

Documenting the Ethiopian Student Movement: An Exercise in Oral History

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edited by

Bahru Zewde



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Forum for Social Studies



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Cover: an excerpt from the poem “Dehaw Yenageral” (“The Poor Man Speaks Out!”) recited by Tamiru Feyissa at the 1961 College Day

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Acronyms

AAU	Addis Ababa University
AESM	All Ethiopia Socialist Movement
COSEC	Coordinating Secretariat (of the International Students Council)
EC	Ethiopian Calendar
ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
ENLF	Ethiopian National Liberation Front
EPDM	Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement
EPLF	Eritrean Popular Liberation Forces
EPRP	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party
EPRYL	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Youth League (the youth wing of EPRP)
ESANA	Ethiopian Students Association in North America
ESLCE	Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination
ESM	Ethiopian Student Movement
ESUE	Ethiopian Students Union in Europe
ESUNA	Ethiopian Students Union in North America
GC	Gregorian Calendar
HSIU	Haile Sellassie I University (later renamed Addis Ababa University)
ILS	Institute of Language Studies
IUS	International Union of Students
MCSU	Main Campus Student Union
NUEUS	National Union of Ethiopian University Students
TPLF	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UCAA	University College of Addis Ababa (1950-1961)
UCU	University College Union
USUAA	University Students Union of Addis Ababa
WSLF	Western Somalia Liberation Front
WWFES	World-Wide Federation of Ethiopian Students
WWUES	World-Wide Union of Ethiopian Students

Preface

What is presented in the following pages is a unique experience in oral history. It is a selective record of four days of reflections by protagonists of the Ethiopian student movement in those heady days of the 1960s and 1970s. It comprises mostly of presentations by the resource persons. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to include all the reactions to these presentations. That would have caused even more delay of a project that is already behind schedule, as the original transcripts would have had to be translated. The full Amharic transcript, which is more than twice as long as what is presented here, has been deposited at the Institute of Ethiopian Studies Library. But what is presented here does, I think, give a sufficiently comprehensive picture of the ups and downs, the achievements and shortcomings, of that movement. It is with some sense of gratification that I note that almost all the questions that were posed at the inception of the project have been answered to varying degrees of exhaustiveness.

Far be it from me to say that this constitutes the full story. That full story will have to be written not only on the basis of these reminiscences but also a careful examination of and correlation with the massive literature, both primary and secondary, that the subject has generated. That will be my next undertaking. What has been attempted here is as faithful and dispassionate a record of the activities of the protagonists as is humanly possible. Aside from the Introduction, which sets the context, and occasional interpolations and footnotes in the interest of clarity and factual accuracy, I have refrained from commenting on the reminiscences. But I made sure that participants had another chance to make any changes that they deemed necessary to their original submissions. Many took advantage of that, some even coming with new written versions. Some, however, did not have the time to make any revisions.

In conclusion, I wish to express my gratitude to the participants of this fascinating experience. To consent to reflect on a period whose reverberations are still being felt was an act of courage in the first place. To devote four full days out of their generally busy schedule was a clear indication of the value that they attached to the undertaking. I am also indebted to Hailu Berhane for translating the Amharic transcript into English and to Heran Serekeberhan for copyediting the text. Needless to say, my deepest expression of gratitude goes to the Organisation for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), without whose financial support this project would not have been realized, and to the Forum for Social Studies (FSS), which provided the logistical support for the retreat as well as the funds for the publication.

Bahru Zewde
December 2009

Introduction

1. Intellectuals and the State

The place of intellectuals (in the broad sense of the educated elite) in society has varied in place and time. The higher the level of industrial development, the less influence they seem to exercise. Thus, while intellectuals may be sought as advisors and members of think tanks in the so-called First World, they are rarely seen exercising direct state power. The situation is different in the so-called Third World, notably Africa. The educated elite has historically seemed destined – by social ascription or self-arrogation – to play a central role in the exercise of state power. In Africa alone, the first generation of post-independence rulers – Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Léopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania – provides us with ample evidence to appreciate this reality.

In Ethiopia, too, intellectuals have played a role and exercised an influence disproportionate to their size. This can be divided broadly into two phases, with the Italian Occupation (1936-1941) forming an important watershed between them. The pre-war intellectuals were preoccupied with a whole gamut of concerns ranging from educational development to fiscal reform. They had an essentially reformist agenda. Driven by a concern to save the regime from the double threat of internal disintegration and external invasion, they urged what could be characterized as defensive modernization. They pinned their hopes on an enlightened despot (first Iyyasu, then Tafari) to bring about that modernization. Some of them rose to become ministers in Haile Sellassie's pre-war government. The Fascist Italian invasion and the subsequent occupation not only terminated their careers but also - through its merciless policy of liquidation of the educated elite - created a gap in intellectual activity in the immediate post-Liberation years.

The second period of intellectual intervention could thus begin only in the late 1950s. It revolved mainly around Ethiopian students (mostly at the tertiary level at the initial stage), both at home and abroad. This eventually evolved into what came to be known as the Ethiopian Student Movement. The nucleus of this movement was the University College of Addis Ababa (founded in 1950), later Haile Sellassie I University. The movement could be said to have gone through three successive stages: self-awareness, reformism, revolutionary commitment. There is general agreement that the year 1965, when students came out onto the streets with the slogan of “Land to the Tiller”, marked the beginning of the third stage.

It is this third stage that is the focal point of this study. For it constitutes the crucial period that forms both the backdrop and the essence of the changes that have come to affect fundamentally the Ethiopian state and society - changes that are yet far from over. To cite only the major components of this reality:

- the militant student agitation, in both its internal and external dimensions, was the single most important factor behind the demise of the imperial regime;
- the radicalization of the Darg, including its fateful adoption of Marxist-Leninist ideology, was induced by the ascendancy of the left before and during the revolution;
- the leftist organizations, notably EPRP and *Me'ison*, were direct outgrowths of the student movement;
- the TPLF, which is the dominant force behind the current political dispensation, had its genesis on the fringes of that movement;
- its junior partner, ANDM (formerly EPDM), started as a movement that broke away from the EPRP;
- the Eritrean liberation movement developed in constant interaction - at both the ideological and organizational levels - with the student movement and the leftist organizations that grew out of it;
- some of the major ethno-nationalist organizations, notably the OLF, in part got not only their ideological inspiration but also their leadership from the movement.

It is clear from the above that, if there is one single factor that explains the direction Ethiopian history has taken in the last four decades or so, it is the role of the intelligentsia. Without sounding too reductionist, one can trace to it many of the major developments of that period: the overthrow of one of the oldest monarchies in the world, the ultimately disastrous experiment in socialist construction, the equally problematical experiment in ethnic federalism, the ideologically couched movements for secession, the dogmatism and self-righteousness with which political positions have been advanced and pushed, and the attendant culture of exclusivism and intolerance.

To try and unravel the history of the intelligentsia is therefore to go more than half way to understanding how Ethiopian history took the trajectory that it took in the second half of the past century, and where Ethiopia finds itself today. Most assessments of the Darg and post-Darg eras do not seem to be informed by such an understanding. It is hoped that this project will generate a corpus of data that will form the basis for well-grounded historical and political assessments of the Ethiopian reality. To members of that generation, too, recording as dispassionately as is humanly possible what they remember of those heady days

of student activism and leftist politics is one final service that they owe both to that generation, and to the idealism that was its hallmark.

2. Studies of the Ethiopian Student Movement

In spite of the importance of the subject as outlined above, it has not received the requisite amount of scholarly attention. In some ways, the first half of the twentieth century has received much more attention than the second. This is partly understandable in as much as the earlier story is more or less fait accompli while the drama associated with the latter is still unfolding. Recently, Messay Kebede has placed these early intellectuals within the context of modernity (Messay 1999). A useful background to the discussions of what we have termed the second phase is available in Bahru Zewde's assessment of their lives, ideas and impact (Bahru 2002).

With regard to that phase, Randi Balsvik (2005, reprint) has done a pioneering study of the student movement. Based on a comprehensive reading of student publications and extensive interviews of some key actors, her work constitutes an invaluable guide to determine the major contours of the movement in its formative stage. Descriptive rather than analytical, her narrative has the added drawback of ending when the saga assumes a more critical phase.

Some key participants of the second phase have also done great service to both history and their cause giving their own account of events. Tesfaye Mekonnen (1985 EC) started this tradition of leftist reminiscing. Marred by a woefully ill-considered and ultimately unhelpful historical background as well as by a heavy dosage of self-justification, it nonetheless deserves credit for breaking the ice of silence. More thoughtful are the accounts of Kiflu Tadesse (from EPRP) and Andargachew Assegid (from *Me'ison*). The former's two-volume (three volumes in the Amharic version) history of EPRP (1993 and 1998), despite the unavoidable controversy it has provoked, still remains the only extensive story of an organization that played such a crucial role in Ethiopian politics of the 1970s. Its major weakness is in its account of activities abroad and in the field, terrains with both of which the author was not directly familiar. Andargachew's book (2000) is most useful in its account of the formation and early years of *Me'ison*. It tends to be more defensive in tone in the years of the organization's association with the Darg. In short, both accounts are official histories, written by persons who still remain loyal to their former organizations and are thus unable to attain critical distance.

More recently, Messay Kebede (2008) has produced a highly critical analysis of the movement, emphasising its negative dimensions and tracing the radicalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s to the blind adoption of the western educational system and the cultural dislocation that this entailed. The objective

circumstances that bred that radicalism, to wit the repressive and exploitative nature of the imperial regime, are assigned secondary significance.

There are as yet unfortunately no such comprehensive or critical accounts for other multi-ethnic or ethno-nationalist organisations, such as the TPLF or the OLF.

Nor is the full history of the Eritrean liberation movement, particularly that of the EPLF, yet on record. Perhaps this is understandable, in as much as these movements have yet to run their full course. The moment for historical reflection has thus not yet arrived.

3. Objectives of the Project

This project set out with the aim bringing together former student leaders and active participants in the student movement to reflect collectively on their experiences and engage in a thorough and dispassionate discussion and analysis of the Ethiopian student movement and the left that was its progeny. The intention was not so much to write the story as to record it. Once a fairly comprehensive and reasonably honest record of events and issues has been established, the task of reconstructing the history would be that much easier. Some of the more specific questions around which the discussion revolved were:

- when and how did the student movement assume a radical or revolutionary position?
- what was the nature of the interaction between the student movement at home and abroad?
- when and how did the student movement evolve into political organization(s)?
- what was the genesis and course of the “national question” in the movement and what was the nature of the debate that it provoked?
- what was the nature of the relationship of the students and the left with nationalist and ethno-nationalist organizations?
- when and how did the split that was to have such fateful consequences emerge within the movement in general and the left in particular?

4. Oral History: Methodological Issues

While one can hardly contend that the heat and passion generated by the Ethiopian Student Movement has completely died down, it seems nonetheless evident that we are better positioned now more than ever before to write its history. Indeed, it has become a matter of some urgency to try to do that. Already, many of the protagonists have either perished in the course of the

struggles of the 1970s or passed away thereafter under less violent circumstances. Their absence is bound to create a serious gap in the historiography of the movement. To wait any longer would mean losing yet again some vital informants.

There is another compelling reason to embark on this project now. The documentary basis of that history can only be expected to shrink rather than expand. In the absence as yet of a properly organized National Archives, the researcher is dependent on whatever documents are available in such collections as that of the Institute of Ethiopia Studies Library at Addis Ababa University as well as in private collections of participants of that movement. While the latter are clearly subject to the vagaries of the individual owners' lives and fortunes, not even the IES collection is immune from loss or damage with the passage of time. One can only have praise for the dedication and jealousy with which successive IES library staff and leaders have guarded its precious collection. Unfortunately, there have been in recent times some disturbing cases of disappearances of previously consulted documents.

Until the 1960s, historical writing in Africa was almost inextricably linked with written sources. There was even a tacit assumption that, where there are no written sources, there is no history. It is such assumptions that had moved a famous Oxford don to conclude with smug confidence that, until the coming of the literate European colonial rulers, Africa had no history worthy of the name (Bahru 2000). Indeed, until the second half of the twentieth century, with only a few exceptions, African history was the history of foreigners – mostly Europeans – in Africa.

It was through what amounted to a methodological revolution that African history began to be recast in the 1960s. This revolution came about largely through the recognition of the great value of oral sources and ancillary disciplines (such as archaeology and historical linguistics) to reconstruct African history. As it happened, the new historiography developed almost simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic. The University of Wisconsin (Madison) and the School of Oriental & African Studies (London) became the two major centres for the new Africa-centred historiography. These centres produced the first generation of modern African historians, who in turn were to train successive generations of historians in the second half of the past century: among them K.O. Dike and Jacob Ajayi in Nigeria, Adu Boahen in Ghana, Bethwell Ogot in Kenya, Tadesse Tamrat and Merid Wolde Aregay in Ethiopia. Two of the leaders of those schools, Jan Vansina and Roland Oliver, have recently shared their exciting experiences in their memoirs (Oliver 1997; Vansina 1994).

The pioneer and great practitioner of oral history in this context was the Madison don, Jan Vansina. He distilled his wide experience in the tapping of

oral tradition for the reconstruction of the history of central Africa into two major works: *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology* (1965); and *Oral Tradition as History* (1985). These studies have made clear that using oral sources is not simply a matter of recording testimonies but involves a great deal of sifting and verification. Above all, it is difficult to reconstruct the past on the basis of solitary testimonies. Hence the need to gather as many testimonies as possible before reaching any definite conclusions is emphasized.

A related methodological issue among historians using oral sources has to do with the modality of recording testimonies, more specifically the relative advantage/drawback of group vs. individual interviews. In other words, would it better to interview persons who have witnessed/experienced an event/process individually or together? The collective interview has the merit of on-the-spot cross-checking of evidence, as one informant would refresh or contradict the memory of the other, enabling the historian to emerge with a reasonable degree of consensus. On the other hand, group interviews have the drawback of intimidating the more timid or cautious informants and allowing the more outspoken ones to dominate. In general, too, informants in a group interview are known to be less voluble and more “proper” in their rendering of the events they had witnessed. In that sense, the “consensus” might actually have been achieved at the expense of a good deal of vital information that is deemed inappropriate or incommensurable.

Ultimately, it is a matter of “and” rather than “either/or”, for the two modes of gathering oral testimony have to be combined. In the present exercise, it is indeed unavoidable that individual interviews of participants and activists of the Ethiopian Student Movement are to be conducted; some have already been done and others are planned. Yet, the collective mode has been chosen as the main one for gathering the essential oral data for a number of reasons. To start with, it has the merit outlined above of on-the-spot cross-checking of reminiscences. As the four-day recollection exercise unfolded, it became evident that some have much more vivid recollection of events than others. In a number of instances, participants actually were seen soliciting support in recollecting events. The informal discussions during breaks and in the evenings – which were often more enlightening though, sadly, unrecorded – also helped to kindle a lot of memories. Secondly, the collective experience instilled in participants a particularly keen sense of historical responsibility – of an act of “communion” if you will – to record events as faithfully and as honestly as possible.

At the same time, however, there were instances of reticence, particularly when it came to citing names or voicing recollections deemed indecorous or compromising. One sometimes noticed participants changing thoughts mid-sentence when they felt such reservations. It is conceivable that they would have felt less inhibited had they been responding to individual interviews. But, in the

end, I feel that the advantages of the collective reminiscing far outweigh the disadvantages. It is difficult to imagine one gathering the massive data that was generated in those four days alone through months of individual interviewing.

Of course, this is not the first time that historians have resorted to interviewing leaders and active participants of the ESM. The Norwegian historian, Randi Balsvick, not only pioneered the study of the movement but also the methodology of buttressing the massive written data with oral interviews. As can be seen from the annex to her book, she was able to interview 110 student activists. Given the fact that the book was being written during the imperial regime, which was watching these activists very closely when it was not persecuting and harassing them, one can appreciate the difficult circumstances under which the interviewing was conducted. No wonder, then, that the author was forced to give her informants numerical codes rather than listing them by name.

Then, in the summer of 1992, just over a year after the fall of the Darg and the assumption of power by the EPRDF, a unique gathering of former student activists took place at Hotel Russell, a posh hotel in central London. The meeting was organized by Dr. Yacob Haile Mariam, a former president of the National Union of Ethiopian University Students or NUEUS (1963/64 Academic Year) and sponsored by the German Friedrich Ebert Foundation. While the 2005 retreat, largely by reason of the acrimony generated by the May election, was forced to exclude those actively engaged in partisan politics, be it in the government or the opposition, the 1992 meeting brought together those who were in the new government and out of it. Unfortunately, no documentation has come out of that memorable meeting. Apparently, the organizers were more interested in trying to garner positive lessons that could help in charting the country's political future than in documenting the ESM as such.

5. The Retreat

It is evident from the above discussion that the 2005 undertaking had its own unique features. Unlike in the case of Balsvick, the modality of interviewing that had been preferred was collective rather than individual. Unlike the 1992 gathering, the 2005 retreat was intended not just as an informal exchange of experiences and views, but as a careful and conscientious documentation of the past. On both counts, it was more challenging and required careful preparation. Participants were identified and the program prepared, background material to stimulate discussions was assembled and guidelines to help steer deliberations were drafted. For financial reasons, the participants' pool had to be restricted to those residing in the country. However, participants who were resident abroad but who happened to be in Ethiopia at the time could participate.

Thus, Alem Habtu, a former leader of ESUNA currently living in the United States, was able to take part in the deliberations, managing to squeeze in the last few days of his vacation here. Bekele Tadesse, Vice-Chairperson of the Restoration Committee that tried in vain to reverse the ascendancy of USUAA, also flew in from California for the event. Even within the domestic pool, careful balance had to be struck between activists at home and abroad, as well as between those who were active within the student union in Europe (ESUE) and that of North America (ESUNA). While the initial selection was carefully made along those lines, unwillingness or inability of some participants to come to the retreat might have had a negative effect on the overall balance.

Regrettably, the only known member of the “Crocodiles” group, which was instrumental in the radicalization of the student movement in the mid-1960s, failed to show up after initially agreeing to do so. Another person who was believed to be a member of the group and had held an executive position in the student council as well was identified too late for inclusion. Remedial measures have been and will be taken to rectify such imbalances. Thus, among the persons interviewed after the retreat are Amanuel Gebre Iyesus, one of the seven students who hijacked the first plane in 1969 (he is one of the two still alive), and Dr. Elehu Feleke, leader of ESUE in the 1960s. Contact was established with Gebru Gebrewold, the leader of the “Crocodiles” during a visit to Los Angeles in April 2006. Because he was not feeling very well at the time, it was agreed that he send his answers in writing to the questions that I would address to him.

The preparation of the program of the retreat was another matter that required careful planning. Initially, the retreat was envisaged as a six-day affair. But it soon became evident that it would be difficult to expect participants to devote so much time from their regular responsibilities. So, it had to be reduced to four days, astride the weekend. Sustaining the interest of the participants even for this length of time was expected to be quite a challenge. As it turned out, the deliberations grew increasingly more interesting as the days progressed so that few regretted the amount of time devoted; those who had to leave early for unavoidable reasons did so with great reluctance. It is indeed a measure of the important place that the experience of the student movement still occupies in the minds of the participants that people who currently have manifold commitments and responsibilities could devote so much time to the deliberations. (See Annex 3 for the profile of participants).

The program combined the chronological and the thematic (see Annex 1). It started with the “innocuous” (to borrow a term from one of the resource persons) beginnings of the early UCAA days and ended with the transmutation of the student unions into the leftist political organizations that become so prominent in the mid-1970s, notably the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP) and the All Ethiopia Socialist Movement (AESM or *Me’ison*). In

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between were the following issues: the radicalization process (in the mid-1960s), organizational matters (at home and abroad), major demonstrations and embassy occupations, the question of nationalities, gender and the woman question, and the high school factor. As it turned out, the two areas about which not much was known earlier proved to be among the most fascinating: these were the “early beginnings” (late 1950s and early 1960s) and “the high school factor”.

