



FROM OBLIVION TO MEMORY

The FOM Newsletter

Commemorating Ethiopian prisoners of the Italo-Ethiopian War

VOL. 1 · NO. 1

JUNE / JULY 2026

fromobliviontomemory.org

Editor's Note

Welcome to this edition of *From Oblivion to Memory* (FOM). As descendants of those forcibly removed from Ethiopia and imprisoned in Italy and other places during the dark years of fascist occupation and repression, we unite not only to remember the past but to reclaim stories nearly lost to time.

Our journey began in August of 2025 when several families met for the first time on the island of Asinara — the very place where many of our ancestors were held captive. During our visit to the prison, a poster-sized photograph of a boy, a girl and a woman was on display at the hospital in Cala Reale. This photograph was a powerful reminder of lives touched by those dark years. The girl in the picture — now 94 years old — is the only one who is still with us today.

This powerful reunion sparked a collective realization of the urgent need to preserve and share these histories. Upon returning home, we formed *From Oblivion to Memory* — an organized community dedicated to research, remembrance, and advocacy. This newsletter stands as a testament to our commitment: voices long silenced find strength and presence.

Through regular outreach efforts, FOM strives to build a living archive of resilience and to foster connections among descendants worldwide. We warmly invite all who share this history and also those who are moved by this cause to join us. Your stories, memories, and contributions are vital to keeping this legacy alive.

Together, we honor the past and embrace the responsibility of remembrance for future generations. In this first issue, we highlight and honor two prisoners from that period and bring one historical insight of the time. In each subsequent issue, we will continue to share different lives and stories, ensuring they — and their experiences — are never forgotten.

All references to Amharic words are explained in the glossary on page 4.

Featured Articles



*Dejazmatch Germachew Tekle
Hawariat*

Dejazmatch Germachew Tekle Hawariat

In this quarter's edition, we are honored to share the story of Dejazmatch Germachew Tekle Hawariat, whose life's journey reflects resilience, service, and enduring purpose.

At just 19, shortly after returning to Ethiopia from his studies in France, his life was altered by war. Captured alongside more than 300 Ethiopians, he was sent into exile, first to Asinara, and later to Longobucco.

From these beginnings emerged a life of meaningful contribution. Germachew became a respected author and playwright and later served Ethiopia during the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie I as a minister and as a diplomat, including as ambassador to Rome.

Years later, he returned to Longobucco — no longer a prisoner, but now as ambassador, accompanied by his family — marking a powerful and deeply personal full-circle moment.

His is one of the very few stories that has been preserved and will be publicly available in his forthcoming memoir, soon to be published by the Ethiopian Academy of Sciences. The following excerpt describes his journey from Asinara to what was his final detention destination, Longobucco.

[...continued on page 5](#)

Woizero Senedu Gebru

A woman of incredible perseverance, Senedu Gebru lived into her nineties before she passed away in 2009. She was a member of the Tikur Anbessa resistance movement before she was captured and removed from her country as a prisoner to Asinara. She was a source of support for other prisoners while there and later became an educator, an author, an advocate for women, and a politician among many other things.

[...continued on page 7](#)



Woizero Senedu Gebru



*Members associated with
Ethiopia's resistance era*

Tikur Anbessa

This short essay is about the Tikur Anbessa who were one of the first organized anti-fascist resistance group of the 20th century.

They were formed in Ethiopia during the Italian occupation, and symbolized courage, discipline, and national pride. Though small in number and short-lived, their fight against colonial aspirations and oppression left a lasting legacy in Ethiopia and inspired future resistance movements worldwide. This is the remarkable story of their heroic accomplishments.

[...continued on page 9](#)

Announcements & Upcoming Events

AAIS Event

We have an opportunity to raise awareness about FOM at the next American Association of Italian Studies (AAIS) conference. This annual academic forum will be held in Sassari, Italy from June 3–5, 2026. Some FOM members will participate in a panel discussion during the conference.

Fundraising Highlights

We have produced a new brochure for FOM for fundraising purposes. It is more comprehensive and has more information than the flyer developed previously, and it will be available on our website for downloading and printing.

