

## OBITUARY



Dr Nerayo Teclemichael 1941 – 2018

Dr Nerayo Teclemikael, 76, died peacefully at his home in Shoreline, Seattle, on Friday 16<sup>th</sup> March 2018 surrounded by his close family members. He died from a heart attack a condition that he had suffered from for several years.

Nerayo was born in November 1941 at the Swedish Mission compound in Edaga-Hamus, Asmara. His mother, Tegbaru Gebrekirstos, grew up within the Swedish Mission at Edaga-Hamus and also studied there. Tegbaru's parents died unexpectedly when she was about 10 years old and she was brought up by well-wishers of the Swedish Mission. She became a committed Kenisha (Swedish Lutheran Church) and when Teclemichael Agias, Nerayo's father, proposed marriage to her, she insisted that he must first convert to her religion. However, it is likely that Teclemichael was already on the verge of conversion under the influence of his friend and fellow villager from Adi-Nefas, Keshi (Reverend) Habteselassie Gulbet, who was one of the first from the Highlands part of Eritrea who converted from Orthodox Christianity to the 'Kenisha' religion. So, Tegbaru and Teclemichael were married in the Swedish Mission Church at Edaga-Hamus, only about 7 kilometers from Adi-Nefas.

Teclemichael and Tegbaru earned their livelihood from subsistence farming. Teclemichael was in advanced age when he married Tegbaru. He had been married before and had three children from his first wife – Keleta, Letezghi and Zerai. The three siblings were young when their mother suddenly died and Teclemichael single handedly brought them up. It must have been a very difficult time for Teclemichael but it is also clear that he was a determined person.

Nerayo had started scribbling some notes for his autobiography and he mentions that his half brothers and sister were already grown up (and probably married) when their father married Tegbaru.

Unfortunately, Teclemichael died when Nerayo was only about three years old and his mother was pregnant with Samuel. Nerayo mentioned to me once that growing up in the village without a father was not easy for the two young brothers. In his early childhood, he could not understand why his father was not around like other fathers and he used to ask his mother when his father would be coming. He recalled that, at one time, his questions were so unbearable to Tegbaru that she just burst into tears.

Despite the hardships Tegbaru faced after the death of her husband, she was determined that her children should go to school. She did not want them to be shepherds and she decided to sell the animals she owned to avoid them being a distraction to her children's education. At first there was no conventional school in Adi Nefas and Nerayo started attending an Orthodox Church school at an early age. When he was about five or six years old, however, Keshi Habteselassie, in agreement with the Swedish Mission, opened a school in Adi-Nefas and Nerayo was one of the few who registered. Keshi Habteselassie had no formal education himself, nor was he a trained teacher but Nerayo always mentioned the strong background he gained from him in the areas of discipline and being respectful to others. In addition, Nerayo was fond of Keshi Habteselassie as he had acted as a father figure to him and Samuel after the death of their father. After only a year with Keshi Habteselassie, however, the Swedish mission assigned a trained teacher whose name was Alazar Neamin. Nerayo blossomed with his education under the guidance of teacher Alazar and successfully completed the fourth grade and was transferred to the Swedish Mission School at Edaga-Hamus. During the three-month school holidays before starting his education in Edaga-Hamus, Nerayo found work at a bicycle repair shop owned by a man from Adi-Nefas. Nerayo was very much enjoying the work and the tips he was getting. Customers loved him as he was repairing their bicycles fast and gave him the nickname "balila" meaning speedy. As a result, he was about to drop from school when teacher Alazar intervened and persuaded the shop owner to release him to continue with his education. To the end of his life, even when he was suffering from a near total memory loss, there were a few people whose names Nerayo never forgot and all were from his childhood period. One of these was Teacher Alazar Neamin and it is clear why.

An interesting incident happened when Nerayo was attending his fifth-grade education. The school registered too many students, far beyond the capacity of the fifth-grade class that year. Therefore, a decision was made by the school to promote five clever students from grade five to grade six and Nerayo was one of them. After completing his sixth-grade education, an opportunity arose for Nerayo and a few others from his class to attend a three year teacher training course at Adwa in the Tigray province of Ethiopia. Nerayo, barely 13 years old by this

time, was obviously delighted with this news as the Teacher Training School at Adwa was boarding and this would be one mouth less to feed for his mother. The Teacher Training School was Swedish Mission supported and Nerayo got on well with the Swedish teachers there. One of them taught him the church organ, a hobby which he enjoyed, expertly playing whenever the opportunity arose later in his life particularly at the Mekane-Eyesus Church in Addis Ababa.

