

The Unsung Story of a Hero

Every now and then the world is greeted by a hero, a unique human being who more than anyone else possesses qualities of courage, loyalty, resourcefulness, charisma, and most of all, selflessness. An ordinary individual with whom comes a great story that paints the picture of our history. A History that is so unique in nature and part of the present life of all Eritreans. However, when we reflect on our history we often tend to focus on just one portion. It seems for most people the Eritrean history begins after the international community decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia in 1951 and Idris Awate fired the first gunshot that sparked the Eritrean Struggle for Independence on September 1, 1961. What about the events that led to that day? What about the people who fought not only in the trenches but within the city itself, surrounded by enemies?

September 1 marked the beginning of the struggle in the international forum, but for Eritrea and people like Mr. Yohannes Tseggai, the struggle had begun long before. Mr. Yohannes was among several of the youth at the time, who understood the idea of Free Eritrea was achievable but indeed a challenge. He started fighting for a vision 'Netsa Eritrea' way before we as a country decided that raising arms was our means of liberation. In a country oppressed and possessed by outsiders, in an environment where the natives were never allowed to be elevated to a certain degree of education, he used the small window of education he could get by attending "Scuola Vittorio di Asmara," while at the same time working as a writer with British information services in the 1940s. Like many of our founding fathers, he too was bold in the pursuit of more knowledge, never fearing to follow truth and reason to whatever results they led, because he knew that in order to achieve the vision "Netsa Eritrea" he would have to equip his mind with knowledge. His whole life as a patriot was not based on his index trigger finger but his intelligence and his ability to write. It's often fascinating and motivating to see how the youth at that time always walked on the edge of the precipice, fascinated by how close they could travel without losing their balance



Yohanes Tseggai (2nd from left) with the great patriot Abdekadir Kebire(right) in 1949 a few days before Kebire's martyrdom at the hand of assassin agent of Ethiopia

Throughout history we've seen that only a few generations have been granted the role of defending freedom in its hour of maximum danger. After the collapse of the Italian government in the 1940's, the British took over Eritrea, which resulted in the formation of several Eritrean nationalist movements such as, "Mahber Fikri Hager," "Eritrea Ni Eritrawian," and "Al Rabita Al Islamya," with the idea of consolidating the country as one. Regardless of the different organizations, the Imperial power of Haile Selasie worked tirelessly in an effort to destabilize the situation in Eritrea and annex it to Ethiopia. However, the majority of the Eritrean population was behind the idea of an independent state of Eritrea. Patriots such as Ras Tesema Asmerom, Weldeab Weldemariam, Ibrahim Sultan, Abdelkadir Kebire, and Degiat Hasen advocated long and hard for unity within the country. Their ideals gave a way to a dream of an independent state of Eritrea, diminishing the efforts of the imperial power to conquer and exploit its people

"The secret of happiness is freedom. The secret of freedom is courage."

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Yohannes Tseggai(right)with the great patriot Woldeab Woldemariam, by the side walk of catderale,1947, right after Woldeab Woldemariam was released from the hospital after the first assassination attempt on his life



Yohannes Tseggai (2nd from right) with Ato Woldeab Woldemariam (2nd from the left) & Degait Hassen (left), 1949

“I also have in me the courage to die for my political beliefs, for the cause of liberty of my country, and for the genuine interest of my brothers and sisters”

As an avid follower of the late Weldeab Weldemariam, Mr. Yohannes Tseggai too became an advocate for the independence of Eritrea. He worked closely with the late Woldeab Woldemariam before and after the Federation with Ethiopia to secure Eritrean Independence.