The program had the merit of giving structure and direction to the deliberation. But, to refresh the memories of participants on events that took place some three to four decades back, it was necessary to provide some background material. Such an exercise also poses methodological problems. Oral informants are normally expected to recite from memory. In that sense, non-literate informants, who record faithfully what they recollect, are generally preferred to literate informants, whose information might be influenced by their subsequent readings. Thus the background material that was provided had inherent risks. But, in the end, it proved a calculated risk. While participants alluded to some of the documents in the folder, they did not exhibit undue reliance on them.

The compilation of the background material did not prove too difficult. My own previous research had helped me to uncover a good deal of pertinent data. The challenge rather was one of judicious selection. The fairly thick folder was divided into six categories, conforming more or less to the program: early beginnings, the radicalization process, organizational matters, major demonstrations, the question of nationalities and gender and the woman question. Missing were data on “the high school factor” and embryonic political organizations. Even within the six categories cited above, the amount of documentation provided indicated the relative abundance or scarcity of data. Thus, more documents were provided on “major demonstrations” and “the question of nationalities” than on any of the other four. The “Crocodiles” proved as elusive as their name: the only written data that could be produced was a hilarious announcement of their formation that appeared in the student newspaper, *News and Views*, on 14 December 1964.

A final aspect of the “management” of the retreat was the formulation of guidelines to help steer the deliberations (see Annex 2). The guidelines were necessary to prevent as much as possible a resurgence of the acrimonious divisions that bedevilled the student movement in the early 1970s and were to have such lethal consequences as the Ethiopian Revolution unfolded. As it is, memory is so often a “contested terrain”. If one were to add retrospective analyses and rationalizations, the ground would become a veritable minefield. To avoid such an eventuality, participants were enjoined as much as possible to narrate rather than to analyze, to “understand” rather than “to celebrate or

castigate”. The occasion was to be one of looking back “critically and dispassionately, yet cheerfully”.

It was not so easy to enforce such a strict regime among a group of people who have been known to have strong views on many of the issues that were being recounted. The first exchanges after my welcoming and introductory speech revolved precisely on this issue of narration versus analysis. More than one participant expressed strong reservations about being constricted to a mere narrative of events. But, with reinforcements from the two historians present and some of the participants, I stood my ground. The only concession that was made was the unavoidable provision of “context” for the narrative. Although, in the course of the proceedings, there were occasional digressions into analyses and some jabs at the constrictive regime, participants more or less adhered to it. In retrospect, one can say that the overall success of the program owed a good deal to the formulation and enforcement of those guidelines.

6. The Outcome

All the participants returned from the retreat with a high sense of satisfaction, both at partaking in such a collective act of recollection and in recording to the best of their knowledge events that had such a great impact on their lives. There was even a sense of regret that the reflections had come to an end, as they had to. Back in Addis, I had to deal with two issues. The first was the complaints of those who were not included in the exercise. I had to explain as best as I could the financial and logistical constraints that forced me to limit the number of participants. Even if I had the means, inviting all those who could have been invited would have been tantamount to holding a General Assembly of former student activists.

Much more serious was the formidable challenge of transcribing and editing the eighteen ninety-minute cassettes that had ensued from the four-day reflections. Considerable financial investment had been made in the contracting of a state-of-the-art sound recording system. As a result, the recording proceeded without a hitch. Time consuming as it was, transcribing the tapes proved relatively straightforward in comparison to the Herculean task of editing the transcripts. Enchanting as the recollections were when one heard them, they proved far from perfect in script. Recollections often lacked coherence and lucidity. Sentences were rarely completed and there were many of the customary stop-gap phrases (“enten” in Amharic). Although the chosen medium was Amharic, English was used to an astonishingly high degree, in some instances amounting to about half of the delivery.

All these lapses and incongruities had to be rectified before the text could be presented as a respectable record of a generation. The editing was done in two stages: a first round of editing of the transcript and then verification by listening

to all the eighteen tapes. While the first exercise was found to be time-consuming the second proved very useful not only for accuracy but also to figure out words and phrases that had eluded the transcribers as well as to make a sense of the punctuation.

To summarize the major findings of the retreat would scarcely do justice to the wealth of data gathered and the diversity of views expressed. But, at the risk of capriciousness, one can try to give some of the highlights. As indicated above, the recollection began with what the major resource person of that era, Ato Asfaw Damte, called “innocuous days” (*yagar zaman* in Amharic), the years in the late 1950s when students were hardly in a combative mode. As expected, the major focus of the presentation was the role of African scholarship students in radicalizing the UCAA students. The Kenyan Omogi Caleb and the Nigerian Denis Ejindu were two of the stars in this saga. The former in particular, who became Secretary General of the UCAA Student Council and started a radical newspaper known as *Campus Star*, was vividly portrayed in the reminiscences. To the consternation of the Jesuit president of the College, Dr. Matt, the very first issue of that paper carried a portrait of Karl Marx. The second issue even more audaciously took the occasion of the election of Pope John XXIII to remind the Catholic administrators of the College of the blessing that Pope Pius XI had given to Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935. The target of these radicalizing scholarship students was thus not so much the Ethiopian Government as the UCAA Jesuit administration that was exercising such an authoritarian sway over campus life.

The presence of the scholarship students not only contributed to a more radical perception on the home front but also made Ethiopian students appreciate their African identity. Thus the visit of Kwame Nkrumah in 1958 was a great eye-opener. The first show of solidarity with the plight of Africans under the yoke of colonial rule came in 1958/59, when students heard reports of the beating to death of prisoners in a jail in Nyasaland (as Malawi was then known). The students came out onto the College football field for a one-minute prayer for the victims. Although the idea was mooted, they stopped short of marching out onto the streets. This had to wait until the abortive coup d’etat in 1960, when the students came out in a rather furtive show of support of the coup. Patrice Lumumba’s assassination in 1961 was another rallying event, when UCAA students commemorated it with five minutes of silence.

The Jesuits were not entirely oblivious to the “sinister” influence that the African scholarship students were exerting on their Ethiopian colleagues. They tried to negate that influence by sowing discord and suspicion between the two groups. They even went further and reported on the activities of both the scholarship students and their Ethiopian sympathizers with a view to having them sanctioned for subversive activities. One casualty of such spying activity

was a Ghanaian student by the name of Henry Botchway, who was dismissed on the grounds that he was frequenting the Soviet Permanent Exhibition Centre (as the Soviet Library was known) and the Soviet Embassy.

A second major testimony underscored the crucial importance of the year 1962 for the process of radicalization of the student movement. The crisis that culminated with the abolition of the boarding system revolved around the College Day, which had become a major landmark in the academic calendar by the early 1960s. It started apparently over a dispute over “protocol” between the Student Council and the Palace, but concealed a more fundamental rift between the Emperor and the students. Until 1961, the Emperor had attended College Day, even giving prizes to the three poems selected for recital on that day. But, in 1961, the winning poem by Tamru Feyissa, entitled “Dehaw Yenagaral” (“The Poor Man Speaks”), reciting in graphic fashion the miserable life of an average Ethiopian, was considered as a *lese majesté*. To avoid a repeat of such an embarrassment, the Student Council leadership was asked to allow a preview by the Palace of the three winning poems of 1962 before they were read in front of the Emperor.

What then followed was a war of nerves between palace and campus, narrated in very vivid fashion by Ato Eyesuswork Zafu, then Vice-President of the Student Council. Inevitably, the students (or more strictly the Student Council) refused to yield to what amounted to censorship by the palace. The Emperor retaliated by refusing to grace College Day with his presence, as was his wont. Even worse measures were to follow, including the suspension of the poets who read their works on that day and the abolition of the boarding system. Student appeals for the rescinding of the boarding ban led to a dramatic exchange of words between the Emperor and his entourage on the one hand, and the student leaders who had gone to the Palace with their petition on the other. The final saga in this tense period of confrontation revolved around the graduation of the Student Council Vice-President, who was distinguished not only by his leadership role but also by his outstanding academic record. While his graduation could not be stopped, the Palace did not relish the prospect of him receiving his diploma from the Emperor, whom he was believed to have slighted. But, to avert the uproar that was brewing when students realized that their leader was not in the academic procession, he was persuaded to go through the motion of walking up to the podium and bowing to the Emperor, without actually being awarded the diploma!

A new piece of information that emerged at the conclusion of this particular presentation was the role of University alumni in fostering political awareness. This was in fact reinforced in the course of the presentation of the first President of the National Union of Ethiopian University Students (NUEUS), Mulugeta Bezabeh. In effect, arising from the desire of the activist elements to

continue their political engagement after graduation, a kind of study group or reading club came to be set up in the vicinity of the University. The group, which used to meet three to four times a week, included among others some of the student leaders – such as Haile Fida – who were to exert such a big influence on the student movement as well as subsequent leftist politics.

Thirdly, a number of participants active in the student movement abroad, particularly those in North America, gave useful accounts of their ideological formation. While, ultimately and almost invariably, they all became Marxists, the path they traversed to reach that stage was far from linear. It started with the startling realization of their country’s backwardness vis-à-vis the host country – much in the same vein as the intellectuals discussed at length in my *Pioneers*. In this respect, even the experience of “Kleenex”, the tissue that was disposed of in such liberal quantities, could be startling.¹ Then, it was reinforced by the international solidarity with Vietnam and the fascination with Cuba. The visit of the veteran student leader, Hagos Gebreyesus, to the hallowed Caribbean island gave him added awe and aura, even if he was reportedly not particularly communicative about his experiences. That notwithstanding, making Castro-like long speeches was to be a distinctive feature of Ethiopian student meetings. On the home front as well, Vietnam and Cuba were to inspire one of the most popular chants of the late 1960s: ፋኖ ተሰማራ፣ ፋኖ ተሰማራ፣ እንደ ሆ ቺ ሚን፣ እንደ ቺ ጉቤራ (Guerilla, rise to arms! Guerilla, rise to arms! Following the example set by Ho Chi Minh and Che Guevara).

In the North American case, social awareness also grew in constant interaction with the African-American Civil Rights Movement. This is particularly interesting as the latter day student radicals were initially shocked to discover that, in the eyes of the American whites, they were every bit as “nigger” as the African-American residents. In Europe, the influence of veteran activists in the student movement could be decisive, as was the case of Dr. Kebede Mengesha and Dr. Elehu Feleke with the group of students in Lund (Sweden), who eventually assumed leadership of the Ethiopian Students Union in Europe (ESUE). The proceedings of the retreat were greatly enlivened by portrayals of Bay Area radicals led by Senay Lekké, who led a spartan life in preparation for the inevitable march to liberate Ethiopia!

Related to this was the process of radicalization, which took a dramatic turn in the mid-1960s. Both at home and abroad, the years 1964-1965 marked a

¹ I could not help but draw parallel with my own experience when I visited the United States – curiously enough for the first time – in 1990. Coming as I did from a country plagued by all sorts of scarcity – including toilet paper (let alone disposable “Kleenex”), I was flabbergasted by the amount of napkins that consumers loaded on to their trays in restaurants and cafés; I literally followed the napkins wistfully with my eyes as most of them were dumped into trash bins after customers had finished their meals or drinks.

turning point. As the movement abroad was liberating itself from the royal patronage that had been its hallmark, as was evidenced by the 12th Congress of the Ethiopian Students Association in North America (or ESANA, as ESUNA was then known) in August 1964, the movement inside the country took a revolutionary turn with the “Land to the Tiller” demonstration of February 1965. As it emerged from one particular testimony, instrumental in the planning and execution of that epoch-making demonstration was the “Crocodiles” group. No sooner had the “Crocodiles” proclaimed their existence in a cryptically worded message in the student paper, *News and Views*, than they successfully staged a coup that toppled the incumbent student leadership. Also, it was one of their members who brought the idea of demonstrating under the slogan of “Land to the Tiller” in early 1965. The emergence of a counter-group with the ambitious name of “Nacet” could scarcely check the influence of the Crocodiles.² Unfortunately, my efforts to entice the only Crocodile survivor known to take part in the retreat proved unsuccessful. Subsequent efforts to rectify this gap by interviewing the leader of the group currently resident in the United States turned out to be equally unfruitful.

The organizational climax of the radicalization process, i.e. the formation of the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA), as well as the futile efforts to reverse the process through the Restoration Committee, was narrated with fascinating detail – the former by its first Secretary-General, Hailu Ayele, and the latter by the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee alluded to earlier. As the academic year 1965/66 began, the major contentious issue, particularly at the main campus of the University at Seddest Kilo, was that of a campus-wide union versus faculty-based associations. No sooner had the Main Campus Student Union (MCSU) established its ascendancy than it was challenged by the call, no doubt inspired by the Crocodiles, for the establishment of a city-wide union, encompassing all the campuses of Addis Ababa. This was what eventually evolved into the University Students Union of Addis Ababa (USUAA). Ironically, this initiative had the support of the University Administration, which preferred to deal with one city-wide union than with various campus unions or associations. But the student opposition to USUAA – both on ideological and organization grounds – was so strong that the matter had to be put to a referendum. It is the strong contention of the opponents of USUAA, i.e. those that eventually coalesced into the Restoration Committee, that USUAA won the day by only half a vote.³

² The name “Nacet” was inspired by a popular ad of the blade cutting a crocodile in half. The counter group’s efforts to check the Crocodiles proved as futile just as the ad was implausible!

³ As a matter of fact it was by one-third of a vote: *University Reporter*, Vol. I, No. 1 (31.1.67). The one-third vote anomaly arose from the fact that freshmen, whose numerical mass was as alarming as their political wisdom was very much suspect, were trusted with only one-third of a

The birth of USUAA had an immediate and palpable effect on the radicalization process. Nothing illustrated this more dramatically than the organization and outcome of the 6th Congress of the normally moribund NUEUS. The vehement opposition of the pro-American Alemaya College student leadership notwithstanding, the stamp of USUAA was clearly evident in the resolutions that were adopted at the conclusion of the Congress. Interestingly enough, this turned out to be the first time that the word “imperialism” was used to designate the external enemy of Ethiopia.

As many of the participants from the home front had passed through the University system in those years (1966-70), the organizational struggle, as well as the almost ritual annual demonstrations, got sufficient coverage, the veracity of the recollections being established through the process of on-the-spot counter-checking referred to above. While the epoch-making “Land to the Tiller” demonstration passed off with little incident, the 1966 demonstration against the “Shola Concentration Camp” produced what is remembered in student folklore as the “Battle of Ras Makonnen Bridge”. Ethiopian students abroad echoed the struggle at home with demonstrations of their own and occupations of Ethiopian embassies. Perhaps the most hilarious recollection was that relating to the overzealous New York militants who contemplated a march from New York to Washington DC. They had to abandon their audacious venture when a more experienced compatriot informed them that, to execute their plan, they had to get permits from the five states that are found between the two cities and, since they could not march on the inter-state highway, they faced the risk of being arrested for trespassing if they use the state highways.

Given its central significance at the time and its continued relevance to the contemporary Ethiopian political scene, the national question naturally attracted considerable attention. The famous tracts of Walelign Mekonnen (1969) and Tilahun Takele (1971), as well as the pertinent resolutions of the 19th Congress of ESUNA and the 11th Congress of ESUE were an important component of the literature distributed in advance. There were two important new elements that emerged in the course of the deliberations. The first was an account of the genesis of Walelign’s thesis in the course of his detention following the nationwide student protests of spring 1968. The narrative was given by Abdul Ahmed, one of the inmates at Alam Baqagn (at the Central Prison in Addis Ababa), where Walelign and the other detainees came to experience first-hand the grievances and frustrations of ethno-nationalist leaders who had become tenured guests of that prison.

vote. When I presented a report of the retreat at the 16th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies at Trondheim (Norway) in early July 2007, one of the opponents of USUAA at the time, recalled that the President of MCSU, Eshetu Chole, consoled his supporters by saying: “it is better to lose than to win by half a vote”!

The second refreshing aspect of the retreat was personal reflections on the nature of the debate on the national question that took place at the two historic congresses of the summer of 1971: the 11th ESUE Congress in Berlin and the 19th ESUNA Congress in Los Angeles. The debates at those congresses were preceded by years of intensive study of the national question in chapter and sub-chapter study groups. So much so that members of the Lund sub-chapter in Sweden used to remark jokingly that they had become “redolent of nations and nationalities”. As it turned out, it was only at the Berlin Congress that there was a proper debate to speak of, albeit largely confined to the two protagonists of the opposing camps, Andreas Eshete and Berhane Meskel Redda. The upshot of the Berlin Congress was the adoption of the formula that has been the distinctive mark of the Ethiopian Left over decades and that finally got enshrined in the 1994 Ethiopian Constitution: “the right of nations to self-determination up to and including secession”. The LA Congress got bogged down on procedural issues. It ultimately ended in the walkout of the ESUNA leadership and the split of the organization into “the old ESUNA” and “the new ESUNA”.

Finally, the retreat shed a new light on the split in the student movement that eventually translated itself into the bloody feuds of EPRP and *Me'ison*. As it turned out, the tension and friction that have been evident in the early 1970s came to a head at a meeting in Berlin in April 1973. That meeting brought together the leaderships of the two trends that eventually surfaced as EPRP and *Me'ison*. On the surface, the divergence arose over the nature and role of the re-constituted World Wide Union of Ethiopian Students, which was restructured as the World Wide *Federation* of Ethiopian Students. In actual fact, the formal debate over clauses and phrases concealed a crucial struggle between the two budding leftist political organizations to control the powerful student movement. Nothing illustrated this fact more dramatically than the mutual recriminations (as it subsequently transpired) that the two leaders of the organizations, Berhane Meskel Redda and Haile Fida, were seen to be exchanging on the sidelines of the meeting. Equally poignant was the testimony of a former high school activist, who described his confusion and that of his colleagues when they suddenly discovered that their most cherished friend was now deemed to be the enemy. The rest, as we all know, is history.

At the end of the retreat, some participants felt whether it was not incumbent on those gathered to address the issue of what the country has endured as a result of the fateful intervention of students in national politics. Some even went so far as to say that those who have survived that turbulent chapter of Ethiopian history owe the nation an apology for what they have made it suffer, a point of view that was as vehemently rejected by others. While such an undertaking is beyond the scope of this specific project, it nonetheless remains a fact that, ultimately, some of the lessons of the student movement for

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contemporary Ethiopian reality need to be drawn. Or, in the words of one of the participants, some form of “closure” was essential “to usher in a collective quest for a new vision of Ethiopia’s future”. That, indeed remains, the challenge of the future.

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Chapter I “The Innocuous Days”

Asfaw Damte

In this ‘era of student innocence’, certain phenomena which were later to serve as springboards for the future student movement were accidentally emerging. The first such springboard manifested itself when Emperor Haile Sellassie attended the meeting of the eight independent African countries in Accra (Ghana) in 1950 EC.⁴ Fifty students, selected annually from all over Africa, were awarded a scholarship to study in Ethiopia for four consecutive years, bringing the total number to 200.

Accordingly, a certain number of the first batch joined University College of Addis Ababa in 1951 EC. At the time, I had run for the post of Secretary-General of the Student Council and won the election. Of the newcomers, I became particularly close to two Kenyans, Robert Ouko⁵ and Omogi Caleb, and a Nigerian, Dennis Ejindu.

The College Administration did everything in its power to discourage close relationship between scholarship students and Ethiopian students. In an effort to estrange the former from the latter, the Administration went so far as to encourage scholarship students to form their own clubs with scholarship students in other colleges.

Their malevolent propaganda included portraying Ethiopian students as loathing other African students, of being inordinately proud of their long historical heritage and of referring to other African students as “niggers”. A UN scholarship student from Tanganyika by the name of Shebani Shimbo Majonga was instrumental in perpetuating this campaign. He had studied Amharic and had a modest understanding of it.

I was apprised of this matter, and particularly of the charge pertaining to the reference of scholarship students as “niggers”, by a reproachful Omogi Caleb. I did not attempt to refute this last accusation. In fact I pointed out to him that such appellations were common even among Ethiopian family members, where the more “light-skinned” individuals were “accused” of being “pale-

⁴ A reference to the Summit of African Independent States held in Accra in 1958. EC = Ethiopian calendar. The Ethiopian calendar falls 7 or 8 years behind the Gregorian (September-December and January-August, respectively).