We issued a challenge to help raise **\$20,000 by August 2026**, the anniversary of our trip to Asinara. To date, families have contributed or pledged a total of **\$6,000**.

Our goal is to create a commemorative museum on Asinara to honor the memory of our ancestors who were imprisoned in Italy. Some are buried in unmarked graves in the Campo Faro Cemetery there. We are starting by building a robust digital archive and website, gathering content about the Ethiopian prisoners and writing our own story about this time in history.

With the support of the Sardinian authorities, we all have a chance to make a difference and make this a reality. Please join our cause and make a donation. All donations are tax deductible, and FOM will provide a receipt for all donations.

New Website Launched – FOM 2.0!

We are proud to announce the launch of our new FOM 2.0 website with enhanced digital capabilities and interface. Pierre-Habté, Elfya, and Yitna deserve all the credit for this enormous undertaking which has taken months to build. We are so grateful. The new website has built-in capabilities for archiving content. This is a game changer because it will allow us to build a true digital database of the experiences of our ancestors before, during, and after their period of imprisonment. It's a beautiful expression of the FOM mission. Please visit us at www.fromobliviontomemory.org to see the exciting addition to the FOM communications plan!

If you enjoy reading our newsletter and other publications, please consider donating by clicking on this link:



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fromobliviontomemory.org/donate

Standing Meetings

- **Bi-monthly:** Steering Committee
- **Monthly:** Archives, Research & Documents Committee (ARD), Finance Committee, and Communications Committee
- **Yearly:** Annual Board Meeting

Please check the WhatsApp "United" thread for upcoming meetings.

Contact Us: info@fromobliviontomemory.org

Glossary

Afenegus

"Chief Justice." The highest judicial official in the Ethiopian imperial court.

Arbegnoch

Amharic word for patriot warriors who took up arms in defense of their country

Ato

A general honorific for an adult man, equivalent to "Mr." in English. Used for men of various social standings, from merchants and officials to ordinary citizens.

Blatta

A title for high court officials of the second rank.

Dejazmatch

"Commander of the gate." A high military and provincial governor title, roughly equivalent to a duke or general.

Hakim

Amharic for physician

Kentiba

Mayor. The title for the head of a city or town.

Ras

"Head." The highest non-royal noble title, roughly equivalent to duke or viceroy.

Tikur Anbessa

Literally translated, means black lion.

Woizero

A general honorific for an adult woman, equivalent to "Mrs." in English. Used for women of various social standings.

Behind the Scenes

Many thanks to the following contributors on our first quarterly newsletter:

For researching, writing, and editing: Gohalem Assefa, Ejigayehu Demissie, Yitna Firdyiwek, Mimi Germachew, Meqdes Mesfin, Wassy Tesfa, Lydia Tesfaye, and Yadwa Yawand-Wossen.

For translating: Debitu Merid Camporeali, Gabriella Ghermandi, Haile Kebede, Konjit Seyoum, Dagmawi Yimer.

For images and pictures: Elfy Getachew Nouvellon, Eyasu Betwos, Alula Pankhurst.



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Dejazmatch Germachew Tekle Hawariat

English translation of an excerpt from Germachew Tekle Hawariat's original memoir in Amharic

The ship weighed anchor and headed toward Sardinia. About fifteen to twenty armed carabinieri escorted us. Having passed by La Maddelena, an island with coastal artillery and the town of Cagliari we got on the big seas. As we got close to shore after traveling aboard the boat for about three to four hours, they brought a burlap sack full of chains and shackles and emptied it in front of us. The rumor of being imprisoned was turning out to be true. We were shocked and dismayed. They immediately cuffed our hands and shackled us together in a chain gang. We disembarked at the port town of Civitavecchia. Using a covered vehicle for transporting prisoners, they made several trips back and forth, taking us to the train station. During our transfer from the ship to the vehicle, the people of the town were gathered around cheering in applause, showing their approval. We felt that just as in ancient times the Romans would parade their prisoners in public carrying a yoke, seeing us prisoners in shackles gave the Italians a sense of pride and joy. They treated us like common criminals, when we had committed no offense. They had forcefully and violently seized our country from us. We surrendered peacefully and had not even resisted with violence. Yet, they were humiliating us.

