

## KNUD HOLMBOE

(1902-1931)

A Martyr of freedom of expression

Knud Valdemar Gylding Holmboe was born on April 22 in 1902 as the eldest son of a well-known Danish merchant family in Horsens, Denmark.

Already during his late teenage years Knud became interested in religion and philosophy. After his primary education he was hired as a journalist apprentice and worked for different Danish local papers. At the age of 20 Knud converted to Catholicism and went to live in a monastery in Clairvaux in France. His pondering nature soon made him part with the monastery and seek deeper religious knowledge elsewhere. In 1924 he travelled to Morocco and became acquainted with Islam.

During a meeting with a sheikh inside a tiny mountain mosque in Morocco, Knud became aware of he belonged to Islam and he converted the following year.

Back in Denmark he published his first book, merely called "Poems" in which he writes about death, life, belief and the desert. Shortly thereafter he published a book about his stay in Morocco. The book is called "Between the Devil and The Deep Sea – a dash by plane to seething Morocco".

In 1925 he travelled through the Middle East; Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Iraq and Persia. He witnessed political unrest in Baghdad and Palestine in the middle of a historical period that happened to shape the entire Middle East into its present unstable balance. In 1927 Knud travelled across the Balkan together with his new-wed wife. In Albania Knud witnessed the Italian mistreatment of the Muslim population. Among one of the more controversial articles and pictures Knud sent home to the Danish media was the story of the Italian hanging of a popular Albanian catholic priest. The story went public all over Europe, and the Italian authorities became furious.

Back in Denmark Knud tried his luck as an editor for a local press. Economical problems made him leave Denmark and he settled with his wife Nora and his daughter Aisha in Morocco. There he changed his name into Ali Ahmed el Gheseiri which is a rough translation of his name into Arabic.

In 1930 Knud began the journey which was about to make him famous.

He travelled in his Chevrolet Model 1929 from Morocco in the west across the vast Sahara desert – his plan was to reach Egypt. When Knud reached Libya, he witnessed the shocking Italian treatment of the Libyan Muslim population. Hangings, executions, attacks, maltreatment, destruction of livestock and poverty...Knud Holmboe wrote everything down and took loads of photographs.

Reaching the Libyan eastern city of Derna, the Italians arrested Knud and kicked him out of Libya. By that time Knud had already made his mind up, joining the Libyan resistance movement led by the famous sheikh Omar al Mokhtar.

In Egypt Knud tried very hard to convince the Muslim population to aid the struggling Libyan population by waging jihad against the Italian occupation. He was in the middle of a plan to arrange for a caravan carrying aid into the Libyan southern city of al-Kufra, when the Italian ambassador in Egypt asked the English and Egyptian authorities to apprehend Knud Holmboe and throw him into jail. After a month in prison in Cairo, Knud was kicked out of Egypt and shipped home to Denmark.

In Denmark Knud's story of the Italian holocaust towards the Libyan population was published in a new book: "Desert Encounter". This book became an instant bestseller both in Denmark and in many European countries and in the USA. In Italy the book was banned and not translated into Italian language until 2004.

While publishing his book, the Italian government spent thousands of dollars to defame Knud and his book in public. A Danish-Italian police officer was paid to come to Libya in order to refute Knud's allegations – in the media Italy used space and time to try and refute Knud's story of the Italian war crimes in Libya.

In May 1931 Knud went on another journey; he planned to travel on a pilgrimage to Mecca. On his journey he visited several Libyan exile-resistance organisations and leaders in Turkey, Jordan and Syria.

At Knud's arrival in Syria, the Arab population there waged a big demonstration in front of the Italian consulate in Damascus: again Knud was asked to leave the country and only after severe protests from the Danish consulate in Istanbul, was Knud able to enter Jordan and go ahead with his pilgrimage.

The Italians fearing Knud's activities in Mecca (they assumed he would call for jihad against Italy) tried to do their utmost to stop Knud from reaching Mecca. A German freelance agent, Hans Joachim von Bassewitz, was "put on" Knud to make sure he could report everything back to the Italian consul. During his stay in Amman, Jordan, several mysterious attempts on Knud's life alarmed Knud that someone was out to kill him.

Nevertheless, Knud bought a camel and went on to travel to Aqaba, waiting for an entry permit into Ibn Saud's newly established territory.

On October 11, 1931 Knud left on his camel towards the Saudi Arabia border. It is known that he settled for a night in the vicinity of the Haql oasis where he was approached by a local Bedouin tribe. This tribe had been known to work for Italian officers in the area at the same time.

The tribe lured Knud to travel on alone, and he was attacked on the road between al-HaqI and Humayda. During the night he was captured, Knud managed to escape and swim away from the sea shore. When he was too tired to carry on swimming, he had to approach the shore. The Bedouins found him, almost naked, and they shot him and buried his corpse on the shore. He was 29 nine years old.

A Jordanian border officer, Aref Sleem, managed to catch the leader of that very tribe and kept him in a local arrest in Aqaba for questioning during a few hours. The sheikh was released from prison on the orders of the English commander John Glubb.

A few months later the tribe members who killed Knud Holmboe, were killed themselves when tribal soldiers loyal to Ibn Saud destroyed their camp.

Knud´s legacy was the truth, which he left in his writings and his photographs.

Eventually Italy was brought to justice after World War 2 – but the Libyan people to this day have received no compensation for the Italian atrocities. Knud´s body has never been excavated and brought back to Denmark.