⁵ He subsequently rose to the post of Foreign Minister of Kenya, until he was assassinated in 1990.

faced”. I assured him that this was a far cry from the venomous usage in other countries.

The Jesuits⁶ harboured the fear that these scholarship students, who were products of the continent’s various liberation movements, not only had no qualms about speaking their minds or doing what they wished but also enjoyed preferential treatment at the highest level. They would thus induce the innocent Ethiopian students to follow in their wicked footsteps!

The Jesuits, who considered the scholarship students protégés of the Emperor (after all, they were wined and dined at the homes of aristocrats and high officials during short breaks and on holidays), did not restrict their efforts to alienating them from Ethiopian students. They diligently spied on Ethiopian students and reported them to the Security Department with a view to having those they considered ringleaders dismissed, thereby winning the government’s approval in the bargain. I recall that they succeeded in getting a Ghanaian student, Henry Botchway, dismissed on the grounds that he was a frequent visitor to the Soviet Permanent Exhibition Center⁷ and the Soviet Embassy (it is probable that additional charges were leveled at him).

As it turned out, the interaction of such incidents inevitably produced the very result the Jesuits were afraid of. The scheme they had devised “to make scholarship students feel special” had the opposite effect. Thus Omogi Caleb started issuing a two or three-page flyer called *Campus Star*, a copy of which was posted every week on the bulletin board.

The very first issue, carrying an article on Karl Marx as well as his picture, was placed on the bulletin board by Omogi. By sheer coincidence, the Emperor came for a visit at dinner time followed by the President of the college, Dr. Matt. No sooner had the latter glimpsed the picture of Marx than he ripped it and rolled it into a ball. Then, with his hands behind his back, he followed the Emperor. His face was flushed. I do not recall whether he took the crumpled piece of paper with him or threw it away.

The next issue carried the picture of the Pope-elect (this was sometime in October of that year) John XIII, a reputedly popular pontiff. The picture carried the caption: “We hope that Pope John XIII will not stab Africa in the back in the same way as Pius XI stabbed Ethiopia (an allusion to the pope’s giving his blessing to the Fascist forces invading Ethiopia). Though this predictably was received with mixed feelings by Catholic and non-Catholic students, it was mild

⁶ In the early years, the Jesuit order supplied both the President and a number of the staff of the UCAA. The Jesuits also had a stronghold in the favored school named after the Emperor, Tafari Makonnen.

⁷ This was the official name of the Soviet Library, which was frequented by a high number of high school and university students.

when compared to the sheer fury it aroused among the members of the UCAA administration. They even decided to ban the paper; however, it resumed soon.

Not content with this, the editor announced that all contributors to the paper would be welcomed with open arms, including those using pseudonyms. A good number of Ethiopians must have grabbed that chance. These successive incidents not only foiled the plot designed to divide students, but also went a long way in poisoning the relationship between the administration and the scholarship students. The support they had at the highest level, however, must have shielded them from any overt attack.

Soon after that, *News and Views*, a paper designed to host news and opinions began coming out. It enjoyed enormous support from the administration. Unless my memory fails me totally, its first editor was Amdemichael Kabte, a classmate of mine. He had a penchant for journalism and was a highly-skilled writer.

Another incident closely related to these students occurred in April 1959. A Nigerian scholarship student, Dennis Ejindu, had consulted officials of Radio Ethiopia and had reached an agreement with them to air a panel discussion on April 15 (designated “Africa Day”) on the Radio’s English programme; I was invited as the Ethiopian guest speaker. In the course of the discussion, a point regarding the role of missionaries vis-à-vis colonialism was raised. I pointed out a number of adverse effects whose source can be traced to missionary work. This was quoted in the *Ethiopian Herald*. As a result, I was given a caustic dressing down by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Mr. Pierre Trudeau.

Following Ghana’s independence on 6 March 1957 and the subsequent visit of Kwame Nkrumah to Ethiopia, a certain number of students had become avid readers of books on Africa. It can safely be said that the arrival of scholarship students gave us an added incentive.

Thus on the morning that BBC broadcast the news that prisoners had been beaten to death in Nayasaland, there appeared on the notice board of the dining hall an announcement (by the Secretary-General, but unsigned) summoning all students to assemble on the football field for a one-minute prayer. All the students attended the meeting before entering the classroom. (Naturally, there were one or two students who suggested that we cancel class and proceed to the British Embassy.) Since the whole thing was done on the spur of the moment, the College Administration was confounded; however, it did suspect that the “African students” were behind it and accordingly refrained from taking any action.

The second phenomenon that could be said to have triggered the emergence of the student movement began in 1951 EC with the public reading of the three best poems on College Day. This event would take place in the presence of the Emperor and high dignitaries as well as a large audience from

outside the college community. Previously, the reading was confined to the College dining hall. While it was true that a few guests usually attended the event, it had little influence outside the campus. Moreover, even members of the College community rarely got their hands on copies of the poems, much less outsiders. This interaction had a deep impact on the contents of the poems, as their authors came to realize that they were not merely sending a message to their friends and fellow students, but to high government officials and the public at large.

When the leaders of the abortive coup of 1960 sent emissaries to the College seeking student support, they were banking on the students' burning desire for change, as evinced by the poems read on College Day. The public demonstration they staged in support of the coup was a bell signaling forthcoming events. (It is hard to believe that the event did not strike a chord, particularly in the hearts of residents of the capital.) It may be said that this was the turning point for college students in that they came to realize that they were expected to play a role in the nation's affairs.

A development related to the issue at hand was the attendance of two members of the Student Council at an international student conference in 1951 EC. The first invitation (received in the middle of the academic year) came from COSEC – Coordinating Secretariat of the International Students Association.⁸ The delegate who attended this meeting in Lima (Peru) was the President of the Student Council, Hagos Gebreyesus. The other invitation was for us to send two delegates to the second All-Africa conference and it arrived near the close of the academic year. The Secretary-General, Asfaw Damte, and the Social Affairs President, Mekbib Gebeyehu, were selected to attend the meeting in Tunis (Tunisia).

One picture that clearly emerged from this meeting was the blatant tug-of-war being waged in order to align the youth of the Third World along sectarian lines. It was evident that officials of the Tunisian government had mingled with Tunisian students for the purpose of controlling the conference. Accordingly, on the second day of the conference, they managed to have a delegate from Algeria (it was not independent yet) elected to chair the meeting. Taking his cue from his Nigerian predecessor, who had chaired the meeting on the opening day, the Algerian chairman gave preferential treatment to Arabic- and French-speaking presenters instead of giving the floor to speakers in the order in which they had asked to speak. The ensuing opposition and argument was such that the second day of the conference closed without anything of substance resulting from it.

⁸ Most probably a reference to the International Student Council (ISC), the pro-Western international student organization, as opposed to the pro-Eastern International Union of Students (IUS).

Given the experience of the first two days, it was not easy to agree on the choice of a chairperson for the third day. Eventually, a member of the election committee (I do not recall which country he was from) nominated Ethiopia and received the support of the majority; however, the Ethiopian delegation pointed out that “... it was reluctant to accept the nomination because there had been abstentions, albeit very few.” Another round of voting, however, resulted in a unanimous decision and the Ethiopian delegation had no choice but to accept the chairmanship.

The vast differences in opinion and the intransigence shown by the delegates made it impossible to reach a consensus. The major differences were along the following lines:

- a) Anglophone versus Francophone;
- b) Arab versus African;
- c) Countries under colonial rule versus independent states.

Accordingly, the conference ended without resolving anything.

The leader of the Ethiopian delegation was asked for his opinion and his critical comment was carried by a Tunisian newspaper. What was a source of amazement to the Ethiopian delegation was how the comment that blamed the Tunisian delegation for interfering in student affairs was allowed to be printed.

Another source of surprise was the presence as observers of not only the student union delegates of both China and the Soviet Union but also those of representatives of the contending world-wide student bodies (one from COSEC in Leiden, Netherlands, and the other from IUS in Prague, Czechoslovakia). All four unions extended invitations to the Ethiopian student delegation to visit their respective countries!

The Ethiopian delegation declined the invitation from China and the Soviet Union on the grounds of time constraints. On the other hand, to show its neutrality, it accepted the invitations of both world-wide student unions and proceeded first to Prague, seat of the secretariat of the International Union of Students (IUS).

What became apparent from these experiences was that an Ethiopian College Students Union was bound to confront forces determined to pull it in several directions. I say “Ethiopian College Students Union” because, towards the end of 1951 EC, there was a plan to establish a union including students of the Engineering and Building Colleges.

Eyesuswork Zafu

In my sophomore year, I was Cultural Activities Officer. My junior year, however, was spent in the USA. The reason for this is as follows: At the time both the Eastern and Western blocks were doing their utmost to influence students to join their respective camps; accordingly, a program named FOSLEP (Foreign Student Leadership Project) was initiated. It was a project intended for those students whom Americans thought enjoyed leadership roles in the student movement to join a college in the US for a year of education and participation in student activities before returning home to complete their senior year. In 1960, three students were selected from Ethiopia: Ato Newaye Kristos Gebreab (the present special Economic Advisor to the Prime Minister), Omogi Caleb and myself.

Thus I was in the USA in 1960-61. In August 1961, I returned to Ethiopia, and in the following academic year, I ran for office in the Student Council. (I recall that I made a rather lengthy speech of which I still have a copy). I ran for the position of Vice-President. Gebeyehu Ferissa won the presidency and I the vice-presidency. Newaye Kristos Gebreab became Secretary-General. What Ato Asfaw referred to earlier (expatriate students getting the chance to join the union) took effect then. Thus Charles Angoma became the Sports President, James Odaga the President of the Debating Club and Stanley Gulavi the Press and Information Officer. The others are Amsale Mekasha (who is presently retired after working with the African Development Bank), Gebeyehu Ferissa and Addis Mammo (both deceased).

Such was the composition of the Student Council in 1961-62. That year the eleventh “College Day” (formerly known as “Sports Day” and celebrated annually) was due to be held on 9 July 1962. The previous year, on the 10th College Day, Tamiru Feyissa had presented his memorable poem – “Dehaw Yinageral” (“The Poor Man Speaks Out”). (This poem depicted the miserable life that the poor led, in spite of which they were grateful for Divine Providence). The speech that I made during my election campaign was immediately reported to the American Embassy. I was summoned to the Dean’s Office (still occupied by Trudeau) and given a dressing down. I was blamed for taking a left-wing stand (nothing could be further from the truth!). I was also informed that my stay in America did not appear to have done me much good. I replied that, as far as I was concerned, America was an old story; even the U.S. Embassy was too remote a place for me. I had already gone to the States and returned. The future held no problem for me. As I was elected by a clear majority of students, I said with full confidence that I was indifferent to whatever they said to me.

In my opinion, what contributed most to the events that were to unfold occurred while we were preparing to celebrate the 11th “College Day”. As usual, on a designated evening in the College dining-hall, contestants would read their poems to a panel of judges selected for their sound knowledge of and experience in the subject. The three best poems would be read in public on “College Day”. We were, of course, perfectly aware that agents of the Security would mingle with us, listen to the poems, tape them and leave. However, as “College Day” came nearer, we were informed that the authorities wanted a word with the student leaders.

By this time, although students had not begun taking classes there, the University had moved into the Grand Palace at Seddest Kilo. I recall that the first person that talked to Neway Gebreab and I was the Business Vice-President, Ato Wubishet Dilnessaw. He let us know that he was dissatisfied with our behavior, that he was not likely to forget what had occurred the year before. He went on to say that the poems selected for that year also left much to be desired; consequently, we had to list in detail the activities we planned to engage in on “College Day” (9 June).

We informed him that as the two of us were not at liberty to make a final decision on the matter; we had to consult with the other members of the Student Council. Accordingly, we went back and reported to our President. On the morning, we were summoned to President Kassa Woldemariam’s Office. This time, all three of us attended the meeting. Present were *Lij* Kasa Woldemariam, Minister of Pen *Tsehafe Te’ezaz* Teffera Werk and *Lij* Yilma Deressa. The latter had this to say: “His Majesty’s protocol demands that you list in detail all the activities you have planned for the day. We are only too aware of what transpired last year. We will not give you another chance to invite the Emperor and heap abuses on him.” Up until that time, the Emperor had never failed to attend “College Day”. He had attended the event for ten successive years. It was on the eleventh year that such a pre-condition was set.

We had a great respect and love for our President, Gebeyehu Ferissa, whom we knew to be a brilliant and considerate person. The above-mentioned comment of *Lij* Yilma Deressa was an allusion to him. Furthermore, *Lij* Yilma could not bear the sight of Gebeyehu, whom he suspected to have had a hand in the aborted ‘coup d’ état’⁹ or was at least sympathetic to it. Gebeyehu stated our stand by pointing out that the event would take place inside the university compound. As long as it was confined to the campus, students had the right to exercise their academic freedom. The students had no intention of propagating their opinions outside the campus. The government could not impose censorship

⁹ A reference to the abortive coup of December 1960 led by Brigadier General Mangestu Neway, Commander of the Imperial Bodyguard, and his brother, Garmame Neway.

on what the students did within the university. Neither the government nor the University was entitled to do so.

Up until then, Neway and I had let Gebeyehu Ferissa speak for all of us. However, realizing that things were getting out of hand, I requested Gebeyehu to let me say a word or two. When I got his consent, I began talking. (I have always had – and still do – the reputation of calling a spade a spade.) “Your Excellency *Ato Yilma!* To tell the truth, we have little knowledge about His Majesty’s protocol requirements. However, that we know little of this matter has no bearing on the presence or absence of His Majesty. My friends and I believe that there is not an overwhelming necessity for us to oppose His Majesty’s protocol requirements. Nevertheless, our Student Council is a democratic body (I was a bit too trusting at the time, so I meant it). Since we were elected to the office we hold, even if we agree to your proposal, we cannot decide here and now. The only solution for us is to present it to our Student Council for a collective decision. Another point is that, from the moment they were selected, those poems are the property of the Student Council and not of the authors. They are scheduled to be read on “College Day”. Therefore, let us return to the college and table your proposal to the Student Council.”

The above took place on the evening of 8 June 1962. Celebration of “College Day” was scheduled to start around noon the following day. It was a real impasse. To tell the truth, all three of us were certain that the Student Council would not accept the proposal, but this was my only strategy for exiting from the tight situation. I remember *Lij Yilma* asking me, “What is your field of study? Is it law?” “No,” I replied. “Then what is it that you study?” “Administration,” I replied. His exclamation “Aha!” was interrupted by President *Kassa Woldemariam*, who interjected: “*Lij Yilma*, these people have not refused to abide by His Majesty’s protocol requirements. All they are saying is that they can speak neither on behalf of the other five members of the Student Council nor for the whole student body. They are asking to present the proposal to the Student Council and obtain their response. I believe they are right.” Thus, thanks to *Lij Kassa Woldemariam*’s intervention, the deadlock was resolved.

We then held a meeting of the Student Council. It was a brief affair. The Council unanimously rejected the proposal on the grounds that academic freedom and intellectual environment were non-negotiable. If His Majesty decided to attend, well and good; but if he decided to stay away, that was his prerogative. Since we had been told to inform *Lij Kassa Woldemariam* of our decision, we did so that same evening. Then we went on with our preparations for “College Day.”

The celebration was scheduled to begin at noon on the next day, a Saturday. We were once more summoned around 10:30-11:00 am, this time to the Jubilee Palace. Those same three people – *Lij Kassa Woldemariam*, H.E. *Ato*

Yilma Deressa and *Tsehafe Te'ezaz* Tefferawerk – were present. Standing close to the last, I could clearly see the note written in well-defined script, from which he read: “Since you have refused to comply with the requirements of His Majesty’s protocol, which can only mean that you do not wish His Majesty to attend the event, and as we cannot ask His Majesty to attend under these circumstances, His Majesty will not be present at the celebration.”

As luck would have it, I was an active participant in debates and plays since my days at General Wingate School and in the University College too. Chagrined by his words, I said, “We find it hard to accept that His Majesty will not attend our College Day for fear of being ridiculed by youngsters for whom he has provided education. We will only believe that he has decided to stay away if he fails to show up at the time we expect him. It is painfully obvious that our College Day, which has been celebrated colourfully every year, will not be the same if he decides to absent himself. Therefore, we emphatically refuse to believe that he will not come for the stated reason.”

At this point, *Lij Kassa Woldemariam* told us, “Let me accompany you back.” He then drove us to his home, located near Ras Hotel, invited us to lunch and drove us back to the University College. He left after promising to be back.

We then went on celebrating our Day. The poems read on that occasion were undoubtedly very powerful. This was due to the fact that, at this point in time, we students had begun expressing ourselves eloquently regarding our society, the College administration and the government. This, as *Ato Asfaw Damte* pointed out a little earlier, was due to the influence of expatriate students – particularly West African students (most of whom were classmates of mine). They had lived under colonial rule and become extremely politicized. During their stay in college, they spoke their mind without any fear of retaliation. We envied their frankness and harboured an inferiority complex whenever they reproached us for being too secretive. That is why we started voicing our true feelings. The poems, therefore, were accurate portrayals of the existing social conditions and a castigation of the political system.

His Majesty did not show up, but *Lij Kassa Woldemariam* did. His presence and participation in the event lent it life and colour. What came as an unpleasant shock was what occurred later: the suspension and/or dismissal of students and the cancellation of the boarding system. The justification for these measures was presumably that students were living in such comfort that they were abusing their privilege by fomenting plots against the regime. When informed of this decision, we decided that further struggle was imperative. I recall that we rallied the students of our college as well as the student councils of other colleges to petition first the President of the University, then the Chancellor (His Majesty). We indicated that our opposition was not to the cancellation of boarding school per se but to its being a premature measure.

We had a number of reasons for this opposition, the principal one being the sheer physical advantage a boarding school offered in terms of comfort, health and finance. Where else would students live while attending college? How many families could afford paying for their children's education? In particular, what would happen to students like me, who had all along been dependent on handouts of jackets and pants since high school (at Wingate)? The measure taken was terrifying. We therefore framed our petition as a call for the postponement of the cessation of boarding school until the appropriate time.

After an exhaustive discussion, we decided that *Ato* Tadesse Tamrat (now Professor) should read our petition in the presence of His Majesty. Accordingly, a group of student council members from all the Colleges requested an audience with His Majesty. We were subsequently informed that His Majesty with an entourage of his ministers would grant us an audience at Menelik Palace. As usual, His Majesty was attired in his ceremonial robe and a pith helmet as headgear. His entourage consisted of *Tsahafe Te'ezaz* Aklilu Habtewold, *Ato* Yilma Deressa, several senior ministers and high ranking officers of the Armed Forces. We the student leaders were in the front ranks. Tadesse Tamrat then presented the written statement against the cessation of boarding system.

The officials, on the other hand, argued that the expenses incurred by the government on our luxurious accommodation could provide education to innumerable destitute children. It was an economic approach designed to make us feel guilty. Next, two of the government's high-ranking officials took turns to speak. The first was *Tsahafe Te'ezaz* Aklilu. I think his speech was mainly a reinforcement of His Majesty's views: "In our school days, most students were garbed in shabby clothes, carried sacks to hold left-over food and 'kollo' (roasted grain) that they obtained by begging from door to door, fighting with dogs every inch of the way. You, by contrast, insist on continuing to lead a life of ease and comfort, thus depriving a good number of children from getting decent education. This is outrageous!"

The second speaker was *Lij* Yilma Deressa. He spoke in the same vein. However, he made a most startling remark, "Even Metropolitan New York does not boast of a boarding school, let alone our poor country." These were his very words. "Your demands are an affront to propriety!" Although our political thinking was poles apart, I was fond of a student named Shibru Seifu (May God rest his soul!). Shibru bowed low, indicating that he wished to speak. He began by saying, "Your Majesty", and then shifted his address to "You" before he had even finished a sentence. This was found to be an affront to imperial protocol, and he was immediately stopped.