We got out of the car when we got to the station. They had us wait there until all of us arrived in our respective groups, after which they made us board the train and we started our journey. An armed soldier sat next to each one of us. After traveling in this fashion for some time, we arrived at Rome Termini station. Once we got to Termini, they had us disembark and they took us to a room. They locked it up with us inside. After a couple of hours, the door opened and we were made to board another train. They only gave us bread for lunch, and we ate it with our hands still in chains. We travelled all night and reached the small seaside city of Rossano. A few buses pulled up which we boarded, and we continued our journey.

The road was lined with gravel. The terrain we travelled across was hilly and had many cliffs with a lot of wooded areas and shrubs. There weren't too many houses or farms. It was a hilly, parched area that was quite similar to the southern part of France. We were in a city called Calabria, which is located at part of the map of Italy that looks like a shoe. We passed through a plateau, connected to a larger one named Sila. After traveling from Rossano for a couple of hours we reached a small town that was built on the edge of a cliff. When we reached the town center, thousands of people, men, women and children — were gathered waiting for our arrival with a lot of commotion. One could surmise from their behavior that, no black person had ever been seen before in these parts. Some of the women and children even looked scared and amazed upon seeing us.



*Dejazmatch Germachew Tekle
Hawariat while serving as ambassador
to Rome*

Once we got off the buses, we walked single file into a large house. Inside the house were officials who were standing, waiting for us with an air of arrogance. The local administrator (podesta) said, "Welcome to Italy! ... You are free here. You are not prisoners." The shackles were removed for us. Our hands were so swollen that many of us had trouble taking the shackles off. Several women were watching us through the bars in the windows and wiping tears from their eyes.

Once the shackles were removed we were led to our living quarters. Other than the ground floor, the building had two stories and was built like apartments. Depending on the size of the room, there were three, four and six beds in each. We selected our partners and settled in. I shared a room with Kosroff Boghosian and Monsieur Abraham Korajian. Aside from the fact that the room was small, it had a small fireplace which came in handy in the winter months.



Dejazmatch Germachew Tekle
Hawariat

Our beds were made with clean sheets, a blanket and even a bedcover similar to that of a hotel bed. Three young Italian men were designated to make our beds, clean the rooms and run errands for us. Their names were Alberto, Cataldo and Salvatore. Each bedroom had a balcony and in the back was a spacious veranda. There was a washroom on each floor. There was also a small rooftop terrace to get fresh air.

When I looked at the landscape I was stunned by its location. I later heard that the previous name for Longobucco was Temesino. It was founded by the French in The Middle Ages. The French were later gradually dominated by invasions and conflict with the Spaniards, Bourbons and the Arabs.

Three quarters of the town was surrounded by cliff. The remaining side is surrounded by forests and mountains. The entire area is encircled by the plateaus that it is impossible to see anything other than mountains and the sky so much so that it seems like one deep crevice. Indeed, the name Longobucco translates to *long hole*.

I began to get concerned that although for the time being we were free from the shackles, we must have been placed in such a desolate and remote place because they would not be freeing us anytime soon. Once we settled in our places, we were all summoned to the carabinieri's main office. When we arrived, we went in one by one, where the marshal and his assistants were waiting, and gave the usual fascist salute. They registered our names, along with our ages, ethnicities, line of work and religion. Upon answering the question regarding religion, we were amazed to see the sycophantic behavior displayed by a couple of the elders among us who betrayed their own to claim what they were not, demonstrating how integrity at the time was beginning to get tested in some quarters. Blatta Kidane Mariam Aberra translated for us the rules by which we were to live.



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Senedu Gebru: Courage and Resilience on Asinara

Educator, resistance fighter, parliamentarian, playwright, and advocate for women's rights

Educator, resistance fighter, parliamentarian, playwright, and passionate advocate for women's rights, Senedu Gebru was a pioneering figure in Ethiopian public life. Born in 1915, Senedu was one of the first Ethiopian women to have received an education in Europe. Fluent in multiple languages by the time she returned home, she infused her knowledge of history and love of literature with a deep commitment to service of her country.



