

Remembering Eritrean heroes in contemporary history

A Short Biography
Of
Dejazmatch Haregot Abbay



*Compiled and edited
By
Estifanos Ghebremichael*

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Personal data

Dejazmach Haregot Abbai

Mayor of Asmara (1963- 1974)

Personal Details

Spouse *Woizero Lemlem Gebrekidan*

Father *Bahri Negassi Abbai Habtezion*

Mother *Woizero Leah Mesmer*

Born May 9, 1909
Arbaete Asmara, Eritrea

Died Around july, 1979
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Burial Holy St. Mary Cemetery (Asmara)

Religion [Orthodox Tewahedo](#)

Haregot Abbai 1909-1979

(later Fitawrari Dejazmach) was an Eritrean businessman, investor and politician. In the 1960s, he became a Mayor of Asmara, the Eritrean Capital City (then the second largest city in Ethiopia).

Early life

Haregot Abbai was born in Arbaete Asmara , Eritrea on May 9, 1909 to parents *Bahri Negassi Abbai Habtezion* and *Woizero Lia Mesmer*. After completing his fundamental education at St. Giorgio School in Mendefera, Eritrea, he initially worked on his family farm and eventually joined the Italian civil administration working in the Genio Civile, Comando Truppe and Deposito offices. As a young man and starting a new family, in the early 1920s he developed his aptitude for business by working part time with local Indian merchants (commonly referred as *Banyans* in Eritrea). His entrepreneur flair came in handy when in the 1930 he began to participate in the cotton yarn trading and freight transport businesses and owning a small fleet of low bed and small sized trucks. In the 1940s he grew his business by expanding into grain grinding mills and in the 1950s he further expanded his business through a Joint Venture by acquiring the Salvati Africa (owned by Italians) city bus business. The company was later renamed and continues to operate to this day as the Asmara Bus Company. In the 1960-70's he further solidified his business interest by participating in the real estate, entertainment (cinemas), cement, soft drinks (Coca Cola), banking, insurance and textile sectors.



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Early Political Contributions

Beyond business activities, Haregot Abbai also actively participated in the social and political movements of his days. In the 1940s he became a member of political party known as "*Mahber Fikre Hager*" (MFH, Society for Love of Country), serving as its Vice President in 1947.¹ In 1952, following the Federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia, he was elected as a member of the newly created Eritrean Assembly. During the early days of the Federation (1952–55) he served in the positions of Director of Interior, Secretary of Justice and Secretary of Economy. In 1955 as the Ethiopian government started to

interfere and amend the Federation Act and with the subsequent election of a new Executive President of the Eritrean Government, he left the Eritrean Assembly to focus on his business.

As Mayor of Asmara

In 1963, a year after the Federation ended and Eritrea was annexed by Ethiopia, he was appointed as the Mayor of Asmara. His time as the Mayor of Asmara (1963–74) was amongst his most publicly popular and most memorable accomplishments as a civil servant. During his tenure as Mayor, Asmara underwent some major revitalization and renaissance and some of his key accomplishments were:

1. Low cost residential improvement plans around districts of Asmara covering Abbashaul, Geza Berhanu, Senita and Mai Temenai.
2. Expansion *Mai Serwa* of existing and building of a new *Mai Nefhi* water reservoir dams to improve the city water supply system which was critical to city during the long draught periods.
3. Covering of the notorious *Mai Bela* open sewer system traversing through key location in the city.
4. Improving sport and entertainment activities by constructing a new stadium with appropriate lighting for night activities.
5. Improving economic and social activity expositions by building the Asmara Expo Center.
6. Helping the homeless by building a city homeless center to shelter abandoned children and adults.
7. Upgrading city roads and building of ring road for the use of commercial traffic to avoid congestion in the city roads.

During his tenure, Asmara also hosted many heads of states, including Queen Elizabeth II of England, Queen Juliana of the

Netherlands, King Olav of Norway, The Shah of Iran, The President of Germany, The President of Bulgaria and Premier Chou En Lai of China.

As Mayor of Asmara, he received various recognitions which included:

1. Travelled to the USA as guest of the US government. Visited several US cities and states to tour industrial and agricultural locations. Received Keys to the cities of San Francisco, New York and etc.
2. Knighted by Queen Elizabeth II receiving the Knight Commander of Victoria Order (KCVO).
3. Order of Norway decoration by King Olav of Norway
4. State medal of recognition by President Heinrich Lübke of Germany

Private Life

Haregot was also a consummate family man, educator and philanthropist. In the late 1920s he was married to Woizero Lemlem Gebrekidan and had ten children. In addition to support his community he used his personal funds to build the Arbate Asmara School and the St Korkos church.