I was standing a little distance behind Shibru. I too made a bow. "All right," said His majesty, "what have you to say?" "Your Majesty," I said, "the two most highly-placed officials next to you have spoken. *Tsahafe Te'ezaz*

Aklilu has informed us that, in his days, students were shabbily clad, carried sacks containing dried ‘injera’ and ‘kollo’. What I would most emphatically assure His Excellency is that, had we lived in that era, we too would have had to face the same hardships. But conditions have radically changed both with regards to our life style and our education. It is impossible to continue traveling along the same road. His Excellency *Lij* Yilma Deressa, as Minister of Finance, is in the best position to know the average income of an Ethiopian family. We, for our part, find it very hard to imagine how many families can afford to pay for their children’s education. As far as I am concerned, drawing a comparison between Ethiopia and Metropolitan New York is akin to trying to make two parallel lines meet. Would it not be more sensible to consider conditions in countries that are nearer ours?” I would have stopped there except that the Emperor exclaimed: “Don’t tell us that you are going to cite Ghana as an example.”

By coincidence, in 1962, I had represented the students of Haile Selassie I University at the Pan African Youth Movement Conference, formerly known as Pan African Youth Conference (we had altered the name during the course of the meeting), in Conakry, Guinea. On my way back home, I had stayed in Ghana for a week as guest of the “Young Pioneers”, the Kwame Nkrumah youth wing. I was given a guided tour by a roving ambassador named Pauline. Because I had had the chance to observe many things during my visit, I replied to the Sovereign, “Yes, Your Majesty, it is much easier to draw a comparison between Ghana and Ethiopia than to compare Metropolitan New York with Ethiopia.” My comment that to compare Metropolitan New York and Ethiopia was similar to making parallel lines meet had caused the assembled students to burst into laughter. His Majesty was so incensed at this that he reprimanded us for being “boorish”. This rebuff was greeted by deep silence, and only then did I start speaking again. Following this, His Majesty denied us any chance for further exchanges and terminated the audience.

We returned to college and pondered our condition from every angle but we could arrive at no satisfactory solution. Graduation Day was only a month away, school would close soon after. I recall that the graduation ceremony was scheduled to take place on Thursday, July 12, 1962. On the eve (I think I still have a copy of the posted announcement by Dean Girma Amare), we assembled in the student dining hall. That evening was an occasion to honor those students who had achieved outstanding results. In other words, those students who had scored superior academic results and had effected significant changes in student life would be awarded the Prince Mekonnen Commemorative Medal (later renamed the Dean’s Medal)¹⁰. I vividly recall that Robert Ouko (a very close

¹⁰ It was subsequently further renamed “Chancellor’s Medal”.

friend in my student years as well as in the years to come) stood first while I came out second. That evening I was awarded the Prince Mekonnen Commemorative Medal.

Next morning, we dressed as best we could and proceeded to Christmas Hall, where the Graduation Ceremony was to take place. As soon as we reached there, I was summoned to the Dean's office. A number of things - all of them pleasant - raced through my mind. I was saying to myself: "Last evening, I was awarded the Prince Mekonnen Medal, what do they intend to give me now?" Suddenly, a fellow graduate came by my side and inquired what I was doing there. On hearing my reply, he led me outside, where there was a big commotion. "How come we haven't been allowed to proceed with the graduation ceremony?" I enquired. They replied, "You have been sitting here quietly and yet you are the cause of all the pandemonium." "What have I done now?" I asked. They informed me that His Majesty had refused to award me my degree in person. "So what was the result," I wanted to know. I was later told that at a meeting, the Dean of Education (Dr. Aklilu Habte), the Dean of Students (Dr. Girma Amare) and such lecturers as Professor Mesfin had brought up my case. These people (I was informed later) were told that I had graduated and had received my diploma a few days earlier. (It is indeed a fact that we take delivery of the diploma a few days before graduation). The students then threatened to boycott the graduation ceremony if I were not permitted a formal graduation. The Administration was dead set against my name being cited in public and my being officially awarded my diploma by the Emperor.

At long last, we joined the ceremony. When it was announced "Eyesuswerk Zafu from Public Administration", what would normally have been greeted by moderate cheering turned into a tumultuous applause that reverberated across the hall - a definite proof that the students were trying to make a statement. Normally, I am not a timid person, but on that day I was rattled. Somehow, I reached the stage, where President Kassa shifted the tassel of my mortar board. (In those days, when students were small in number, it was the University president who took care of that gesture). President Kassa whispered to me that I would receive my diploma later. Thinking back over the event, I would never have done what I did then.

Incidentally, this was the first time that Christmas Hall was hosting a graduation ceremony since the palace building had been named Haile Sellassie I University. The news that the Emperor had donated His Palace had caused such a large turnout of the diplomatic community that there was barely any standing room. Once the tassel of my mortar board had been shifted, I faced the Emperor and under the cover of my gown extended my hand, made a bow and walked back. There was applause. When those who were nearest to me at the ceremony asked me to show them my diploma, I informed them that I did not have it.

“The Innocuous Days”

Nevertheless, ninety-nine percent of the audience was positive that I had secured my diploma.

To me it was all fun. I recall that Professor Mesfin Woldemariam (he was my geography teacher at Wingate School), seeing that no graduation feast had been prepared for me, and in an effort to console me, drove me to his home where I lunched and spent the afternoon. Upon my return to the university compound at 4 pm, I met the Dean of the Science Faculty, Dean McFarlane. I saw him pacing back and forth near his car, wondering where Eyesuswerk was. I received my diploma from him. The decision about boarding-school was irreversible. Those student leaders who did not graduate that year were suspended. These are my memories of my school days.

Chapter II The Radicalization Process

Hailu Ayele

I think Bahru's introductory remarks provide a framework for the discussion. Let me adopt this framework. I believe that the consequences of the discontinuance of the boarding system should be seen in a broader perspective. I do not believe that it has received the attention it deserves. Although it has not been considered to be a defining moment, it has had a great many ramifications.

As regards the "Crocodile Society"¹¹, I was not a member, but I knew a few of its members, some of whom were very close friends of mine. It can safely be said that the "Society" was a rallying call for the dissemination of left-wing ideology and an invitation for potential adherents. There must have been non-students in its ranks, which may explain the source of the left-wing writings. Though few in number, they did have their role.

When the "Crocodile Society" issued the notice that appeared on *News and Views*, I was not at Arat Kilo, although I had spent my freshman year there. I joined the institution in September 1962, following the graduation of Ato Eyesuswerk's batch. I attended my sophomore year at what was formerly known as "Imperial College of Engineering" (later renamed "College of Engineering", located at Mexico Square. Because boarding was not available, I was living in a hostel in the Piazza area; it was previously a casino and later headquarters of the Awash Valley Authority. The students were of diverse composition and representative of the whole university: economics, business, engineering and building technology. They represented a diverse groups both in terms of their fields of study and their year in College. Word would reach us in the evenings about what was going on at Arat Kilo and we used to discuss whatever occurred in our area. This is the source of my knowledge of the "Crocodile Society".

Although I have misplaced it, there was another notice that was posted and it read: "The Crocodile Society, in its meeting held on Saturday at 8:30 (the date and the place are specified), has unanimously awarded the Patrice Lumumba Nationalist Award to Gebru Gebrewold (or maybe it was Girma?)". It could be said to have been even more effective in bringing the "Crocodile Society" into the limelight. This was during the academic year 1963-64.

¹¹ A semi-clandestine student group that emerged in 1964 and played a preponderant role in the radicalization of the student movement and its adoption of Marxism-Leninism as its guiding ideology.

That year also witnessed a coup that overthrew the Student Council. Because the coup occurred in the aftermath of the “award”, the “Crocodile Society” gained fame not only because Gebru had played a prominent role in the coup but also because he was the recipient of an award. As a result, whenever some left-wing or unconventional opinion appeared, many students would say that the “Crocodile Society” was behind it. However, I can not positively say that it was not always true. The society’s characteristic trait was hard to pin down. It was everywhere; yet, it was intangible. It was effective because it successfully transmitted its message without disclosing its identity and because it had a captive audience.

On the other hand, following the coup that overthrew the Student Council, a group known as “Nacet” (a razor blade advertised as the nemesis of the crocodile) had come into being. What am I driving at is to enquire how many people raised the same issues as the “Crocodile Society” and to what degree these issues became topics for discussion. While I cannot reveal its inner workings (because I was not a member), I was close enough to disclose the things I knew.

I did not participate in the “Land to the Tiller” demonstration because I was on my University Service. Unlike students from other faculties who went on service in their fourth year, we Engineering students served in our sophomore year. I received news of the demonstration while I was in Bahr Dar. Nevertheless, I could see that it had made quite an impact. When we returned from our University Service, we found that our faculty had moved to Arat Kilo campus. Arts and Business faculties, on the other hand, had moved from Arat Kilo to Siddist Kilo. As luck would have it, we were living with two of the students suspended subsequent to the demonstration. So, even if radicalization came about in the way Bahru had described it, the “Land to the Tiller” demonstration effected a profound change in the students. Students were dismissed because of it and they experienced hardships as a consequence; however, the solidarity was high. I shared a residence with two of them. I believe I should be discreet regarding this matter because it was confidential. But I did feel its impact when I came back from Bahr Dar. Although there had been earlier some visible signs of left-wing tendencies (in the form of discussion clubs), they had substantially proliferated thereafter. This is a result of the “Land to the Tiller” demonstration. However, since I did not directly participate in it, I cannot venture to say more.

Dessalegn Rahmato

One of the persons who accompanied me on my trip to North America was Melese Ayalew. Hailu Habtu and Berhanu Abebe (now deceased) were also with us. We joined different colleges. What left a lasting impression on me was the fact that for most of us (relatively speaking) it came as a very frightening experience to realize how backward Ethiopia was. When we were in Ethiopia, we would sometimes read foreign newspapers and occasionally listen to foreign radio broadcasts and watch fatuous films. This revelation, I believe, may be one source of our disillusionment.

I especially recall certain events that vividly brought home the terrible condition our country was in. While in the States (for that matter even now), I enjoyed traveling by car, preferring that mode of transport to air travel. My first stay in America was marked by numerous bus trips. I took to visiting a great number of states. I could not stop being impressed by the condition of the highways. Another item that brought home to me our backwardness was “Kleenex” – a disposable tissue that resembled a handkerchief. Although in retrospect it seems a trifle, I could not conceive of such a thing then. Of course, now that ecology has become a concern, a great many items have ceased to be disposable.

The other thing I came to realize at the time was the great amount of influence exerted on visitors from such African countries as Ethiopia when they travel abroad. Although I never analysed the concept, I had heard of imperialism and colonialism. I got a true picture of how much we were underprivileged not only in such significant areas as arms technology and the economy, but even in such rudimentary areas as thought process, sartorial propriety, creation of ideas and their propagation. (There were times when I – and by extension my country – felt small.) At times like this, such questions as “Where is our place on the international scale?” “Where can we perceive our progress?” would resonate loudly in my mind.

Thirdly, when I left my country at the end of 1963, the peoples of the Third World were in the midst of social turmoil, upheavals and wars. In point of fact, it was then that the term “Third World” was coined. It would be beneficial if we considered this in two ways. On the one hand, a good number of countries were the scenes of political, economic and social upheavals and their attendant massacres. Later, these same phenomena were manifesting themselves in America and later Europe. Countries such as China, Vietnam and Cuba had major revolutions which for most of us served as models. One palpable difference between living in the U.S. and living in Ethiopia at that time was that, even though these revolutions had no support in the U.S., one could access a great deal of literature dealing with them. To tell the truth, when I first arrived

there, I experienced considerable trouble deciding what to peruse and what to discard. Being rudder-less, I would read whatever took my fancy at the time. Incidentally, the books I have presently in my collection seem to suffer from a similar ailment: identity crisis. Those revolutions I consider to be great, especially that of China and Vietnam, have a special place in my mind in that they erupted in the rural areas and made their way to the suburbs.

Such was the genesis of my abiding pre-occupation with rural Ethiopia. I firmly believed (and I still do) that if progress was to be achieved, the rural population had to be emancipated. “How?” “Is it possible?” “Is it improbable?” are questions that were beside the point. What drove me to entertain these thoughts were the two revolutions: the Chinese and the Vietnamese. True, the Cuban Revolution also had a special appeal; Che Guevara is an eloquent person, very much loved and respected by the youth. But what made me pay close attention to rural Ethiopia was, as I said, the Chinese and the Vietnamese revolutions. Our knowledge of the Cuban Revolution was patchy. Only Hagos Gebreyesus had a personal knowledge of the country by dint of visiting it and attending a conference. True, I had tried to do some reading on Cuba. We had high regard for both Che Guevara and Castro. In fact, making lengthy speeches (à la Castro) had become fashionable. What has endured in my memory about the Cuban Revolution is more its form than its content. On the other hand, there are a great number of things I still recall and ponder vis-à-vis the Vietnamese and Chinese Revolutions.

Further, even though we never referred to them as revolutions, there were some massive changes and attempted changes in Arab and Latin American countries, and occasionally in Africa. What fascinated me most about these places were the attempts to change and the movements for change. Some were military movements. I was mesmerized by the fact that these movements were motivated by the burning desire to wage war on the super-powers or to put an end to subjugation by them. We paid homage to these attempts to stand up to U.S. power. These struggles were sending the message: “We want freedom – freedom from American, European and colonial subjugation.”

This feeling was with me when I read Nasser’s writings. He commanded our respect when he started to oust colonialists from the Suez Canal and announced that Egyptians could manage the Canal (whether in actual fact they could or could not was another matter!) Naturally, our respect for such acts diminished with time.

In retrospect, I believe that, had I been in Europe at the time, I would have entertained similar thoughts. But my sojourn in the USA, and the experiences I had there, had some distinctive features. Let me cite two or three of these. What was instrumental in pushing me towards left-wing politics was the human rights struggle of Black Americans. As you are all aware, this is referred to as the

“Civil Rights Movement”. When I first arrived in the USA, it had completed its liberal phase and was turning into a formidable and challenging force. Up to that time, the movement was characterized by a series of gentle and legal protests designed to appeal to the conscience of the Whites. Of course, there were radical movements such as the “Black Muslims” and the “Pan African Movement”. But what was predominant was the legal and liberal struggle. Within two years of my arrival in the USA, the struggle had turned into a mighty tidal force.

I feel that this civil rights movement had a special impact on Africans (certainly on me) in that a number of ways were being explored in order to link this massive and confrontational Black Movement to Africa. Their feeling was: “Africans are our brothers. We should emancipate ourselves the way Africans have emancipated themselves.” In fact, this Black Power Movement, unlike the call for a return to Africa, held Africans in high esteem. This feeling of admiration they had for Africa was something I could not reconcile with the Africa I knew. It was a source of pain for me to realize that Africans could not assume responsibility for their backwardness and would not fight for their own basic rights, much less rally around the cause espoused by Black Americans. The speeches we would hear during Civil Rights rallies, their inflated opinions of us as well as the preferential treatment they accorded us were not to my liking! We had been assessed and found wanting.

The Black movement (the word “Black” had replaced the word “Negro” in keeping with the change in tempo and scope of the movement) had also an impact on all of us. I began to realize that racism has its basis on color and not on your place of birth. I seem to recall, Alem, that on our way to visit you, Hailu and I were chatting while walking on a road in a small town called Harrisburg in Pennsylvania. An old white man was sitting by the road. Spotting us, he began shouting abuses “Hey, niggers! What are you doing here?” I remember our protest, “No, no. We are not niggers; we are from Ethiopia.” It took me about 3 or 6 months to come to terms with myself. I still harbour a feeling of shame. The Black Movement thus brought a tremendous change in my political thinking.

Then came the war in Vietnam and the peace movement in the U.S. and around the world. I was a witness to it because I was in the U.S at the time. If what I was reading as well as what I was watching on television was anything to go by, there has never been any event more instrumental in launching a universal peace movement, an anti-war and anti-imperialist movement than the Vietnam War. I stand corrected if there were such phenomena earlier in history. The anti-war movement was not restricted to Vietnam but had expanded in scope to include peace, anti-imperialism and anti-war movements. It was also instrumental in reviving dormant movements. Thus, the Youth Movement (my own term for the Student Movement) in the U.S. and later in African and Asian

countries was linked to this. It was a cause for turmoil in the U.S. and a serious impediment to peace.

While we did not attend each and every rally, not a day would pass in which a rally did not take place, protest tracts were not read, Vietnam was not discussed, a demonstration was not staged or war protests were not shouted. In my opinion, all this contributed a great deal to the enhancement of our activities. I would rather not go into this intricate matter lest I impose on your time. As I mentioned earlier, those who were there with me can supplement.

Later, other movements were triggered by the anti-Vietnam War protests, namely the Women's Liberation Movement and the Environmental Movement. Maybe we can take it up later when the question of women and gender comes up. I remember this issue being moderately discussed by us. What amazes me up to now is that the environmental movement was such an important issue at the time. Many of us, however, looked upon it either as a stumbling block that would divert us from our struggle or as a movement not warranting so much attention. As far as I can recall (and I stand corrected if I am wrong), neither in *Challenge* nor in any of our discussions did we deem the environmental movement a serious enough item for discussion. The irony of it is that, currently, one of the obstacles to our country's development is environmental pollution.

I think our reluctance to come to terms with this issue is understandable. While the change brought about in our attitude by these processes is a positive thing, there is a negative side to it, too. The positive side of it was that it made us aware of the need to fight for our rights, for the development of our country and for freedom; this in turn enabled us to contribute to the student movement. The negative side was that we were at sea in the sense that we could not identify properly the problems confronting us, much less seek solutions for them. We were too obsessed with fad expressions (they are known today as "buzz words"), mostly "isms" - to wit, "imperialism," "colonialism" - to correctly address our problems by examining the relevance of these slogans to our country.

This, to my way of thinking, is one of the aspects. There is no need to narrate the story. We will be discussing ESUNA either tomorrow or the day after, time enough to discuss it then. However, this trend towards left-wing politics or radicalism was, as Bahru put it, a gradual process and not an overnight occurrence. Speaking for myself, I was not a reactionary one day and a radical the next. It was a lengthy process. As far as I can recall, it would be difficult to say that most of the members of the student movement in North America were adherents of Marxism-Leninism. I remember arguing with those who claimed that even *Challenge* was a forum for Marxism-Leninism ideology. Students espoused different ideologies. Perhaps those who were elected to office, or were editors of periodicals, or were contributors adhered to the dominant political ideology. However, it was not easy to assert who was who.

As far as I know, the first reputedly Marxist-Leninist student leader was Hagos. Our admiration for Hagos was due to the fact that he had visited Cuba and was knowledgeable in the ideology, having had the opportunity to ‘dip in the source’, as it were.

At first, there was neither a clear picture of either Marxism-Leninism or socialism, nor how to go about adopting the philosophy. It was only when we began sharing the experience of the U.S. student movement and other similar movements, from reading extensively on the subject and engaging in discussions that we turned the situation around. On the other hand, our poor performance in this area was due to the difficulty of accessing fellow students. As you know, America is a very large country; at the time, one student lived in Los Angeles, another in Washington D.C., and another in New Haven. It was virtually impossible to call these widely-scattered individuals to a meeting. The transportation cost alone was not to be contemplated on a student’s income. Whereas students in Addis Ababa lived on the same campus, shared the same sleeping quarters and attended the same institution, we, on the other hand, were scattered far and wide; and most of us were busy with our studies. Thus, due to limitations of time and finance, meetings were very difficult to arrange. This is what I recall. Let me stop now to give others a chance.

Hailu Ayele

One other point I had intended to bring up tomorrow is related to North America. I recall the time when Robert Kennedy was literally carried out of a meeting in Ras Makonnen Hall on the shoulders of students. There were some students, whose name I can recall now, who were taken aback by the incident. They could not reconcile the war being waged against imperialism and this act of veneration of Robert Kennedy.