Woizero Senedu Gebru

At the start of the Italian occupation, she joined the Tikur Anbessa resistance movement as its first woman member. Ras Imeru, who was the leader of the movement, was not convinced. He strongly encouraged her to leave the country, go to Europe and pursue her education. At the time her then husband, Foreign Minister Lorenzo Taezaz, had accompanied the emperor and was living in exile in Europe. She declined, citing her commitment to the oath she had taken to never abandon the resistance under penalty of death. She managed to convince Ras Imeru that she did not have to go into combat to be of service to Tikur Anbessa, but that with his support she could start a Red Cross unit to provide assistance to the wounded.

Following the failed attempt on the life of Marshal Graziani, the young Senedu lost two of her nephews, Debebe and Hailu, both under twenty-one years of age, and her younger brother Meshesha, along with many other members of the Tikur Anbessa to summary execution by Graziani's forces. Shortly thereafter, Senedu and many of her family members were captured and sent as prisoners to Asinara. Conditions were harsh, and the isolation was profound, but Senedu met these challenges with extraordinary resilience.

Denied books in familiar languages, she taught herself Italian so that she would be able to continue reading, turning an obstacle into an opportunity for learning. She became an advocate for her fellow prisoners, campaigning for better living conditions, particularly for her female prisoners. She also watched over her siblings, preventing one, Desta, from fleeing to a convent on the island.

On Asinara, Senedu forged lifelong friendships with her fellow prisoners, based on a shared loyalty to country and yearning for liberty. Her experiences in Tikur Anbessa and captivity on Asinara later inspired *Yelebe Mesehaf* ("The Book of My Heart"), a play about the Italian occupation and Ethiopian resistance.

Her time as a member of Tikur Anbessa and on Asinara foreshadowed a life of service to her country. Her surrender was a source of great regret throughout her life. She felt that she should have fought to the bitter end. She resolved to make her survival worthwhile by dedicating her life to service to her country. Among her numerous public roles are her service as headmistress of the country's first girls' school (Empress Menen School), she was the first female vice president of the Ethiopian Parliament, and an active member and vice president of the Ethiopian Red Cross/Crescent. She was a leading member of Ethiopian Women's Charitable Association and the founder of the first self-help organization of Ethiopians living with disabilities.

Senedu married Major Assefa Lemma (later Ambassador) in the late 1940s and continued her public service while raising four children. She passed away in 2009 at the age of 94, leaving behind an exemplary legacy of resilience, courage, and service.

Her time on Asinara stands as a testament to the human capacity for survival in even the most trying of circumstances. Though a prisoner herself, Senedu's strength and compassion not only sustained her family and fellow prisoners but became the defining chapter of a life dedicated to her country and its people.



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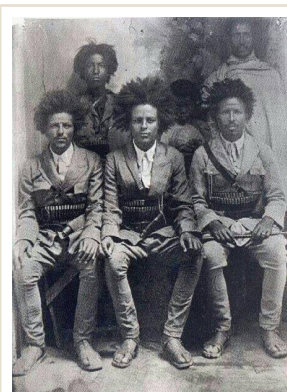
The Tikur Anbessa 1935–1937

A brief history of Ethiopia's organized anti-fascist resistance movement

Introduction

The Tikur Anbessa of Ethiopia came to existence as a resistance group at a time when fascism was rearing its head and Italy was trying to capture what it had lost during the Scramble for Africa at the Battle of Adwa. More than just a resistance group — The Tikur Anbessa was a symbol, a living testament to organized struggle against oppression. Having emerged even before the French and Italian resistance movements, Tikur Anbessa predated the anti-fascist movements of Europe. Although its existence was brief and the number small, its legacy was historic, as the first structured anti-fascist resistance movement and arguably the first organized struggle against oppression in Africa during the 20th century.