There was no stopping Nerayo in furthering his educational pursuits from then on. After graduating as a teacher, he was, in 1957, employed by the Swedish Mission in Addis Ababa and sent to Asela to serve as a teacher in their school. He taught for only a year in Asela and whilst there, he sought help from an Indian teacher he met as he studied to take the national entrance examination to University. This was an uphill effort without attending high school but he nevertheless sat the national examination and, amazingly, he passed. His ambition was to join the Faculty of Science of the University College of Addis Ababa, the only university in Ethiopia at the time. However, the Dean of the Faculty of Science was alarmed on realizing that a student who had no formal secondary education was attempting to join them. Nerayo had to argue his case hard and was only accepted as a special student for a three-month trial. Once accepted, however, and as usual, Nerayo did well and completed the prescribed four years course, obtaining his BSc degree in 1963.

Nerayo's dream had always been to become a Medical Doctor and there was a story behind this. When he was a young boy, he had an ulcerous wound that refused to heal. As he saw it then, the only way to protect himself from any illness was by becoming a Doctor. Again, amazingly, his dream came true when six of the graduates from the Faculty of Science, Nerayo among them, were selected and recommended to pursue medical study. Establishing a Medical School was in the planning stages in Ethiopia at the time and the selected students had to be sent to Beirut, Lebanon, for their two years' pre-clinical studies. When they returned from Beirut, they continued with their studies at the then Princess Tsehai Hospital in Addis Ababa and all six friends got their Doctorate qualifications in 1966.

Whilst working as a teacher in Asela, Nerayo was only about sixteen years old but he felt a family responsibility and wrote to his mother asking her to send his younger brother, Samuel, so that he could help him with his education. Samuel came to Asela and when Nerayo decided to join the university, he pleaded with the Director of a Swedish Boarding School at a town called Debre-Zeit (Bishoftu) for Samuel to be accepted there. Luck was with him this time too and Samuel was accepted.

After attaining his doctoral qualification, Nerayo was offered a job as a physician and lecturer at the Gondar Public Health College. There, the dean of the college was another Eritrean, Dr Eyasu Habtegabir, with whom he developed a lifelong friendship. Maybe Nerayo had a restless mind and having worked for only a year in Gondar, he was looking for an opportunity

to go abroad intending to qualify as a paediatrician. He could have gone to the US but he decided to go to the United Kingdom instead. Having stayed in London for a year, Nerayo returned to Ethiopia without any certification although he gained some experience in child health. On returning to Ethiopia, he started working at the Ethio-Swedish Paediatric Clinic in Addis Ababa. For the two years he worked there, Nerayo was not happy with his fellow doctors as he felt side-lined in all decisions simply because, he believed, of being Eritrean. Frustrated, he asked the Health Minister to transfer him to Eritrea arguing that there was no qualified paediatrician there. His request was accepted and he hurriedly went to Eritrea and started working as paediatrician based at the Etege Menen Hospital, the current Oreta Hospital.

Like all Eritreans of his generation, Nerayo had a burning desire to participate in the struggle for the liberation of Eritrea, which had by then become a thorn in the Ethiopian Government's side. In Asmara, Nerayo had started joining other Eritrean doctors who were involved in clandestine work for the Eritrean liberation struggle.

When Nerayo was working in Addis Ababa, he had developed a relationship with an Ethiopian woman from Tigray, a nurse, who bore him a boy, Dawit. Her name was Roman and she actually was an elder sister of Nerayo's friend; a class mate at the Adwa Teacher Training school. When Nerayo came to Asmara, it was immediately clear to him that he would sooner rather than later be joining the liberation struggle. Before he did that, however, he felt it was important to ask Roman to come to Eritrea with Dawit so they could meet his mother. It was obviously the happiest moment for his mother to see her grandson. Unfortunately, (or maybe it was fortunately) the security situation in Asmara was worsening by the day at that time and mother and son had to return to Ethiopia hurriedly after staying in Asmara for only a month.

