maneuvers but stuck between trees and suddenly the tank caught fire. The Italian army were running in total disarray from the battlefield. An Italian Major wounded and carried out with stretcher, several army officials and support drivers were killed instantly at the spot. Some escaped, some attempted to surrender by hands up, but the Patriots were not aware of this surrender sign they kept attacking at them. Shifferaw was killed on this battle. Tessema is the first Ethiopian patriot successfully disarm the enemy tank. It feels good to note that these commanders charged across open ground in the face of relentless gunfire and sacrifice their lives to defend Ethiopia from aggressor.

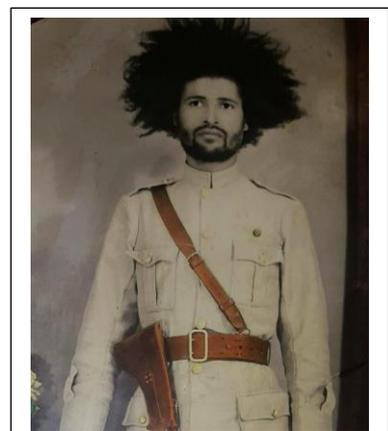
The story takes a turn by the defeat of Ethiopian patriots at Shire/“Selaclaca” area war front. The Patriots lost the battle and Ayalew retreated to his home town. The enemy advanced deep in Ethiopia territory and occupied for five years and the rest is history.

At the end of the book the Author conveyed short summary as why the Ethiopia patriots were defeated. Here are some reasons he documented: the lack of leadership skills, poorly armed with nearly obsolete rifles, most men had swords, spears or clubs, many never heard sound of airplane motors, no knowledge they were facing battling with mechanized army, inadequate food or shelter, poorly dressed, a rampant disease, many days spent marching arduous trails, uneducated and had no fighting drill, undisciplined i.e. filled with emotion at the battlefield (firing to early), deep religion believe as title of the book indicate that St. George supposed to be a savoir in the battlefield, etc. The Author admired the Ethiopians patriots about their pride, dignity, the will to fight, love of their motherland and commitment to defend foreign aggression. They strived under impossible condition during the battle.

On November 1, 2015, Posted in Al Mariam's Commentaries entitled “Reflections on Prof. Mesfin’s “Adafne”: Saving Ethiopians From Themselves? Recognized the patriots sacrifice in the same vein:

Prof. Mesfin writes,

“Up to the present, the written history of true Ethiopian heroes is negligible. Little has been written of the patriotism and heroism of Dejazmach Geresu Duki, General Jagama Kelo, Shaleqa Beqele Weya.[I would emphatically add to the list the name of Dejazmach Kebede Bizunesh, a great Ethiopian patriot who not only whipped the Italians in battle time and again in the late 1930s a few miles west of Addis Ababa but also fought in his old age the Derg with valor and against all odds for nearly three years. So many unsung and forgotten heroes unknown to Ethiopians and known only to God. I am so proud and deeply grateful to all of them!].”



Dejazmach Kebede Bizunesh
(From the family’s collection)

The Patriots paid a heavy price. Dr. Nystrom stayed seven months with the resistance Patriots in the battle field in care of the sick and treating the wounded. Despite the hardship he faced, he showed deepest unselfish efforts to help the freedom fighters, and was true sympathetic adviser to the patriots. He deserved a great credit for his strong support to stick with patriots. We thanked Dr. Gebeyehu Teferi and Desalegn Alemu for super work, effort and heart they put in translating in Amharic. Special thanks goes to Dr. Nystrom of his unique diaries survived to tell this untold stories of the devastating battle of 1935-36 in northern Ethiopia.

(Picture of Dejazmach Ayalew with private guards)