When the international community turned its back on justice and decided to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia, all hope seemed lost. The huge losses that followed the annexation left many Eritreans in doubt. Abdelkadir Kebire was killed in the middle of Asmara, Ibrahim Sultan was exiled and Woldeab Woldemariam had to overcome seven assassination attempts on his life before he was forced to leave Eritrea. As the saying goes, “*When you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot and hang on,*” that’s exactly what they did. All the threats, assassination attempts, and prison time wasn’t enough to deter them from their Vision. The dream of an independent state of Eritrea was still in full effect

After their exile, Abona Woldeab Woldemariam formed a radio station in Cairo, a station that broadcasted the current events of Eritrea, informing the world of the heinous crimes that were occurring at that time. Mr. Yohannes Tseggai served as the main communication channel, transporting important information to and from abona Woldeab Woldemariam as well as Bilata Omar Qadi (a nationalist who campaigned for the independence of Eritrea inside the United Nation). At the same time Mr. Yohannes played an active member of Mahber Shew'ate (union of Seven), an organization that spread all over Eritrea within a short time to conduct resistance to the Ethiopian authority in Eritrea. Mahber Shew'ate began to coordinate the principles of liberation and the various sectors of Eritrean struggle in the urban areas of Eritrea as well as Ethiopia.

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After the Ethiopian regime became suspicious of his communication with abona Woldeab Woldemariam and his involvement with Mahber Shew'ate, an assassination attempt was made on Mr. Yohannes Tseggai's life. In 1956, as he walked the treacherously dark streets of the city, he noticed skulking in the shadows, a car of Ethiopian security forces racing hazardly toward him. They proceeded to run him over, leaving him abandoned and battered in the streets of Taba condemned to a slow and painful death. After several months of excruciating recuperation in the hospital, he managed to survive this part of his life using it as fuel and ignition for his ongoing journey throughout the years.

The Ethiopian regime didn't hesitate in continuing to make his life hard. They segregated him from society, put him out of work, and backed him into a dilemma making his responsibility as a husband, father to 10 kids, and most importantly the sole bread winner of his family a difficult task. There were times where he and his family didn't know when or where their next meal was coming from, constantly living in fear, fear of being killed, fear of not being able to support his family. It makes you wonder, how is one supposed to live a moral and compassionate life when he or she is fully aware of the blood and horror inborn in life? If there is ever a stage at which an individual's life becomes truly an adult, it must be when he or she grasps the irony as it is unfolding and accepts responsibility for a life lived in the midst of such paradox.

In 1988, when the Ethiopian regime lost control of Afabet, they manage to take out all of their frustration on the innocent Eritrean civilians. Mr. Yohannes Tseggai, being one of many, was arrested and brutalized in the prison formerly known as MARIAM GIBI for several months causing him his first stroke. The attempt on his life, job lock, constant surveillance, and imprisonment were supposed to be his deterrent, but ended up making him live another day longer to fight the struggle



Patriot Yohannes presenting newspapers & nationalist documents of the 1940s & 50s to President Isaias Afwerki in 1995

Every great achievement is the victory of a flaming heart. Permanence, perseverance and persistence in spite of all obstacles and impossibilities rewarded Mr. Yohannes Tseggai the fruit of his labor, an Independent Eritrea. After safe keeping the important documents that played a huge part in the May 24, 1991 Eritrean independence victory, in 1995, Mr. Yohannes Tseggai presented them to president Issais Afwerki, where they are now being held in the historic library, as a testimony to the hardship and determination it took to gain the Eritrean freedom. True heroism is not the urge to surpass all others at whatever cost, but the urge to serve others at whatever cost. Mr. Yohannes Tseggai was truly an example of right behavior, the sort of man who risked his life to protect his society's values, sacrificing his personal needs for those of the community. He was a lucky man who lived to see his dream come true 'Netsa Eritrea'.

It's often said in order to know where you are going you must understand where you came from, which is why we frequently strive to learn and uncover the unsung stories of our heroes. Every man's life ends the same way, what distinguishes one man from another is the details of how he lived it.

*"The legacy of a hero is the memory of a great name
and the inheritance of a great example*



The unsung story of this hero is too great to be withheld and too massive to be cramped in one article. We hope to share his untold remarkable story in the upcoming future.

"Up to now, I have never served nor become a messenger for any foreign power or interest. I am an enemy to any kind of slavery, in all its shapes and colors. No man be he European or African, can force me into the yoke of any kind of bondage. If there be some one who dares to attempt my assassination in order to force me to submit to doing things contrary to my feeling and will, then I also have in me the courage to die for my political beliefs, for the cause of liberty of my country, and for the genuine interest of my brothers and sisters."

~ Woldeab Woldemariam