The incident involving Hubert Humphrey¹² took place in 1968, February 1968 I believe, when I was in my senior year. Among the members of the local movement, there were people who had contacts with ESUNA both on an individual basis and as a group; we had access to the periodicals issued by ESUNA. In one such issue, whose author I do not remember, an article entitled “U.S. Imperialism in Ethiopia” had appeared. It featured a lengthy analysis taken from American newspapers and Congressional debates on American influence in Ethiopia, especially in connection with the Kagnew Station. The article had come into our possession before Hubert Humphrey came to visit Ethiopia. I vividly recall my discussing the article with a number of people for three days and reaching the decision to distribute it before Hubert Humphrey’s arrival; however, we could not distribute it in its entirety because it would nip the on-going student movement in the bud. Some of the terms used there to describe the Emperor were libelous.

Accordingly, instead of passing it out as it was, we took the trouble to edit and distribute it. That is why, Bahru, the change of attitude you alluded to appeared a year later. Incidentally, that paper was very well composed; it triggered lengthy discussions and debates among the students. The paper clearly portrayed the influence exercised by the U.S. on the Ethiopian government. That was why there was a confrontation when Humphrey arrived. His effigy was burnt along with a U.S. dollar bill – yes, the real one (its rate of exchange was small then!).

I think it would be beneficial to document this matter in detail, once it has been raised. A good number of people were involved in the printing of that paper. As it was a clandestine operation, the typing was done in one place by a given group, while it was run off somewhere else by another group. Probably about a month later, several copies of this mimeographed material were discovered in a house. When the paper was discovered, the person who used to reside in that house was in prison on another case.

The discovery of the mimeographed material led to the imprisonment of three people, including myself. I had finished my first semester exams at the

¹² A reference to the visit to Ethiopia of American Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey, which provoked a student protest.

time. On a Saturday morning, I had an appointment to go to the cinema with a friend. I was on my way to his home when I was arrested by two colonels and taken to the 6th police station. They started by handing me a piece of blank paper and instructing me to write “Imperialism” on it. (I could name the colonel, but I would rather not). I shaped ‘I’ in a certain manner. Is that the way you write ‘I’?” he asked me. “I write it any way I want to,” I replied. The moment he had uttered the word “Imperialism” I had gotten the message, for I knew what he was getting at.

Then he took me to Kolfe to our imprisoned friend, who had been slightly hurt. At the sight of him, I got frightened, for he was a close friend. Before I could say anything, he let me know that he had made a clean breast of it. The three of us confessed that we had written the paper. We were then asked to hand over the original. As we had destroyed it, we gave them the one sent us from North America, which they promptly delivered to Ato Nebiye Le’ul. After a series of telephone calls, we were told that we had been invited to lunch at a good restaurant. Thus, I ended up having lunch at Castelli Restaurant for the first time in my life by dint of being a prisoner! As a student, I had no way of knowing that such a restaurant even existed. On that Saturday, after lunch, we were summoned by Ato Nebiye Le’ul and proceeded there. Two colonels, one from Special Cabinet (the Counter Intelligence Unit) and another from Security had been detailed to investigate the matter. They told us: “Our suspicion was that you could not be the authors of this paper. As you could not possibly have access to such information, foreign elements must have given it to you or had it distributed. As it turns out, you local students have proved yourselves more responsible than the others.” That is because we had watered down the original version, especially the terms that referred to the Emperor. I was in my fifth (senior) year. The two others were a fourth-year law student and a fourth year civil engineering student.

The colonel finally said to me: “Complete your last year and I will have you employed. Perhaps you will learn what it means to join the civil service and serve your country.” And we were released, after we had dinner in a restaurant (not Castelli this time!) and went home.

Tedla Seyum

My own understanding of the radicalization process is a question of how many members of the student union were aware or unaware of the phenomenon. I personally think that this should be thoroughly discussed, lest we fail to draw the right lessons. Let me base my comments on my secondary school experience. I attended secondary school at Haile Sellassie I Secondary School. One of the senior students then was Tilahun Gizaw. Whenever there was a debate, two individuals invariably stood out: Tilahun Gizaw and Haimanot Alemu. There were not many political issues to be debated. The tenor of the debates was “should there be co-education?” (The boarding school was exclusively for boy students. Incidentally, Tilahun was against the motion and I could say the majority of students supported his stand).

Perhaps two factors could have contributed to the radicalization process at that school. The first was the fact that it was a boarding school enabled students from diverse backgrounds to come together; the second was the appointment of an Ethiopian director, Dr. Zewdneh Yimtatu. I can say that Dr. Zewdneh Yimtatu had kindled a flame among us students without our being aware of it. Maybe this is only a personal impression, but we recall this whenever we get together. Having come back from America, maybe he had gone through the experience you two had mentioned a little earlier.

If you remember, when U.D.I. was declared, the first students who took to the streets were from this school.¹³ It is because *Gashé Zewdineh* took the unprecedented step of ringing the bell at night. In a boarding school, that meant fire or a similar danger. Terrified students rushed out, some fully-clothed, others semi-clad. *Gashé Zewdineh* then imparted the sad news that he had heard that evening. There was no question of eating breakfast. I have no recollection of the time except that it was early morning when we made our way to the British Embassy. *Gashé Zewdineh* overtook us either in a taxi or his own car and stopped us, “Brothers! Brothers!” he pleaded with us, “let us pause and deliberate so that we may speak as one.” Thinking that he had some other problem, we went ahead. We came back home pleased with the stand we had taken. Whether we did this with full knowledge of the issue, I am unable to say. All I know is that I was in the forefront of the demonstration.

The reason I mention this incident is to illustrate that whether in the realm of student movement or in any other sphere, a certain person (say, a far-sighted person) has both the chance and ability to impose his perception of things on others. So with good or bad intentions, a group of students passed off and is still

¹³ This presumably refers to the March 1968 student demonstration in protest at the execution of black African nationalists by the Ian Smith regime rather than the declaration of UDI per se, which had come some years earlier.

passing off their opinion as a general consensus. Speaking for myself, I was a latecomer and joined this school of thought only once I reached Europe. That is when I raised my level of consciousness through reading. I firmly subscribe to the belief that Ethiopian students abroad were allies of the domestic student movement. This has always been so. One group has always influenced the other. I have already said that I have very little knowledge regarding Ethiopian students residing here. Based on information gathered from secondary school students and later from a large number of students from Haile Sellassie I University who espoused different ideologies, I got the impression that it was both impossible and unthinkable to admit not being a radical. I was not there in person. Non-conformists were always in dread of being stigmatized. I confess that I was a true believer, if I may be pardoned. Unlike you academicians, I speak my mind. It is only when these truths are brought to light that the next generation can benefit from our experience.

Chapter III

Student Organizations

Mulugeta Bezabih

... Next, efforts were made to turn the movement taking place at Alemaya University into a nation-wide movement. That is why the first president of the national union was elected from Alemaya University. The conference hall in the College of Engineering was the venue for the founding meeting. Each college was represented. I was made president; Tadesse Tamrat (from University College) took the vice-presidency; Be'alu [Girma] (also from University College) was given the Treasury, Engineering College became the Secretary-General, etc. Thus, an attempt was made to extend the structure to every campus. Each delegate would return to his college to engage in scheduling such activities as training and workshop programs. Especially, after the National Union of Ethiopian University Students was formed, other colleges shared the task of attending the ever-increasing number of international conferences, as Alemaya University and University College alone were unable to attend so many meetings. Ideas would come from abroad and would be discussed and analyzed here.

A good number of workshops took place in the colleges. Debates and discussions continued. One point of interest related to this was the absence within the Union of a movement based on radical ideology, hence heated debates were rare. Besides, meetings were far and between (only three or four times a year).

Although there was manifestation of a right-wing ideology, it had not taken root. Still, since there were a good number of students from other African countries at Alemaya, there was a great deal of discussion among students. The African independence movement had a strong impact on the campus. This was, as you may recall, reflected during the coup d'etat – the feeling that our country had remained backward.

I recall an incident which occurred in, I believe, 1962. There was a big celebration when His Majesty donated his palace to the university. At the time, the Business Vice-President was *Ato* Wubishet Dilnessaw. I was informed by telephone that I was to give a speech. This was a historic event. Imagine a 19-year old youngster making a speech in front of the Emperor! I asked him what I was supposed to talk about. He let me know that I was expected to say how the student movement went a long way in enhancing the country's development. He also informed me that I was to send him my speech beforehand. We held a

meeting at Alemaya. The meeting split into two: one group advocated submitting a copy of our text, while the other suggested preparing two different texts.

At first, I was against this idea because it spelt danger for me, but at last I gave in. Ah, the bravado of youth! The first text was sent to him. He phoned to say that he was very pleased with it. The text that I kept related in great detail African nations' struggle for independence, their remarkable development, while in contrast, Ethiopia had so little to show for its long period of independence. That was the text I read in front of the Emperor. The first part of my speech was constantly interrupted by tumultuous applause from (the) students. I could hear *Ato Wubishet* calling "Hey, just a moment!" I paid him no heed. I could see the Emperor was also restive. Anyway, the speech ended to the sound of continuous applause. *Ato Wubishet* came to me and said: "You impudent liar! You really played a dirty trick on me." In retrospect, I am amazed at what had come over me: to expose His Majesty to public ridicule. Aside from attempting to interrupt my speech, the officials took no retaliatory measures. I believe that unless you were deemed to be a veritable threat to the state, they cut you enough slack.

One can not be a student for life; one has to be gainfully employed, and so on. The student leaders got jobs, transiting from youth to adulthood. We, then, held a meeting to discuss what to do in the future. An agreement was reached whereby the struggle should continue with those earning a living after graduation assisting those still attending school. At the time, *Berhane Meskel*, *Walelign* and others were joining the Union. The debates were intensifying. We suggested the idea of forming a reading club. (What most students had access to were the hackneyed books issued by Progress Publishers). We made use of one of those small houses off *Afencho Ber*, near the University, to form our reading club. The members were *Haile Fida*, *Daniel Aderra*, *Tadesse Negash* and myself. I have no doubt that you know *Daniel Aderra*. Both he and *Haile Fida* were physics graduates. *Daniel* was a very mature person and a left-wing militant and the only Ethiopian to join the German group *Baader-Meinhof*. He led a distinctive life.

Other distinguished figures were *Kedir Mohammed*, an economist from *The Hague*, *Neway Gebreab* and *Gebeyehu Ferissa*. I still fail to understand why *Haile Fida* and *Gebeyehu*, who had grown up together, always rubbed each other the wrong way. There was *Desta Kidane Wold* and some others whose names I do not remember now. *Gebru Gebrewold* was one of the student members. (Incidentally, *Gebru* was also involved in the student movement in *Alemaya*.) He was well-read for a freshman (no one knew where he got his reading material). He would attend meetings even though he was not an elected official. During meetings, he would disparage our efforts, remarking that we would get nowhere. We would reply that we were doing our best with what we had. Later

Student Organizations

he and Zer'u Kishen (another freshman from Alemaya) joined Addis Ababa University.

One can say it was the first reading club. It convened three or four times a week and had access to some 100-150 books from various sources, i.e. private donations, the Soviet Library, etc. But it was soon disbanded. One of the members I named earlier had an uncle who was a general. Our friend told us that our activities were being monitored by the security forces and urged that we disband quickly. The issue was hotly debated but it did not prevent the dissolution of the club. Walelign and others appropriated the collection of books. We could never check out the veracity of that rumour or the wisdom (or lack of it) of continuing to run the club. That was one aspect of the struggle.

The second one was our attempt to infiltrate the mass media. It still amazes me when I look back on our boundless ambition. I joined Radio Ethiopia as an agricultural economist; my duties included preparing and broadcasting programs on the economy. Daniel Adera joined ETV as a technician. He focused his energy on getting good coverage in the news of the Vietnam War. We secured a job at *Ethiopian Herald* for Yohannes Sebhatu, who had been expelled from the University. (He did not last long. He joined EPLF and was later executed by it). Getachew Araya too joined us at Radio Ethiopia. Thus the group assembled there would get hold of the news conveyed by telex and would selectively broadcast left wing items. The American ambassador lodged a complaint to the Manager of Ethiopia Radio, *Ato* Negussie Habtewold. His complaint was to the effect that the Embassy had been monitoring the broadcasts and had found out that the news about Vietnam was biased in favor of Vietcong victories. *Ato* Negussie, who was a true democrat, advised us to be a little more cautious. I have every reason to remember *Ato* Negussie.

Hailu Ayele

We entered college after Haile Sellasie I University was established. You may say that my story begins where *Ato* Eyesuswork finished his yesterday. We started our freshman year in the 1961-62 academic year. We had a feeling similar to that experienced by students before us, generated by the fact that we were the first batch of secondary students from Gondar, Mekele, Dessie, Debre Berhan (myself), Ambo and Harar. We were assigned to Arat Kilo Campus, which at the time accommodated freshmen from such varied fields as engineering (my field), science and public health. The number of students at Arat Kilo was reportedly 450, 150 or 30% of which were freshmen.

Secondly, it was evident that we were younger than those students who had joined college earlier. Most of them, I was informed, entered college after they had taught for a year or two. A good number of them had gone to boarding school before joining college. Others had joined school at an advanced age. In our case, our average age was clearly young.

Thirdly, we were the first batch of students denied the privilege of boarding both in high school and college. When protest over the cancellation of boarding arose in the University our feeling was one of regret, nothing more. Since, thanks to the stipend we got while in secondary school, we have become used to renting a house, our life-style was not affected, unlike those who had preceded us to the University.

Fourthly, a university student was expected to wear a suit and a necktie. The ambition of those students who secured a job for a year or two was to attend class smartly turned out. It could be on account of our age, our upbringing, our background or maybe financial problems, we felt a trifle ashamed to dress up; therefore, we joined the institution wearing jeans. Due to our great number, our youth and style of attire, we were soon referred to as brazen [“ayn yawata”].

As *Ato* Eyesuswork mentioned yesterday, there was a row over the suspension of Gebeyhu Ferissa (the president of the student union) and Yohannes Admassu (the winner of the poetry contest) in the previous year and their being re-instated was heatedly debated. Another item of dispute was the enactment of the University’s new rules and regulations governing the establishment of student unions and the publishing of student newspapers. This had been opposed by senior students. The coincidental timing of these two issues had generated heated debate. I do not recall his name, but a man standing at the entrance to what was formerly called the Arts Building, later renamed the Freshman Building, was inviting people to sign a petition to the Emperor. A friend and I were passing by when he asked us what year we were in. He let the matter drop when we informed him that we were in the first year. Incensed by this contemptuous behavior, we made it our business to find the man after class

and sign the petition. By this time, another person had taken his place. We bothered to find out about the contents of the petition only afterwards. This was the situation during our freshman year.

After endless debate, a student union was established. What captivated our interest and drew our attention was the election campaign. Previously, election posters used to be posted in dormitories; now that boarding was no more, they were posted in every hostel. We as youngsters were enthralled by the speeches, most of which dealt with the backwardness of our country. I recall that vividly. We attended meetings and when voting time came, we cast our votes after consulting with one another. We agreed to cast the half vote allotted to freshmen to Wondwossen Hailu, who became president. As I mentioned yesterday, our residence was in the city center (Piazza), in the building that subsequently became the headquarters of the Awash Valley Authority. Except when we walked home in the evening after attending a debate or discussion session, we had a shuttle service to and from school. Whenever there were debates and speeches at Arat Kilo, we used to walk back to our hostel in groups. That is how we made the transition from youth to adulthood.

When we entered our second year, all of us who had come from three faculties to attend classes in the same campus had to go our separate ways. We engineering students left for Mexico Square. Feelings there were, unlike at Arat Kilo, relatively subdued. However, there was a positive side to this situation. For one thing, we were small in number, 120-130 students. Feelings of superiority or inferiority, depending on the grade level of the students, were kept to a low minimum. For another, the formation of a nation-wide student union and the various activities taking place at Arat Kilo had their impact. The president of the student union was Dr. Alem's brother, a Mechanical Engineering student called Gebre Kiros Habtu. He was instrumental in the establishment of a student paper known as ACME (acronym for Architecture, Civil, Mechanical and Electrical Engineering). The paper, which came out fortnightly, held students captive and attracted their active participation. I was elected member of the editorial board. It had a very dedicated editor named Habte Asfaha. Due to my frequent working visits to Arat Kilo and Sidist Kilo to report on events, I had no trouble maintaining my old relationships.

That year the University invited two eminent personalities to speak. One of them was the historian Arnold Toynbee, and the other was the Foreign Minister [and later Prime Minister] of Israel, Golda Meir. As a reporter, I had the chance to listen to their speeches. Arnold Toynbee's prediction that China would be a rising power made a lasting impression on me. Prior to that speech, I knew very little about China, which was a remote country. It prompted us to read more about that country.

Mrs. Golda Meir, who made her speech sitting down, was a most eloquent speaker. The meeting was poorly attended. The audience was an assembled group from the various faculties. My own presence was in the line of duty. She emphatically informed the audience that, having been blessed with such fertile land, we should do our best to educate our people and develop our country. This event got ample coverage in both *News & Views* and in our own paper. It left a significant impression on those involved in the student movement.

Another incident, which those of us in the know referred to as the “coup d’état”, and which was apparently designed to gauge the students’ state of alertness took place in Arat Kilo. Gebru Gebrewold, a member of “the Crocodile Society”, rang the bell. Normally, the bell was a signal to summon students to take their meals or to take their tea or coffee break. I happened to witness this event because I had prior information that a coup would take place and had thus gone from Mexico Square to Arat Kilo. Students assembled without taking the trouble to ask who had called the meeting and why. The President of the Union, Getachew Araya, and the other members of the Executive Council were charged with poor performance. Their attempts to defend themselves proved futile. They were declared guilty by the gathering and had to step down; a new election took place.

This incident was a good illustration of the fact that an organized force can rally a multitude of individuals around it and set it in motion; such events became commonplace in the University thereafter. It became an established routine to come up with an idea, spread it beforehand, ascertain that there would be a large turnout of people to influence others and it was in the bag. The academic year came to a close on this note. I was not around in the coming year.

The big issue that year was the University Service. Debates raged over it. Newspapers were inundated with interviews. There was no disagreement over the service in principle. Every one felt duty-bound to serve the peasant, who paid for our education while he remained uneducated; however, discord arose over the question of under whose auspices the program would be run. Feelings were running high, too, regarding exemption from service of students related to ministers and other high officials. As if to confirm this, these individuals left for the United States while we went on University Service.

I belonged to the group advocating student participation in the University Service. We went willingly, although we did not approve of our being assigned to teach in a regular school. My assigned school was the Bahr Dar Polytechnic, now Bahr Dar University, an institution built with the assistance of the Soviet Union. It was, comparatively speaking, a comfortable place. Unlike other University students who went in groups of three, there were ten of us (seven from the Engineering College and three from Arat Kilo). There were four to five students living in an apartment. Most of our students were older than us; but we

had a congenial rapport with the younger ones. I recall that we had nothing to do in the evenings. That is where I drank beer for the first time and sprouted a beard.

We were preceded by teachers who had done their studies in the U.S. and assigned to teach there. Dr. Hailu Araya is the one I most vividly recall. At the time, he had a master's degree and was assigned to teach English Literature. He was peculiar in the sense that he spoke only in English when he addressed his students (to help them improve their proficiency in English). He either spoke in Amharic or in English, and never mixed the two. Thanks to his vast collection of books, we were able to set up a reading club. One or two students would be assigned to read on a given topic; this would serve as a springboard for discussion. What was amazing was the fact that 75% of the topics discussed were non-political. They were either literary or historical topics. That was the time when we read to our heart's content.

We were in Bahr Dar when the "Land to the Tiller" demonstration was staged in Addis. Although it was a topic of discussion amongst us, we knew there was little we could do about it. We were engaged in literacy classes after hours. I held the post of Secretary of the Committee. The Provincial Administrator (he was then called Provincial Governor) was *Ato* Habtemariam, formerly Administrator of Nazareth. He also held the post of the Town Mayor. He was a progressive person and very supportive of our efforts. He had, however, this to say to us: "Listen, guys, a lot of rumour is flying around you. You had better give it a deaf ear." We took heed of his advice. On the other hand, out of the 130 enrolled in the literacy classes, 42 successfully completed the course.