Its story, though often overlooked, embodies Ethiopia's national pride and collective memory, representing a disciplined, institutionalized resistance against colonialism. Its members combined modern political thought with elite military strategy under the harsh realities of fascist brutality, creating a narrative that remains inspiring to this day.



Members associated with Ethiopia's resistance era

Who Were the Tikur Anbessa?

The Tikur Anbessa was founded in Western Ethiopia in 1935, following the fall of Addis Ababa and Emperor Haile Selassie's exile. In the wake of his departure, the struggle shifted to guerrilla warfare, and the Tikur Anbessa emerged as a distinct movement. Its members came from three groups. These categories had some overlap.



Samson and Benyam Workneh

Military cadets — such as Kifle Nessibu (son of Afenigus Nessibu Zeamanuel), Negga Haile Selassie (later general), and others from the Holeta Military Academy.

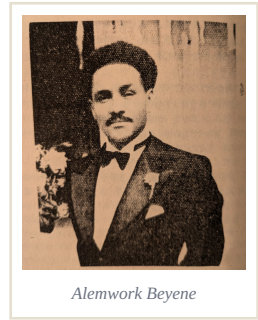
Intellectuals — such as Fekade Selassie Hiruy, who was sent from Great Britain as the Emperor's messenger, and Hakim Workneh Eshete's sons — Samson and Benyam Workneh who returned from abroad to join the resistance, and Ato Haddis Alemayehu.

Members of the aristocracy and local elites — including Dejazmatch Wossen, Woizero Senedu and Meshesha Gebru, (children of Kentiba Gebru), Yilma Deressa, and Ras Imeru.

The group consisted of a rare blend of military training, foreign education, and elite leadership — critical elements in a highly diverse empire. Their leader, Alemwork Beyene, a veterinarian educated in Britain, exemplified their combination of intellect and discipline.

Code of Conduct

From their inception, The Tikur Anbessa adhered to a strict code of conduct — a defining feature that set them apart from often fragmented anti-fascist groups in Europe that came later. Their sole focus was the service of Emperor and country. They sought to avoid the chaos of guerrilla warfare and embodied the belief that the elite must share the same risks as the people.



Alemwork Beyene

Guiding Principles

- **Political supremacy**—warriors must serve the nation, not personal ambitions.
- **Absolute loyalty**—soldiers must revere the Emperor as the living symbol of national unity.
- **No surrender**—capture is unacceptable, and death is preferable.
- **No retreat or exile**—leaders must never abandon their country.
- **Civilian protection**—forces must maintain moral legitimacy at all costs.
- **Humane treatment**—captives must receive mercy, even Italian prisoners.
- **Strict discipline**—rogue actions will not be tolerated within the hierarchy.
- **Educated leadership**—commanders must ensure thoughtful, strategic decisions.
- **Continuous resistance**—fighters must commit to the cause regardless of setbacks.
- **National unity**—regional, ethnic, and personal divisions must be set aside.

These principles emphasized political supremacy over the military, moral treatment of civilians and prisoners, and unwavering commitment to the nation — a framework unparalleled at the time.

Their Role in the Resistance

Though members operated across Ethiopia, the Tikur Anbessa primarily organized resistance in the west, rallying support for Ras Imeru, whom they elected as their leader after the emperor's exile. When Addis Ababa fell and Emperor Haile Selassie was defeated at Maichew, many soldiers fled into forests and mountains, armed but leaderless. It was in this chaos that the Tikur Anbessa emerged as a disciplined, educated force, hoping to guide the scattered fighters — military and civilians alike. Their vision of unity and order tried to give coherence to fragmented resistance, and even their brief existence left a lasting mark.

The Nekemt Incident

The most well-known chapter of the Tikur Anbessa history is the Nekemt Incident of December 1936, also referred to by the Italians as the "Nekemt Massacre." After Addis Ababa fell, a cohort of Tikur Anbessa members sought refuge in Nekemt, Wellega, which was ruled by Dejazmatch Habte Mariam Kumsa. Also present were Blatta Deressa, a Wellega nobleman, and his son Yilma who was a member of Tikur Anbessa. Dejazmatch Habte Mariam had welcomed the Tikur Anbessa on condition they do not provoke the Italians because retaliation would be severe.