Late life and end of life

In 1974 with the onset of military dictatorship Derg in Ethiopia he was imprisoned in Addis Abeba along with most of former Emperor Haile Selassie cabinets, most regional governors, many senior military officers and other dignitaries where in 1979, he was killed by the military/socialist dictatorship in Ethiopia. In 1992, after the fall of the Ethiopian Derg, his

remains were taken back to Asmara and he now rests at the St. Mary Cemetery near where he was born.

Notes

1. [^] Connell, Dan. *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea*. pp. 289.
2. [^] Tesfai, Alemseged. *Aynfelale 1941 - 1950*. pp. 93,215.
3. [^] Tesfai, Alemseged. *Federation Ertra mis Etiopia*.
4. [^] Negash, Tekeste. *Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience*. pp. 83.
5. [^] Retta, Zewde. *The Eritrean Affair (1941-1963)*.
6. [^] Connell, Dan. *Historical Dictionary of Eritrea*. pp. 290.

7. [^] "[List of State Visit by Queen Elizabeth II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_state_visits_made_by_Queen_Elizabeth_II)".
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List of state visits made by Queen Elizabeth II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_state_visits_made_by_Queen_Elizabeth_II). Retrieved 11 March 2012.

8. [^] "[List of state visits made by King Olav V of Norway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_state_visits_made_by_King_Olav_V_of_Norway)".
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List of state visits made by King Olav V of Norway](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_state_visits_made_by_King_Olav_V_of_Norway). Retrieved 11 March 2012.

9. [^] "[1980 Amnesty International Report](http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/POL10/003/1980/en/4eaa8da9-d3b3-46f4-b429-8cf536834e07/POL100031980eng.pdf)".
<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/POL10/003/1980/en/4eaa8da9-d3b3-46f4-b429-8cf536834e07/POL100031980eng.pdf>. Retrieved 11 March 2011.

Additional information

Ethiopian Troops Occupy City in Northern Province

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (AP) — Ethiopian troops took over the city of Asmara on Wednesday and arrested its mayor and the governor of the northern province of Eritrea. Radio Asmara reported.

The radio said the troops imposed a dusk to dawn curfew and seized control of key installations in Asmara, Ethiopia's second largest city.

A military announcement over the radio said that Lt. Gen. Debebe Haile-Mariam, governor of Eritrea, and Dejazmach Haregot Abai, lord mayor of Asmara, were arrested along with five other officials.

However, the main government radio in the capital, Addis Ababa, made no mention of the events in Asmara.

Observers in Addis Ababa said they believed the move by

the troops in Asmara was a precaution against a possible surprise attack by Eritrean Liberation Front guerrillas. They said such an attack had been anticipated while attention was focused on an investigation by the Ethiopian armed forces against 86 detained government officials accused of corruption and misuse of office.

The detainees were all transferred Wednesday to the Addis Ababa headquarters of the 4th army division, the government radio reported, and the investigation is expected to begin soon.

The army took control of Addis Ababa late last month and began arresting officials it claimed were preventing the government of Endalkachew Makonnen from carrying out reform measures.

that included Honorary President Kidane-Mariam Gebre-Meskal, Vice President Saleh **Kekiya**, Secretary-General **Tedla Bairu**, and Assistant-Secretary **Haregot Abai**. These officers, led by the dynamic Tedla, officially registered the Unionist Party in Asmara on 1 January 1947.

“Ethiopians never answered letters, never gave answers to specific queries, and in fact ignored the Eritrean government”.¹

As far as the president of the assembly was concerned, the federation had been a bad arrangement and, resorting to a more traditional form of expression, he said that “a hyena had been put with a goat and the result was obvious”. The Director of the Interior, **Haregot** Abay, on the other hand, was less pessimistic and believed in the survival of federation. The greatest difficulty, according to the latter, was the attitude of the Emperor’s representative and the various federal department heads in Eritrea. **Haregot** was “perfectly certain that the Emperor was unaware of the situation” and believed in a positive outcome if the Emperor were to be informed.² Both gentlemen believed that the Eritrean government was determined to make the federation work, but **Haregot** was of the opinion that federation would only work on the condition that the Eritreans themselves held together and did not remain divided.

In a private conversation with Her Majesty’s Consulate-General, Tedla Bairu, the chief executive, by and large agreed with **Haregot** in his diagnosis of the ills of the federation. The chief executive felt sure that “the Emperor wanted to make federation work, and it was not working because of the attitude of the Ethiopian officials in this territory with whom he found it quite impossible to do business”.³ The Emperor’s representative was the main culprit, but, according to Tedla, the latter’s obstructionism was not intentional.

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