On our return, Addis Ababa had undergone a change as a result of the "Land to the Tiller" demonstration. Some students had been suspended, others had been radicalized. Hostels which we used to live in had discontinued their service. We had to find other accommodation. We somehow managed to live in groups. I recall that five of us - a friend of mine studying geology, my former classmate Kebede Wubishet (now deceased), Yohannes Sebhatu (who had been suspended), and Tekalign W. Ammanuel and myself - rented a three-room house located behind what is now "Tourist Hotel," We soon had our respective friends. We used to read, discuss and debate in the evening. Sometimes a row would erupt, as we accused one another of "lagging behind." This lasted only one semester. Apprehensive of drawing undue attention, we dispersed. Yohannes got employed by the Tourism Organization; Kebede and I availed us of the opportunity to rent a room in the university dormitory. However, our old relationships endured.

It was in the 1965-66 Academic year that the issue of the Campus Union and the 6th Congress of NUEUS arose. The major argument was over how best to

organize the students. The Main Campus Union had been formed with Eshetu Chole as president. The students of Business College had their own union, while the students of the Law Faculty likewise sought to form their own. When the NUEUS Congress was convened, both of them claimed that they represented their respective constituents. The Main Campus Union declined to recognize either one. I recall this because I was a delegate of the Engineering and Science Faculty Student Union. There was a heated debate over the definition of the word “campus”. The students of Business College interpreted “campus” to mean “floor”.¹⁴ Their president was Wondimneh Tilahun, a very eloquent speaker. The law students, for their part, defined “campus” as “a building with a fence around it”, maybe because their school had a fence of sorts.¹⁵ It was a hotly debated and very frustrating issue. For my part, I thought the whole thing was a huge farce.

It was at this time that our group began promoting the idea of a city-wide union for two reasons: 1) it would reconcile the various faculties vying for recognition as unions, and 2) it would be very easy to organize as it would get the unqualified support of the Administration, which felt that it would much prefer to work with a single union than to deal with a number of them. It was said that Dean Paul¹⁶ had expressed such a feeling.

Certain people approached Dean Paul with this idea. (At the time, he was Dean of the Faculty of law and Chairman of the Students Affairs Committee. He had not yet assumed the post of Academic Vice-President). Both Dean Paul and the Dean of Students, Mr. Pion, received the idea enthusiastically and encouraged us to proceed with it. We agreed to do so but insisted that this union differ from the old one in its structure, functions and objectives. Following the discussion, it was not a proper constitution that was drafted but a provisional one. The City Wide Union started functioning in 1966 by electing Baro Tumsa as its president in the presence of Dean Paul. The unions of the other campuses raised a hue and cry, protesting at the creation of another union above them. This entailed ceaseless debates. The academic year closed on this note but not before a promise was made to hold a referendum on this issue when school reopened.

The year 1966 saw the admission of a great number of students into the University. Secondary school students, who had been aware of the public demonstrations staged by university students on such issues as “Land to the Tiller”, “Shola Concentration Camp” and Rhodesia could barely control their eagerness to participate in these activities. Unlike in the past, this group was not

¹⁴ The College of Business Administration was then located on the 4th floor of the New Classroom Building that was inaugurated at the beginning of the 1965-66 academic year.

¹⁵ As a matter of fact, the Law Faculty was separated only by a lawn, not a fence.

¹⁶ The former Dean of the Faculty of Law, subsequently Academic Vice-President of the University.

of the type to “sit on the fence”. Students of Menelik II Secondary School in particular had a long story of active participation in demonstrations, albeit in an unorganized fashion. When they joined the University, they became ardent supporters of USUAA, particularly freshmen. Those who proved the most militant and assumed the leadership came from this group. USUAA came out the victor in the referendum. There was dispute over the numbers. We claimed that the votes were 500 to 400 in our favour. There were those who said that what tipped the balance was the ½ vote (instead of the customary one-third vote) assigned to freshmen. This claim gained prominence when agitation to dismantle USUAA started. I am not certain how many votes we gained; however, what was important was our victory.

The referendum took place in either November or December and was followed by election. Due to the University’s strict rule that no student on probation could hold an office, those students we deemed most dynamic were barred, as a result of which the task fell on me. Because I could appreciate the problem, I accepted; nevertheless, I got more than I had bargained for when I became Secretary-General instead of just a member of the Congress!

I am skipping certain things now. Once USUAA was established, the main event was the 6th NUEUS Congress, for which we worked assiduously in order to make it a resounding success. The resolution passed at the close of the Congress had taken two months to prepare. By then, the suspended students, one of whom was Berhane Meskel, had been reinstated. We argued that even if he could not be a member of the leadership, as he was still on probation, he could still attend the Congress as a delegate. The resolution was drafted by two students but its final form was discussed at length before we went into the Congress.

It was a comprehensive resolution in that it covered both national and international issues. As Dessalegn pointed out yesterday, the international issue had come to gain prominence because of the anti-Vietnam War movement. On “Vietnam Day”, celebrated annually, we would display pictures showing the horrors of the war. A student named Getachew Habte,¹⁷ who had access to Novosty Press Agency, supplied us with the pictures. Books on the Cuban Revolution were widely being read too. It was because students had decided to struggle in this manner that the resolutions of the 6th NUEUS Congress focused on international issues and took an anti-imperialist stance.

Incidentally, an explanation is necessary regarding the word “Imperialism”. Prior to the 6th Congress, we had made it a point not to use the word lest we offend certain elements. When we ran for office in USUAA, we had agreed not to use that term. We would instead focus on the backwardness of

¹⁷ Getachew Habte was shot in 1972 as he attempted to hijack a plane with Waleign Mekonnen, Marta Mebratu and five other students.

our country and the need for change. The 6th Congress of NUEUS changed all that – for the first time, we declared that USUAA was an anti-imperialist student movement. Before that, we would use the word only amongst ourselves.

What was amazing about that Congress was the fact that the Alemaya Students Union, which had produced such people as Mulugeta and had developed an international perspective, had fallen under a new leadership that resorted to a petty argument, to wit, “Since USUAA has turned up at the Congress as a bloc, it is well nigh-impossible for a genuine NUEUS to emerge from this conference.” USUAA had 23 delegates compared to their combined 14 (Gondar and Alemaya). Their stand that voting should be by unions rather than delegates entailed a lengthy debate. Some meetings would last until 2 a.m. A good number of leaflets, supporting one side or the other, were disseminated. At last we came to the conclusion that, even if they had as many votes as we, there were still individuals among them who would cast their votes for us.

There was heated argument during the two days it took to agree on the resolutions. I would like to mention three of the resolutions because of their relevance to later events. One is related to Eritrea. A year earlier, the international student organization IUS had passed a resolution tabled by Arab students in support of Eritrean independence. We had rejected the resolution on the grounds that those who were supporting it were student unions that were protégés of the Syrian Ba’athist party. It was decided to condemn them. The second resolution called on the IUS to renounce this resolution at its next Congress. The third was concerned with the anti-imperialist stand and called on fundamental change in the country on various fronts, including land tenure. Leaflets for and against the NUEUS resolutions started being disseminated. There were those who deplored the resolution on Eritrea. This created division among the general student population, although there was no problem among the activists.

The 6th Congress came to a close. What then followed were *Ato Bekele* [Taddese] and his group with their “Restoration Committee”. The Congress had its share in triggering that committee, as the radicalization of the Congress was unpalatable to that group. This is the way they put it: “What these people have been discussing for 6 days is in no way related to matters of immediate concern to the students. What we need is a union dedicated to our cause.” They managed to collect some 800 signatures and, since the constitution of the union provided for calling a General Assembly if 10% of the student body so wished, we agreed to their request. However, we received word from students of the Law School that a bill banning public demonstrations was being enacted by Parliament. We promptly decided to counteract this by preparing a demonstration within a week. Although there was the danger of not getting a quorum and of dissension among the students, we nonetheless decided to call a General Assembly.

I vividly remember that a great number of students were convinced that this law was tailor-made for them. It was designed specifically to prevent students rather than the general public from holding a public demonstration. A number of suggestions were put forward as to what should be done: staging a demonstration, writing a petition, sending a delegation to Parliament. Owing to the absence of a quorum, it was decided that the USUAA Congress should convene on the weekend (this was Friday) and meet with the students on the football field of Arat Kilo on Monday at 1:00 p.m. When we met at the designated time and place, we were ready for a demonstration. There were about 1,600 students. What occurred after that has been described accurately (except for some names) in the Awad-Strauss report.¹⁸

All this resulted in the consolidation of USUAA and some reduction of the dissension among students. Nonetheless, the Restoration Committee continued its course of action in two ways. The first one was spearheaded by Ato Bekele and company. The second one had no problem with USUAA but could not stand the leadership and wanted to get rid of it. The latter were those who were against the NUEUS resolution regarding Eritrea. This latter trend was not so apparent at the time but was internally very divisive. It was aptly illustrated by those students staying in bed in their pyjamas during the demonstration staged in protest at the anti-demonstration law. However, we all wound up in the same place after the police invaded the campus.

Following this, USUAA, as I mentioned before, grew from strength to strength. There was no question of its fall. Contrary to our expectation that the debate would continue in September, the “Restoration Committee” could not summon as many supporters as it had before. It was no mean task, though. Supporters of the “Restoration Committee”, unlike those of USUAA, attended meetings infrequently and never got a chance to express their opinions. So, the restoration movement faded away, while USUAA continued on its course.

The year 1968 saw students getting better organized. (I was no longer in the student union leadership). As a supplement to what *Ato Mulugeta* mentioned earlier, students often continued relations with those who had graduated and got employed. This relationship came in different forms. Organized people like *Ato Mulugeta* gave material assistance when leaflets were mimeographed and disseminated, the Alumni of University Students contributed a great deal. Although I do not know who the present owner is, I know that leaflets were printed in the offices of the Awash Valley Authority. That line of duty was the responsibility of Hailu Gebre Yohannes. There was indeed formidable outside support.

¹⁸ The comprehensive report commissioned by the University and compiled by the two staff members; it was included in the reading material distributed to the retreat participants in advance.

I have never been able to understand why, but following a demonstration, the first facility to shut down was always the cafeteria, which would cause students to disband. Students would go out and in two hours collect enough funds to provide students with meals for two days! Other students went around the city handing out a ticket (as a kind of receipt) against cash donations. Two or three students would sit at Varsity Bar¹⁹ distributing vouchers bearing the seal of USUAA. Students would obtain their vouchers and dine at Zewditu Hotel (in front of the Parliament building at Arat Kilo) or at other restaurants. It was the enduring public support at the time that enabled students to hold out through lengthy demonstrations. I have said my piece.

¹⁹ Located in front of the Technology Faculty at Amist Kilo, this place continued well into the 1970s as a centre of radical political activity. This tradition may have had its genesis in the fact that student radicals like Walelign used to reside in the hostel above. It remains one of the abiding ironies of the time that the hostel, owned by the Mekane Iyesus Evangelical Church, came to house some of the most radical students.

Yeraswork Admassie

The radicalization process of the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe was very similar to that of its counter-part in the USA. Of course, personally, I was too young in age and inexperienced – my only source of information being books and informants – to be adequately conversant with events that occurred prior to 1968. So I can only surmise that the similarity existed. I know that particularly the Congress of the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe held in Zagreb²⁰ had underlined the fact that fundamental change was absolutely essential for Ethiopia and that trend had gained ascendancy thereafter. I am also aware that branches of the Union had been set up in various European countries, these branch unions and their subsidiaries had set up study clubs designed to read about and conduct theoretical study on Ethiopia.

I had nearly finished my freshman year at HSIU when I traveled to Sweden. At the beginning of 1969, Dr. Kebede Mengesha, who had been informed that there were a good number of Ethiopian students in Lund, came there. Captivated by his sterling personality, we were eager to know what he had to say. “Without resorting to any means that may scare off people or alienate them, you can get together and exchange opinions about your country. It would be good to choose one person from among you. We will send that person periodicals.” That is the way it all started. By coincidence, the next ESUE Congress took place in the very city we were in, i.e. Lund, in August 1969. The person in charge of arranging the meeting was Dr. Elehu Feleke, who came from Stockholm for the purpose. We participated actively in organizing and hosting the meeting; from that day on the union moved from strength to strength. As I was personally involved in this union and also because I believe that it can be taken as a model, I would like to elaborate on it.

Thus those of us in Lund got together in record time and established a subsidiary union with a strong discussion club. Soon, we started playing an important role both in Sweden and on the European stage. This was made possible (as I heard it mentioned yesterday) by the students’ burning desire for change, a desire fueled by the war in Vietnam. As the same sentiment was being expressed there as everywhere else since 1968, it could not have been otherwise. It was the reverse that would have elicited utter surprise. In addition to this, Lund being a small University town, willy-nilly, we always ran into each other; therefore, we were in a position to form a solid and harmonious union. Each member took turn on Sundays to make a presentation of the material he had read. Presenter and chairman were decided by drawing a lot; accordingly, every member had to come well-prepared. We had a well-designed program which

²⁰ Held in the summer of 1968.

enabled us to cover a variety of topics. For example, we had political economy during the first semester and philosophy at another time. A year before the Berlin Congress, we had to read extensively on the Marxist stand regarding the question of nationalities; so exhaustive was our research that we held discussions on union level in Sweden, where we thrashed out both our similarities and differences. The topic was discussed so repeatedly that we would jokingly remark: “We are redolent of nations and nationalities.”

It goes without saying that individuals played a great role in the setting up of such strong groups. In our area, Dr. Kebede Mengesha provided us with strong but discreet leadership in being good readers, listeners and speakers. We are really indebted to him. The other personality was Dr. Elehu, the president of the ESUE Executive Committee based in Lund. He taught us the skill of refraining from giving impulsive replies, making sure of not taking confrontational stands and letting problems die out of their own accord.

As most of you are aware, the Editorial Board of the periodical was based in Stockholm. It was located in a basement and (for reason no one knew) was called ‘Zenith’. It was both our meeting place and the place where the periodical was printed. The Amharic version was of refined quality; as the letters were picked by hand. (The machine was of Portuguese origin). It was Dr. Kebede who picked and set the letters to form words, lines, paragraphs and pages. Probably 95% the chore was done by him; so much so, that his fingers were cut and bruised by the sharp metal. Whenever we went to Stockholm, we would help him at the printing center. Such exemplary work was at the base of the strength of the Swedish branch and the Lund subsidiary of ESUE.

Now let me move on to some major events. There were sieges of embassies. Tedla and I took part in the embassy siege of 1969. It was accomplished in an organized and disciplined fashion. It was well planned and faultlessly executed. While we were in Lund, we used to send a substantial percentage of our earnings derived from summer work to our friends in Algeria. We would also prepare a dinner party, whose proceeds went the same way. The years around 1970 were indeed a time when we participated enthusiastically in the activities of the union.

Melaku can correct me, but it was during the 1970 Congress that dissension reared its ugly head for the first time. The Benelux branch was at the centre of it all. It became clear that divisions and factions were emerging. Although most of us were not clear about it, we could still detect that there were problems. It was at that Congress that Melaku and I met for the first time. The Congress had divided up into different working groups in order to draft the resolutions. Surprisingly enough, both of us were working in harmony. In subsequent years, however, it became difficult to address each other civilly, much less work in a cordial atmosphere. Endless arguments during meetings

became our sole mode of interaction. It was only some five years back, at a conference of the Ethiopian Economic Association, that, to our mutual amazement, we found ourselves in amicable conversation.

Now back to the dissension of 1970. We were mere militants, blissfully unaware that there were elements among us who were members of a given party. In our innocence, we hoped that the gap between existing differences would somehow narrow (it could be that we knew nothing of what was going on behind the scenes). At one point around 1971, the union in Lund had issued an article in *Tiglachen* entitled "Problems of Unions, Part I". I remember a rejoinder entitled "Problems of Unions, Part II" issued by those in Algeria. (I have a copy of it). How did the whole thing start? We, in Lund, had prepared that article prompted by the following considerations: "How did the dissension in ESUNA occur? Was it on the question of nations and nationalities? Does that warrant such a division? Could the differences have been accommodated?" We had discussed the issue thoroughly before publishing the article. We sincerely believed that differences are in the nature of mass organizations and should not hamper working together. Furthermore, we were of the opinion that this problem arose from unscrupulous behavior such as putting labels on persons and questioning their motives. We clearly indicated that the interest of the student movement should override such obstacles.

In reply, the Algerian group accused us of acting in the manner of feudal peace-makers intent on neutralizing the existing class struggle. On reading this, even though I was one of the authors of the Lund article, I began wondering if their charge was not justified. Weren't we being rather gullible? If you recall, at the time, among left-wing movements (in Ethiopia as well as in the rest of the world), there were tendencies to overstress differences, to take extreme positions and to divide up. It is to be recalled that in 1971-72, a good number of organizations were splintering. Trotskyites in particular had different appellations for splinter groups. This may explain the phenomenon in the Ethiopian student movement as well.

A little later, the question of nationalities arose. There was no dissension among members of the union in Europe. Although they went their separate ways when the question of parties arose, the groups that subsequently evolved into EPRP and AESM had a similar stand on the question of nationalities.

So our agenda at the ESUE Congress in Berlin in 1970 revolved around overall change in Ethiopia. The 1971 Congress dealt with the question of nationalities. At the close of that Congress, the Executive Council moved to Lund, where it functioned for a year. At the end of the 1972 Congress, which was held in Antony (Paris), it was decided to move the Executive Council back to Lund, though I recall that those who arrived from Benelux (I think Melaku and others) had declared themselves ready to take over. It was a novel

experience in that it was the first time that a group had volunteered to assume responsibility without being either pressured or begged. I am not sure how (I think there was some kind of voting) but Lund was selected. The Antony Congress had strongly urged the newly-elected Executive Committee (of which I was Secretary-General) that the World Wide Union of Ethiopian Students (WWUES) secure its own secretariat in order to inject new life into it.

As those of you who were in ESUNA recall, there was a division of labour, ESUNA being in charge of the WWUES periodical and ESUE with the Executive Committee, as it was nearer to the IUS based in Czechoslovakia. The seal was with the ESUE Executive Committee. So, when we assumed the ESUE leadership, we were mandated to vitalize WWUES by setting up its own secretariat. So, the ESUE President was assigned to follow up WWUES matters and the Secretary-General ESUE affairs.

Accordingly, we called a meeting in Berlin in April 1973. We sent invitations to all and set up the meeting place. As it turned out, that meeting became a forum for our split. What has to be underscored here is that at the Antony meeting, it had been resolved that the student movement can only be a mass organization. In retrospect, that was presumably necessitated by the differences that were evolving behind the scenes. Those who were blissfully oblivious of the organizational struggles underneath assumed that everything could be resolved peacefully. After the Lund piece and the Algerian rejoinder that I cited earlier, divisions deepened. The April 1973 meeting, which had been called to reinvigorate WWUES, ended up being a platform where organizational divisions were played out.

The first order of business was resolving the issue of mandate. A number of people had come to the meeting, supporters of this or that group. So we had to lay down a rule that not everyone assembled there could speak. Only designated representatives of the constituent unions could do so. There was consensus on ESUE, ESUNA, and the World Wide Ethiopian Women Study Group. The representatives from Algeria and Lebanon proved more contentious.

The President of ESUE had assumed the chair. A dispute arose over voting procedures. ESUE proposed unanimity. During a break, we conferred with Mamo [Muche] and Solomon [Tessema] and agreed on four votes out of five as constituting a majority. In the afternoon, a delegate from Sudan named Tariku [Debre Tsion] arrived at the meeting and we found ourselves in the minority. The next evening, Solomon persuaded the Chairperson (the President of ESUE) to resign in favour of a neutral person lest there be a conflict of interest. So who replaced him as chairperson? Tesfaye Debessay! This is the way things stood: Tesfaye Debessay is Chairman and we are in the minority. Predictably, things were not going our way: we were out-voted each and every time, except once when an article was hotly debated. Melaku, do you recall our

holding meetings as late as 3:00 or 5:00 am in the morning? We would sleep for two hours and resume.