At the time, Italy, under Marshal Badoglio, sought to consolidate control of the country by pacifying provincial leaders. While in this process, Badoglio was replaced by Graziani who was known for his brutal suppression in other places such as Libya.



Dejazmatch Habte Mariam

A delegation of Italian airmen arrived in Nekemt for negotiations. Upon learning of their imminent arrival, the members of Tikur Anbessa engaged in a heated debate amongst themselves and ultimately the military wing won this argument. They then attacked the Italian delegation. The Tikur Anbessa destroyed three airplanes and killed all the airmen on board, including the deputy Air Marshal Vincenzo Magliocco. In retaliation, the Italians bombed and took Nekemt and, in a tragic irony, forced Dejazmatch Habte Mariam to join their campaign against the Tikur Anbessa. Shortly thereafter, they poisoned him to death.

The Tikur Anbessa who survived the attack left Wellega, eventually joining Ras Imeru, who, though still nominally the imperial military leader, had been gradually forced into retreat. But this was no ordinary retreat. It was heavy with the burden of a collapsing world — fighters moving alongside women, children, the elderly, and the wounded. It was a column of survival more than strategy, and because of this, movement became slow, exposed, and painfully difficult to conceal.

Under such conditions, survival became impossible. In January 1937, Ras Imeru surrendered, bringing organized resistance to an end and effectively dissolving what remained of the Tikur Anbessa.

Several members, including seven Tikur Anbessa, were captured alongside Imeru and flown to Addis Ababa. Of this group, two people, Yilma Deressa (later Ambassador and Minister of Finance) and Haddis Alemayehu (later Ambassador to the UN and literary giant) were taken to Italy with Ras Imeru—a transfer that paradoxically spared their lives. Other members of the Tikur Anbessa were not as fortunate. Kifle Nessibu and Ayana Biru, an engineer, were killed while attempting to escape from a moving bus.

The remaining members were also killed at different times, especially in the aftermath of the Yekatit 12 events and the assassination attempt on Graziani. The two sons of Hakim Workneh, Benyam and Samson, were dragged from their mother's home and executed. Fekade Selassie Hiruy was also taken from his residence, shot, and his body was burned. Meshesha Gebru was torn from his sister Senedu's arms and summarily executed.

The violence of Yekatit 12 was just as random as it was systematic and well-planned. While Graziani had issued orders for every black person to be killed, his order clearly targeted the very elements of society that the Tikur Anbessa represented: educated Ethiopians, trained officers, and individuals capable of organizing resistance. In many ways, it was an attempt to erase not just a people, but possibility itself. Under Benito Mussolini's brutal fascist occupation, the resistance fighters were systematically hunted down and killed.

The Tikur Anbessa and the Arbegnoch

The Tikur Anbessa were never the entirety of Ethiopia's resistance. They were a brief but intense intellectual and organizational vanguard — an attempt to bring structure, discipline, and national coordination to a scattered uprising.

Alongside them stood the broader *arbegnoch*, the patriots: a vast, decentralized resistance made up of peasants, regional nobles, former soldiers, and local militias who rose across Ethiopia, making heroes of common men and women after Maichew and who fought on until liberation in 1941.

While these patriot warriors were rooted in local survival and traditional leadership, the Tikur Anbessa represented a modern, national vision. At times, these two worlds aligned; at other times, they clashed — one shaped by immediacy and terrain, the other by structure and ideology. Together, however, they formed an indisputable body of resistance against occupation.

Final Reflections

To this day, Tikur Anbessa remains in the conscience of a nation that sees it as more than a failed movement. It endures as a flicker of what could have been — a disciplined, unified vision of resistance that was extinguished before it could fully take shape.

Its members were not only fighters. They were an unrealized political hope, a generation of thinkers and soldiers who believed that even in the darkest period of occupation, dignity could be organized, resistance could be structured, and a nation could still be held together by principle rather than fear.