After serving as a doctor in Asmara for only a year, Nerayo joined the Eritrean Liberation Struggle in December 1974. As a fighter, whether educated or not, one had to pass through the rigorous regime of military training. Nerayo had always struggled with his weight and he admitted that the training was not easy but he had to it. As a trainee he was of course at the lowest military rank and he used to get his marching orders from a young woman who was head of his unit. Cooking for the unit and chores like fetching water and fire wood were carried out in turns and Nerayo had to fulfil his obligations. After the training, however, he was assigned to serve as a doctor in the world famous Orotta hospital and, in 1980, he married his fighter wife, Elsa, who was a nurse and worked with him. Their marriage was further cemented when they were blessed with the birth of a baby boy, Senai, in July 1985.

Nerayo had an extremely likeable personality and had the knack of bringing ease to difficult situations with his jokes. It did not take long for his name to go far and wide among the fighters and he became the preferred doctor for many. Before long, the leadership also recognised his ability and he was made an emissary to health services abroad and travelled

to different countries to raise funds. He was successful in that and the health service in Eritrea under the EPLF was so highly regarded that even civilians from the areas under the Ethiopian occupation would flock to seek assistance. Unknown to many of us who knew him when he served as an emissary to the health service, he was also involved in a clandestine operation of buying tank-busting and anti-aircraft missiles. Apparently, it sent shock waves through the Ethiopian military forces when they realised that the Eritrean Fighters had acquired tank-busting missiles. There is no doubt, therefore, that Nerayo's efforts contributed to the eventual defeat of the heavily armed Ethiopian forces in Eritrea.

After independence, I had the opportunity to work with Nerayo in the War-Torn Societies Project which operated under the auspices of the United Nations Institute for Social Development (UNRISD). The project was the brain child of a dynamic person, Mitthias Stiffel of Switzerland, which aimed to explore the challenges of post-conflict rebuilding through an innovative and participatory research methodology. Nerayo was then the Director of the Eritrean Rehabilitation and Relief Agency and had participated in a meeting in Cartigny, Switzerland, which gave birth to the War-Torn Societies Project. Eritrea was among the four African countries that the project was selected for its pilot and Nerayo became the head figure Coordinator of the project, thus representing the Government. I happened to be in Asmara at the time and Nerayo proposed me to take the full-time job that became available for a Research-Coordinator's position. Interacting with Nerayo was a joy and there was never a dull moment working with him. During week-ends, we used to take walks and one time we were joined by two mutual friends and we went towards Adi-Nefas. On our way back, Nerayo suddenly stopped at the border where the Adi-Nefas' land ended and asked us to dust our shoes cheekily saying that "every piece of the Adi-Nefas' dust we had been stepping on was gold and it should remain in Adi-Nefas"! Humour was part of Nerayo's make-up and he is widely remembered for it. This reminds me of another comical event when in an international meeting on Eritrea, Nerayo, with his short and stocky frame, walked towards the podium and before he started his speech, stood up in front of the audience and rubbing his stomach with his right hand in a clock wise motion said "I am a simple fighter and I do not know how I got this - I certainly am not a man of wealth but a man of health". The audience roared with laughter and he then continued delivering his speech.

We only worked together for a few months at the War-Torn Society Project as Nerayo joined WHO and became their Country Representative in Congo-Brazzaville and later in Botswana. Unfortunately, his health situation with high blood pressure and a heart condition was getting worse and he had to prematurely retire from his work with WHO in 2003. Since then, he had been mostly residing in Seattle with his family. It seemed that Nerayo could not accept living in retirement and in addition he was increasingly frustrated with his degenerative illness. To make matters worse, the untimely death of his younger brother, Samuel, in July 2015, brought to Nerayo an unbearable challenge. On the other hand, Nerayo was fortunate as he was

surrounded by his loving wife, Elsa, and equally loving son Senai with his friend Shawna, who never failed in looking after him to the end.

Barely two weeks before Nerayo's death, I went to Seattle and spent a memorable few days with him, Elsa, Senai and Shawna. He was unwell but the sense of humour was still with him and he joked reciting the Tigrigna song on old age "eza erganie – baEla eya'mber anes aideleKuwane". We laughed when I tried to remind him of the things we joked about in the past and when I made a poor attempt in making an 'Awlo' about him in Tigrigna – my goodness he did laugh and laugh! That image is what will remain with me for the rest of my life. REST IN PEACE, NERAYO!

**By way of conclusion:**

As mentioned above, Nerayo had attempted to write his autobiography. It is sketchy in its current form but covers most of his life and the humour and everything else that made Nerayo what he was is there. I believe a wonderful and educational book could come out of it and I hope all will participate in the drive towards its realisation. That would be the best gift to remember Nerayo.

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