The article which caused such a row had to do with foreign relations and read as follows: “Foreign relations will be conducted *solely* by the World Wide Union²¹ of Ethiopian Students.” We argued that subsidiary unions, branch unions and continental unions should have the freedom to conduct foreign relations. What I understood then was that one body would take absolute control of the Ethiopian student movement and monopolize its foreign relations, while the other group would be made impotent. The argument continued unabated. It was mainly the Algerian delegate and myself that were debating. The ESUE president was quiet by nature. The ESUNA delegates and the representative of the Women’s Study Group also spoke only occasionally.

Sometime around 2 or 3 am, a phenomenon I would like to mention parenthetically occurred. I suddenly realized that two of the delegates from the USA were fast asleep. I submitted that this be put on record. “Both delegates of the great North American union have chosen to take a nap while a vital issue is under discussion.” Upon being awoken, Mamo blamed Solomon and Solomon accused Mamo. A commotion ensued following a request that this improper conduct be recorded. I then addressed the two persons in charge of taking down the minutes of the conference (one was a person named Meskerem from the US, while the other was Amha Abiy from France), “Are you taking down what I have requested?” They answered in the affirmative, whereupon the dispute over whether the sleeping of the North American delegates be minuted or not was put on record.

Speaking of minutes, while all this was going on, Haile (Fida) was sitting aside and was consuming a ream of paper writing furiously. His notes kept piling up. Mamo and the others would ask him what he was writing, but he would tell them to be patient, that they will see it later. Occasionally (for example during the heated debate mentioned earlier) there were strongly-worded denunciations and recriminations such as: “You will be judged by the Ethiopian people. You will be accountable to history.” At this point, a high official stormed out of the meeting hall, cursing “Bullshit”. This outburst was faithfully recorded in the minutes. Of course, lack of sleep – only two or three hours per night – had its share in all this!

Another event occurred at the place where we took our meals. One evening, Berhane Meskel and Haile were having an argument. Both men’s veins stood out and people kept their distance, apprehensive that an explosion was in the offing. While we were both in prison, I had the opportunity to ask Haile what it was all about. He replied, “We were telling each other that he would be

²¹ “Federation”, as it has come to be designated at this stage.

answerable for it later.” We all know too well the fateful consequences of those differences.

Because of this difference, ESUE declined to be a member of the Federation to be formed. We informed them that if such repression was to be the order of the day, we would refuse to be a member; however, we would do everything in our power to make the union a good one. They asked us a second time if we would change our minds, and we informed them that we stood by our decision. In the end, the constitution was ratified and elections were held (we had no part in it), in which a secretary for foreign relations and a chairman were elected.

We had thought the conference was over, when the leadership of ESUNA drew our attention to a leaflet they had been given by members of Eritreans for Liberation. They wanted the leaflet to be read to the assembly. On getting the go ahead from the chairman, Tesfaye, they began reading. It was a lengthy article that narrated in detail how Issayas and his friends left “Jabha”. Everyone was attentive as the tract was read from beginning to end. Then Haile raised his hand and asked what the point of reading such a piece was. This was greeted by pandemonium from the audience who wanted to know what his motive for posing such a question was. Berhane Meskel raised his hand and said that he would answer that question. Order was then restored. Berhane Meskel had the floor. (By the way, all this is recorded and formally signed by the participants. We, the leaders of ESUE, had this mimeographed and distributed to all our members. I believe that document is secure. Although I don’t own a copy, those who are abroad must have one).

In reply to Haile’s question, Berhane Meskel explained that the article was read in order to illustrate EPLF’s positive attitude towards the Ethiopian Revolution and Ethiopian revolutionaries. This created a minor commotion. Berhane Maskal elaborated: “This positive attitude is clearly demonstrated by the fact that *Ato* Saleh Sabbe has in the past assisted Ethiopian militants by offering us passports, financial support, etc.” I remember that Chairman Tesfaye did not quite like this and gave Berhane Meskel a warning look, whereupon Haile promptly declared that he was satisfied with the reply given.

I mention these things because they are good indicators. We then left the scene and tackled the job of reproducing the minutes of the meeting and the constitution to be distributed to our members. Next we met in Hanover (at the ESUE Congress), where a paper prepared by Abdul Mejid Hussein was printed and distributed. The title was “Leaders of ESUE Take After Their Father, Goebbels”. It charged us with adding the word “sole” to the clause “The Federation is the *sole* body empowered to conduct foreign relations.”

At the meeting, the question of who was responsible for the addition of the word “sole” came under discussion. Solomon raised his hand and said: “The

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word ‘sole’ was in the original version. It was Abebech who deleted it.” The whole accusation crumpled like a house of cards. Those who came from Moscow, Ephrem and his friends, took the responsibility of seeking a solution to satisfy everyone. After certain items had been rectified, a meeting of the leadership was called in Berlin. Thus, at the 1973 Hanover Congress, we had stood on the dock accused of sabotaging the union; however, the meeting exonerated us. A call for reconciliation was passed by a narrow margin.

Once more we met in Berlin, where this call for reconciliation got wide support. All the leaders of the branch unions were in accord. But by then, the Ethiopian Revolution had erupted. It was felt that it would be improper to end the meeting before we held a discussion on the revolution. I recall that it was Kiflu Tadesse who made a speech, following which opinions were heard on the composition of the “Provisional Popular Government.” We argued back and forth. We took breaks, to no avail. The gap got wider and wider. At this time, those behind-the-scene parties began to emerge, eventually involving most of us.

In 1974, we met once again in Berlin, where we held the last united Congress. Elections were held, whereby what we refer to as ESUE and what was later to join the AESM managed, by a minority vote, to control the Editorial Board of the periodical and the Executive Council. The other side was dead set against this. That was the last time the two groups ever met. When next we met in Berlin in 1975, they held separate meetings. We will go over what came after this at a later date.

Alem Habtu

It was formerly known as ESANA, not ESUNA; it was an association, not a union. I participated in that union for the first time in August 1964. It was then that those of us in this retreat met as union members for the first time. The meeting was held at Harvard University, a venue Ephrem Isaac (now Professor Ephrem Isaac) secured for us by dint of his being a student there. Hagos Gebreyesus, Melese Ayalew and Berhanu Abebe in Brandeis (Wondwossen Hailu, too, was there at the time) were instrumental in initiating the reorganization of ESANA (especially the first three people). It may be that they were corresponding with Dessalegn, who was in Ohio. On receiving an invitation to attend a meeting, I headed for Pennsylvania, where we all met for the first time.

It was a transitional meeting designed to emancipate the union from its dependency on the Ethiopian Government's sponsorship and financial subsidy and set it on its own feet. Up to that time, such meetings were marked by the Cultural Attaché of the Ethiopian Embassy offering a substantial amount of duty-free whisky to delegates in order to remind them of His Imperial Majesty's unbound generosity in providing them with education. (A case in point was *Ato Teffera Wondimagegnehu*, Cultural Attaché at the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington). Our purpose was to break that tradition. After a lengthy debate, we reached a consensus that we should have a free union. The above-mentioned people from Brandeis must have given the matter a great deal of thought. It was a very democratic meeting conducted following parliamentary procedure.

Near the close of the meeting, an election was held. Ballots for those in favour of change and ballots for those in favour of maintaining the status quo were prepared. We won by a majority of votes and succeeded in establishing a free student union. Unless I err, Hagos was elected President, Berhanu Abebe Secretary-General. I do not recall who was elected Vice-President. Melese Ayalew and Dessalegn Rahmato became editor and assistant editor, respectively. Neither Andreas nor myself were elected to office. It is possible that, as a compromise, some old liners were admitted into the leadership. The treasurer may have been a member of the outgoing student council. I do not recall the details.

From then on, our stand was one of a free union. Our next meeting was held in August at the same venue - Harvard, Cambridge. As mentioned earlier, the "Land to the Tiller" demonstration had been staged in the interim. Our union took a stance opposing the feudal system existing in Ethiopia. Ephrem Isaac played a key role in making the literacy campaign a part of our union's program. He relentlessly pressed us to support this drive by raising funds. We wholeheartedly gave our consent. Ephrem would remind us: "You may not consider

this [the literacy campaign] political, but you can't deny the fact that, unless they learn how to read and write, people won't be able to read what you have written." We agreed and acted accordingly. Some of us learnt the skills of baking injera as a result of our endeavor to raise funds for the literacy campaign.

We held our annual Congress of 1966 in the same venue. The meeting was so democratic that a good number of students, although in favour of change, were vehemently opposed to radical change in the regime of Haile Selassie and strongly advocated reforms. Arguments were the order of the day. I recall that in 1966, while we were drafting a resolution, a point in support of nationalizing the means of production was raised. We wanted it to be understood by everyone present. Our intention was not to rush the resolution through. I remember Andreas Eshete asking if this point was sufficiently understood. Berekt Habte Sellassie, then working for his doctorate at UCLA, replied that he had perfectly understood it. After a heated discussion, the item was included in our resolutions. It would seem that it was at this time that the union began its left-wing trend.

It has been mentioned earlier that we had extensive contact and cooperation with African-Americans. That year, our guest speaker at our meeting at Harvard was Kwame Toure (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael, a member of the radical youth wing and later a member of the Black Panthers). Later, we would meet with African-Americans who supported our cause as we supported theirs. Our 1967 meeting was held in Bloomington, Indiana. The meeting was made possible thanks to the assistance rendered us by Ethiopians studying at the university. I believe it is there that the union passed resolutions pertaining to education, health, land tenure and emerged as an anti-feudal and anti-imperialist body.

I believe that, the previous year, I was Deputy Secretary-General. At the meeting at Bloomington, I took over the presidency from Hagos and served for one year. We had a smooth relationship with ESUE. We would send them our periodicals and they would send us theirs. In keeping with our agreement, we published the English version while they issued the Amharic one. Once in a while, we would translate their Amharic writing into English. I remember us translating an article they had written on social change and issuing it under the title "The Boston Papers".

That year, one of the leaders of the union in Europe (I think it was Haile Fida) was corresponding with one of the leaders of *Jabha*, Salah Sabeh. I, too, sent a letter to the same person in the name of ESUNA. I was naïve enough to write the letter in Amharic. The content was to the effect that as long as all of us were anti-feudal and anti-imperialist, there was no reason why we could not support one another or cooperate with each other. His reply was written in English and told us in no uncertain terms that "unless you acknowledge Ethiopia

as a colonizer and Eritrea as a colony, no relationship can be established between us.” Some of the main meetings over the next years were as follows:

The next meeting took place in August 1968 in New Haven, Connecticut. It was made possible by the presence of Andreas Eshete at Yale. The main item on that agenda was “What is the Role of the Student Movement?” By coincidence, Eshetu [Chole] was there on his way home. Tamrat and Henock were in their final years as students. The message that we wanted conveyed and one which we had agreed upon was that the role of the student movement was very limited. It is a catalyst leading to change but incapable of effecting change by itself. Our intention was to underline its limitations. All the research papers and our resolutions were published in *Challenge*. The next meeting was in Philadelphia. The agenda was “Regionalism in Ethiopia”. Every year, we would discuss and set an agenda for the annual meeting.

Let me, however, mention something first. At our 1968 meeting in New Haven, after we had passed the resolution emphasizing the limited role of the student movement, somebody (I think it was Dessalegn) brought up the idea of us engaging in political education program (PEP in English). We agreed wholeheartedly. This was important because America is such a vast country, with a large number of chapters, that it was a difficult task to maintain links; a political education program would help maintain uniform standards. Moreover, since one cannot be a life-long student, one has to prepare for the political realities after finishing our studies. It would also be of benefit to such people as Tamrat, Eshetu Chole and Henock Kifle when they return home. Since our knowledge of our native land as well as our knowledge of politics was patchy, this would help fill the gap. It was further agreed that we should have a more profound knowledge than chanting mere slogans. The more conscious members of the union were assigned to give political education wherever possible. To that end, two modules were prepared, one on Ethiopia and the other on theory (Marxism, Leninism, revolutionary struggle).

Let me backtrack to 1969. I remember two reasons why “Regionalism in Ethiopia” was chosen as our agenda. One was because the item had been discussed and resolutions passed by ESUE a year earlier (1968) in Zagreb. The other reason was our realization that regionalism being such a sensitive subject, it would be too much to expect our compatriots in Ethiopia (who lived in a politically more repressive society) to bring up the issue for discussion. We, therefore, agreed to take up the challenge by preparing papers for the meeting.

We held our Congress in Philadelphia, where we discussed this issue. At last, after a lengthy debate, we reached a consensus. Yordanos Gebre Medhin (from Boston) and Haile Menkerios were two of the Eritrean participants who supported the idea. Because of lack of time to draft a set of resolutions, the

Congress mandated us, the Executive Committee, to prepare it in the spirit of the consensus.

Let me add a footnote to our 1969 meeting in Philadelphia (I hope that I am not wrong). When Senay Lekke arrived from the Bay Area, he was transformed from a garrulous person to a militant. During the course of an activists' meeting, which was held parallel with the Congress, he informed us that he had mastered the skill of concocting Molotov cocktails and suggested that this be put to use. He was studying chemical engineering. We were vehement in our opposition, which shocked him. Our protest was probably the last thing he expected.

The 1970 Congress was held in Washington. The assassination of Tilahun Gizaw in December 1969 had had a big impact on the student movement inside the country. What are we going to do? Are we going to sit with folded arms while the regime declares war on us? No, we should retaliate. Such was the prevalent attitude. The leading exponents of this were those who had recently come from Ethiopia: Abdul, my own brother Mesfin Habtu, and some others. Those who arrived from Ethiopia after the 1969 incident dominated the Washington Congress numerically. The burning question at the time was: What next? Andreas Eshete was chairing the meeting. Those who had recently arrived from Ethiopia, as well as those of us who had been in the States for some time, took turns in voicing their opinions. I remember it being mentioned yesterday: the contingent from the Bay Area, led by Senay Lekke, were clothed in fatigues and had on boots. They lived in communes. They abstained from drinking alcohol and they may even have quit smoking. They were leading spartan lives. It would seem that the more militant members had even gone to Cuba to undergo training in guerrilla warfare, presumably to enter Ethiopia via Bale, rather than Bole!²²

We would debate endlessly over this issue. We in the leadership would hold the Congress meeting by day and debate with the people from the Bay Area at night. We strongly pointed out to them that they were going about it the wrong way. I don't know how much time we spent arguing the issue, but we succeeded in convincing them. Even Senay had to admit it. "Oh, you know, I knew all along that it was not right. I just thought it would be best if they heard it from you."

The proponents of the "armed struggle now" argued that it was necessary to retaliate in response to the regime's declaration of war on the student movement. The supporters of "a protracted armed struggle" admitted that, true, students had been killed, that there was oppression and other hardships but while

²² A commonly drawn contrasting option, positing the remote southeastern province of Bale (adjoining Somalia and already scene of guerrilla activity in the 1960s) and Bole International Airport.

armed struggle was the logical course, it would have to be a “long struggle.” I remember that Melese Ayalew had written an article entitled “The Long March”. We reaffirmed our conviction that the role of the student movement was limited, and even if there were to be armed struggle, it would be waged by the combined forces of the proletariat and the peasants; students were merely their allies.

So, how did all this end? Although those in the leadership were not of one mind, it was decided that the leadership should move to the Bay Area. Seeing that it was a vast country, it was imperative that the leadership should be located within easy access to everyone. We also managed to convince the Congress that we had overstayed our tenure and should be replaced, thus resolving a problem that had been bothering us for a long time.

In 1971, we took up the national question, which split the union. Andreas had returned home. Most of us who were in the leadership – Dessalegn, Melese, myself – never imagined that there would be such a split. Senay’s group, without consulting us, walked out of the Congress. I took it upon myself to talk them into coming back by pointing out that they could stay as a minority within the union. As Tamrat is fully aware, up until the outbreak of the revolution, we left no avenue unexplored to put the union back together, to no avail. Some of us were apprehensive that this split, unless checked, would manifest itself in Ethiopia, with dire consequences. I believe we were proven right.

Melaku Tegegn

I am grateful for being given some time. I am convinced that what has been presented so far on the student movement is useful; therefore, I would like to continue in that vein. I would like to take up two items: to report on the struggle by the Alemaya College student movement (hitherto unrecorded) and to supplement on what Yeraswork has spoken concerning the European Union and the Federation. I hope that I will be allowed sufficient time.

At the time, 1968-69 and 1970, the number of secondary school students who had sat for and passed Matriculation Examination and joined the University and Alemaya College had hit an all-time high. Many of us had participated in the student movement and had become radicalized. This is one aspect. Secondly, while we were still in secondary school in Addis Ababa, the student movement had become nation-wide, especially after 1968. Alemaya College was the only exception. Our chief objective was to make Alemaya a part of the nation-wide student movement, to radicalize it. The first great move along this path was taken when Alemaya College joined the struggle in 1968 in the nation-wide demonstration that was staged under the slogan, "Education for all!"

For the first time in its history, Alemaya College was to stage a demonstration. As most of you aware, Alemaya is located in the countryside. The town itself is little more than a village. So we debated as to which town to use for a demonstration and finally settled on Harar (the provincial capital). However, there were logistical and security problems. This was a different kettle of fish, unlike Arat Kilo or Sidist Kilo, where students could assemble promptly and take to the streets. The journey (from Alemaya to another town) would take one or two hours, thus risking isolation and dispersal. Therefore, taking the security risks into consideration, we did not decide either our destination or the route to be taken until the last moment; we left this decision to the Executive Council. It was feared that certain elements in the student body might inform the police.

I remember that we started walking to Harar at 4:00 am and arrived there at dawn. We then marched to the city center. The police, having been informed of the demonstration, were lying in wait for us on the highway. However, as we had crossed the countryside to reach the city, the police had to retrace their path to meet us. They stopped us in front of the Governor's office, near the bank. They refused to let us continue. I recall a vociferous Debella Dinsa²³ (then a captain) yelling: "If you don't go back, you will get your just desserts!" There followed a confrontation: we stood our ground and let it be known that we would not return without submitting our demands to the Governor; they claimed that

²³ He subsequently became a member of the Derg that ruled Ethiopia after the overthrow of Emperor Haile Sellassie in September 1974.

the Governor was absent. Finally the Executive Council (the President was Befekadu Degefe) negotiated a truce (“your demands will be presented to the government. Now go back in an orderly fashion”). We returned home in two buses supplied by the government.

Back on campus, the Executive Council was put on the carpet for taking divisive measures. At this point in time, the student movement had become a boiling cauldron. Eight University students (including Walelign) had been sentenced to from five to seven years imprisonment. (Only one escaped across the Somali border). Mesfin Habtu and a few others were given a prison term of six months. The students refused to attend classes unless those imprisoned were set free. Once again, a logistical problem arose – how to secure transport funds for students to return home. The union somehow managed to collect money from teachers and other sources and to provide the required amount. Those who could afford to pay their own way home were told to do so. Although some students returned to classes later, everyone had withdrawn. Those of us who left in April returned to our studies only six months later when Walelign and the others were granted amnesty and set free.

What did we engage in during those six months? We read and studied. Books were hard to come by; however, we read, studied and discussed anything and everything we could lay our hands on. When we got back in 1969, we had become radicalized and quite articulate regarding certain questions. Those students who had returned to classes earlier were, in keeping with the labeling system of USUAA, branded turncoats. The majority of the students were radical; they (the turncoats) were a minority, albeit a significant one!

What made the year 1969 special? Certain instructors arrived. For instance, Yohannes Admassu²⁴ was assigned to teach Amharic to freshmen. There were three other lectures with him. One was Mulugeta Assefa back from the States, but I do not recall the name of the third person. We, members of the Student Council, got very close with them and began clandestine work. By dint of my being the Vice-President, and the fact that the President was taken to be a reactionary (my own opinion is that he may have secured the post because he was a senior then), I was the one who had direct contact with Yohannes and the rest. Yohannes and his group in turn had contact with Bereket Habte Selassie²⁵, who was then legal advisor to the Governor. Bereket was our source of information for what was going on in the government. Our activities were prompted by his information. For instance, we would prepare pamphlets and pass them on to Yohannes and his group, who commuted daily to and from their

²⁴ The poet who was dismissed from college after reading the winning poem at the controversial College Day described in detail in the first chapter.

²⁵ Attorney-General and member of the Enquiry Commission set up in the wake of the February 1974 Revolution, before he joined the EPLF camp.

residence in Harar by car. They would hand the pamphlets to Bereket and he would pass them on to secondary school students.

For the first time, we were able to coordinate Alemaya College and secondary schools. This was the time that lecturers started getting involved. In 1969, when things took a turn for the worse, it was decided by the union that the president and myself should confer with the USUAA leadership in Addis Ababa. The individuals we met were Tilahun Gizaw, Abbay Abraha, Yohannes Kassahun and, occasionally, Worku Gebeyehu. During our two-day meeting, they informed us that the regime wanted students to stage demonstrations so that it could kill those it had targeted; therefore, we should take care not to provoke it or fall into its trap. They also gave us a modest analysis on the national question and that this issue should be addressed. We then returned to Alemaya.

Some time after our return (I believe it was in early December 1969), we received a copy of "Tagel" carrying Walelign's article on the questions of nationalities. We read and discussed it. Then, I think it was on the day of the Qulubi annual holiday²⁶, we got the news that Tilahun Gizaw had been assassinated. Our first measure was boycotting classes. Then the question of taking to the streets was raised but abandoned. (A number of students had been killed in connection with the funeral service arrangements of Tilahun Gizaw). Then word reached us from Bereket informing us that a list had been circulated by the security on which had appeared the names of five students to be assassinated and advising us to proceed with great caution seeing the extremely tense political atmosphere. The students were unwilling to provoke retaliations and went on with their studies. I remember that only two other students and myself left Alemaya. In the aftermath of Tilahun's assassination, the Alemaya campus was surrounded by an armed force (not the police) for one week; no one could enter or leave the campus during that period. This may have been another factor that frightened the students.

When we turn our attention to the situation in Europe, there are some events that I would like to reminisce. While we were on our way to buy a train ticket from Dire Dawa to Addis, the three of us who had withdrawn from Alemaya met Tekalign Wolde Ammanuel, who happened to be in town. We held a lengthy discussion with him. He asked us what we were planning to do. We told him that it was no longer possible to continue with the student movement; something else had to be done. Although, we had a strong conviction that an armed struggle had to be waged, we had no idea how to go about starting a revolutionary movement or how to set up a communist party. We did not discuss this either with Tilahun or anyone else. It was Tekalign who first gave us a helpful hint. He was in agreement with us that the student movement could not

²⁶ The annual celebration of the feast of St. Gabriel falls on Tahsas 19/December 28/29. Qulubi is the town not far from Harar which becomes a centre of pilgrimage on that day.

continue on the path it had traveled so far. Accordingly, it had to change into a revolutionary movement. Armed struggle could start only once a communist party had been set up, and a communist party had to go through a given process before it emerged as a reality. The first task is to raise the public awareness in Marxism. To achieve this, Marxist study circles had to be set up.

We then made our way to Addis, where our first task was to set up a study circle. I remember that through lack of experience, we were indiscriminate in recruiting members. For example, 25 persons attended the meeting I called. Do you recall, Dessalegn, a friend of ours called Siraj Dibaba? Maybe was a relative of yours. Our meeting took place at his home. We reached agreement that the aim was to enhance our knowledge of Marxism, and to that end Marxist literature should be collected and properly compiled for easy access. A week or two later, someone who was not even remotely linked to us told me that he knew that we had formed a political party. That incident taught me the need for prudence. We had no choice but to dismantle the study group and put it on hold because the disclosure of this matter spelt danger to us.

The study group gave us a good opportunity to develop strong ties with Mesfin Habtu, with whom we exchanged literature. Mesfin further advised us that all those who can leave for Europe and America should do so because the organized forces were located in these two places. He was of the opinion that rallying these forces would go a long way in expediting the question of armed struggle and revolution. Those were the circumstances under which we came to Europe

My first destination was Holland. We had always had a high opinion of the union there. However, the reality was a let-down. With the exception of one student residing in Amsterdam, the others were all living as post-graduate students at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague. A second problem was their limited number; they were 6 or 7 when we came. The other problem was that, apart from studying and discussing, the students engaged in no other political activities outside the union. The union leaders were Terrefe W/Tsadik and Abera Yemaneab,²⁷ with whom we held several meetings at their homes; however most of these discussions were informal.

In time, differences emerged between us. We were of the opinion that we should be organized and that we should struggle. I remember Terefe's reaction: "It is of primary importance that we should convene a congress of all Ethiopian socialists in order to form a communist party. That is how a communist party is formed. It is a protracted process. It is imperative that the student union should be well-versed in Marxism." While we agreed that being well-versed in Marxism

²⁷ Both eventually became members of the *Me'ison* leadership.

was necessary, there was a need for organizing a determined group of people outside the student union if we were to accomplish something of substance.

This was how the differences started. They started in the student union in Netherlands and, as Yeraswork observed, later encompassed Europe and eventually spread to the World Wide Federation. In retrospect, I think the differences were more organizational than political; it was a reflection of the rift between the groups that were later to organize *Me'ison* (All Ethiopia Socialist Movement) and EPRP (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party). Despite Haile's repeated trips to Algiers and lengthy discussions, no consensus could be reached between the two groups. In essence, they tacitly agreed to disagree: "You go your way and we will go ours. If at a point in time, we see eye to eye, then we can come together."

But the problem was that both targeted the student unions and the student movement, be it for recruiting members or to push forward their political positions. Most members of the student union were blissfully unaware of this. Other questions that arose later widened the gap between them; but the initial point of disagreement was organizational. The whole matter should be viewed in this context.

With respect to the question of nationalities, I remember that the ESUNA newsletter containing Tilahun Takele's article reached us in Holland in May or June. Prior to this, all unions had done studies on the subject in preparation for the 11th ESUE Congress, as that question was to be the main item in the agenda. So had we. In point of fact, I was the one who prepared the Chapter's paper on the question of nationalities. We knew nothing of the controversy that had arisen elsewhere. On reading Tilahun Takele's article, we discovered that it was very polemical. We also realized that the issue had reached a point of no return. We were in support of Tilahun Takele's stance but only because Walelign's position was similar to Tilahun's. We had neither political nor ideological ties before that. Mesfin Habtu was instrumental in getting us in touch with the Algeria group, with whom we started corresponding. We promptly established a good rapport because since my days at Alemaya I had great respect for the group, particularly for Berhane Meskel.

Because at the time I was a fresh political refugee with no regular residence, I was using as my postal address the house where Tereffe and Aberra were residing. Having been told to move to another city in order to join a language school, I was not around when Gezahegn Endale came to visit me from Algiers. He had been given my name and address and instructed to get in touch with me. He came knocking on the door of the house which he thought was mine. While Aberra knew him, Terrefe had no inkling of who he was. Anyway, when Gezahegn realted his message, he was told that I was not in. Aberra then phoned to tell me that Tekalign was looking for me. Perplexed by this

unexpected visit, I rushed to their place and met Gezahegn Endale. As we two did not know each other, Gezahegn introduced himself and his mission. Our discussion was also attended by two like-minded people.

Gezahegn did not beat around the bush. He said, “We intend to form a revolutionary party. Are you for it?” We wholeheartedly agreed to the proposal. Then, presumably intending to put me to the test, he said: “Although we believe in the setting up of a revolutionary party, in keeping with Ethiopian tradition, what is essential is to launch an armed struggle with a revolutionary character amongst the peasantry. It is imperative that we start this, whether it succeeds or fails, whether HaileSelassie will have our heads or not. For this, we need the vanguard force. So are you ready for that?” I replied: “Yes, I am ready.” Then, he changed tack and informed me that an organization by the name of the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Organization²⁸ was in formation and showed me its draft constitution and political program. We agreed. Then he asked me to show this to the other two people with me, and if they too agreed, we would be required to submit an application for membership. We all agreed and thus became organically linked. This was how we became linked with the Algeria group.

In the struggle that we waged in Europe, including our efforts to set up the World Wide Federation, our guiding principle was the party's program. We had been organized. This was the situation when the Congress of the World Wide Union of Ethiopian Students (as the Federation was then known) was called. That Union was not concrete in the sense that it had no executive body of its own, nor its own structure. Up until 1972, the number of its member unions was on the rise. While both ESUNA and ESUE were still members, NUEUS, which had become inoperative, could not participate effectively. So the only choice left was to organize the student unions abroad. A new element was the establishment of the Ethiopian Women Study Group in both Europe and North America, which had gone further and formed the World Wide Ethiopian Women Study Group. Then other unions began emerging in the Middle East, in Israel, in Lebanon and the Sudan, while Algeria claimed to have its own union. This was the situation when the founding congress of the World Wide Federation was convened.

À propos what Yeraswork mentioned earlier, do you recall my being elected initially to chair the Congress? The meeting was attended by a good number of non-delegates. This triggered a row over procedural matters; as a result, the meeting broke up in one or two days. It was decided that the only way to re-establish order was to restrict the discussion to delegates instead of allowing everyone assembled to talk. Accordingly, we held a secret meeting from which ESUE and Lebanon were excluded. Later, we held an all-night

²⁸ In the official history of the EPRP written by Kiflu Taddese, the organization’s name is given as the Ethiopian People’s Liberation Organization (EPLO). See Kiflu 1993: 78ff.

meeting in the home of a German Trotskyite named Sieble Blogstet. We had enlisted her aid when EPRP was formed a year earlier. I recall that we burned the midnight oil and went straight to the meeting the next morning. The outcome was a decision to establish the world-wide union whether ESUE and Lebanon were part of it or not. It would not be put off any more. A meeting of the elected members was held. I still cannot understand how Tesfaye Debesay was elected Chairman as he was not a delegate. What ensued has already been reported by Yeraswork.

The next row occurred at the 13th Congress of ESUE. The theme of the Congress was the role of student unions. This question needed clearing up. What was surprising was that a meeting scheduled to last seven days broke up when altercation arose over the report submitted by the Executive Committee of ESUE. No discussion was held on the chief issue – the question of the Federation. Up until the time of the meeting of the Federation, a large amount of political tract had been disseminated both by ESUE and by us, and this had caused a very tense atmosphere. From the outset, lines had been drawn. It was total pandemonium. No side was willing to give in an inch. The discussion was a mere formality. In the end, votes were cast to decide the winning side. As ESUE's supporters were larger in number, they carried the day. ESUE was successful in having its resolutions passed.

One of the resolutions was a condemnation of Holland, the Soviet Union and Switzerland whose unions had made their stand clear earlier. What irked us was the fact that our insistent demand that the Congress be held in Berlin was not accepted. Were the Congress held in Berlin, it would have been accessible to students from Eastern Europe, who would have had only to cross from East to West Berlin. The inter-city train fare in Germany being outrageously expensive, there would not be many participants. The reason why we wanted a good number of students from the Soviet Union to attend the Congress was because they supported the Federation. We were very chagrined that ESUE chose Hanover over Berlin as venue. As planned, they got their majority vote and that was that.

The next dispute, as Yeraswork mentioned earlier, occurred when the February Revolution erupted. Incidentally, the issue discussed at the 12th Congress in Antony²⁹ was the nature of the Ethiopian Revolution. It was standard practice to perceive the Ethiopian revolution in its subjective and objective traits. I don't exactly recall his identity but a member of the ESUE leadership remarked that there were no objective conditions for the Ethiopian revolution, much less subjective ones. The implication of the argument was that armed struggle was not necessary. When, therefore, the February revolution erupted, we pointed out to them that they had always maintained that there was

²⁹ In the summer of 1972.

neither objective nor subjective condition for the revolution and that the eruption of the revolution proved that our stand was correct.

We were at such crossroads when the April [1974] meeting that Yeraswork mentioned earlier was called. The issue of contention was with regard to the questions/and/or slogans we should raise. Being new, our party had no clear-cut slogans. When the revolution erupted, not all members of the leadership were present in the country. I remember that Kiflu [Taddese] and others were here [i.e. in Ethiopia]. Tesfaye [Debessay] and Zer'u Kishen had also returned. The rest were all abroad. There was thus no clear stand. Although it was Tariku [Debre Tsion] who brought up the question of the provisional government, it was Kiflu's support of this that you found a bitter pill to swallow. ESUE was well aware that Kiflu was a member of the Central Committee of EPRP, thanks to Desta, who had been a member before he changed his mind and joined AESM (*Me'ison*). That is why Kiflu's endorsement was seen as the stand of the EPRP; however, that was not the case.

Therefore, when the 14th Congress of ESUE was held [in the summer of 1974], the slogan became the central issue of debate. I do not believe that EPRP had seriously espoused the motto. The slogan of a "Provisional People's Government" had risen only after the Derg's seizure of power on September 12. I even recall the [Me'ison] newspaper "The Voice of the Masses" issuing an article in support of it. There was a lot of confusion. At that same 14th Congress, the other major object of dispute was the role of the various social classes in the revolution. Our stand was that the proletariat had a leading role in the revolutionary struggle.

Abdul Mohamed

I will keep it brief. In point of fact, I feel that there is no need to go into details regarding some things. When Tilahun was assassinated in 1969, the activist camp was disintegrating. We would assemble in groups in order to determine what was to be done next. Despite the confusing situation, it was decided that those able to do so should leave the country. People were beginning to leave, some in an orderly fashion, others not so. I cannot deny the fact that family pressure too played a role in this “exodus”.

When school re-opened following Tilahun’s assassination, seventy students had been expelled. These were highly acclaimed students, renowned for their contribution to the student movement. It was decided that students should leave in small groups. Those who could afford to leave should do so and those who did not have the means should be assisted. Contact with those who were already in the States was established with a view to enlisting their aid in accommodating these. Zer’u Keshen and Mehari Tesfaye were among these. We were rather disorganized when we left here; however, we were genuinely proud of being members of USUAA, engaged in shaping the fate of our country. In that sense we had our own sub-culture. This was the situation then.

The first group leaving for America numbered 7 or 8 people. We found out that the student movement there was better structured than we had given it credit for. Their style of calling meetings, their political education program, etc. was some thing we were not prepared for. We were a little perplexed because we did not know whether this would shrivel up our enthusiasm or on the contrary bolster it. The other matter (discussed earlier) that we could not take in our stride were those nine days’ wonder from the Bay Area (California). Alem has described them earlier. Thus, we met both the structured group – Alem, Andreas and Dessalegn – and those from the Bay Area, for the first time at the 1970 Congress in Washington D.C. Those from the Bay Area met with us and harshly asked: “What do you think you are doing here? Why did you come? We are all set on going back home; you, on the other hand, could not think of anything better than to come here. Are you fleeing from the struggle?” They tried to talk us into either returning home or leaving for Cuba. In point of fact, they were preparing for a trip to Cuba. So much so, that they had discarded their meager belongings. They were poised to depart; however, as Alem pointed out earlier, they held meetings with them in the evenings and managed to mollify them by nominating Senay for President and a redoubtable person named Abdul for Secretary-General. They left satisfied and we stayed behind to plan our next step.

It my opinion there is something vitally important and worth recording. As Melaku has pointed out in his presentation, at one point in time, steps were taken

to organize a political party. The entire hullabaloo in the student movement was controlled by it, although most of the students were not aware of it. As for us, we had organized ourselves into a cell of five people. Of these, Semereab (who has now completely retired from politics) and I are the only survivors. The other three – Zer'u Kishen, Mesfin Habtu and Zer'abruk Abebe – have passed away. That is why I feel we should proceed very cautiously when we bring up this matter. Our contact was directly with those in Algeria, from where we would receive our guidelines. In retrospect, some of these guidelines were counter-productive while others were based on serious reflection. They tended to consider the question of nationalities to be of paramount importance and the rest to be of little consequence. We were accordingly instructed to concentrate on the national question.

The group in Algeria was resigned to the fact that it could not control the European student union. The American situation was deemed more vulnerable and an all-out effort was being made to control its student union. It was thought that the only obstacle in the way was the leadership; therefore, ways and means were being sought to manage them. Instructions were coming to us that the students who had freshly arrived from Ethiopia could re-in force us in our struggle. Alem did not mention it, a serious altercation erupted when an anonymous directive sent to us became public. At issue was (1) the impropriety of opening a letter addressed to someone else (2) the content of the letter itself. As we could not resolve the problem, relations between us became strained.

I would like to mention here that prior to the split of ESUNA at the 1971 Congress, the ESUE Congress had taken place in Berlin. Our delegate to that Congress was Mesfin Habtu. Both Andreas and Berhane Meskel were present. The situation there contributed immensely to our decision concerning what measures we should take next. Mesfin had stopped over in Algeria on his way to Berlin. It would seem that he had held discussions there regarding the situation in America and an agreement had been reached. In retrospect, I believe that Mesfin was unhappy with both the agreement reached and the directives given. After his return from Algeria via Berlin, Mesfin had changed beyond all recognition. He distanced himself from everything.

Still, we had to attend the meeting in Los Angeles, where the split eventually occurred. Our ardent wish was that Tilahun Takele's article would be the main agenda of that Congress. However, we failed to adhere to the procedure required to bring up such issue for discussion. New York was the only place where we succeeded in having the issue discussed at chapter level. Even there we were hard put to elaborate on Tilahun Takele's writing. However, because we felt very strongly about the question of nationalities, we were able to rally, on rhetorical level, a good number of people around us. Notwithstanding what Alem said, our trip to Los Angeles was not motivated by the desire to create a split.

Rather, we planned either to take over the union leadership or to be part of it. Because the Bay Area was noted for its militancy, we succeeded in assembling those who were susceptible to our rhetoric. We also succeeded in bringing together those elements scattered around Washington. We were decidedly fond of debating.

We made our presentation, albeit a weak one. Because there was discord regarding procedure, our presentation was not properly discussed. Those who held strong beliefs regarding procedure left the meeting. Even Eshetu Chole, who was chairing the meeting, was having a difficult time. Zeneberwerk was also there; so were people from the Chicago Chapter who chose to remain neutral. In response to Eshetu's request to clarify our stand, we brandished Tilahun Takele's article. Other than that, we did not offer a potent argument reinforcing our stand. Then the split ensued. Those of us who survived the debacle regrouped in an effort to find a solution. We approached Mesfin, who acted as our leader, to accept the post of president. He refused. After we pleaded with him time and again, he consented to becoming president pro tempore. We then talked those from the Bay Area into joining us. I too followed suit. Nothing occurred for three or four months. Mesfin continued his solitary life; he obviously emerged discontented from the meeting. This contributed to his death. After his passing away, the situation changed. We regained our strength. New directives began reaching us via Zer'u. It is a long story. I thought this worth mentioning.

Another item worthy of focus is the case of Eritrean students who were members of ESUNA up until 1970, when they began to leave. They started forming their own association. Reinforced by new migrants from Eritrea, they held a meeting in what was known as International House and formed an organization called "Eritreans for Liberation". Amdetsion Amdeberhan was instrumental in rallying them. Soon after that, Eritrean members of ESUNA began leaving en masse. Since the question of nationalities was our chief agenda, we did not give up on them. We would meet them both individually and as a group. Meanwhile, Osman Saleh Sabeh came for a visit to the USA and we went to meet him. We informed him that we supported the right of self-determination. However, since we both had the same political objective and since socialism was the solution for both Eritrea and Ethiopia, there was no reason why we could not work together. I recall his reply: "This is all very well, but since we have always harboured suspicions towards those of you who are from the central sector of the country, we shall take you at your word only when you accept unequivocally the independence of Eritrea." We, however, had not gone so far as to condone secession. We have only accepted the principle of self-determination and had not yet figured out the next step. Our political education had not prepared us for secession. And that was that.

Tamrat Kebede

I do not know how brief this will be. Unlike Abdul, I am bereft of party discipline! However, I will make my presentation as brief as possible. I feel there is a gap in what has been presented so far. Alem mentioned the fact that in 1968, the role of students was the main agenda. As far as I can recall, the consensus reached was that, admittedly, the student body was a fleeting stratum. As such, it could sometime in the future join other forces to lead the revolution, but was not of itself and in itself a revolutionary force. Accordingly, it had no other role to play.

I am uncertain whether it was in that same year or a year later that Hagos returned from a trip to Europe, where he had gone as a delegate of ESUNA. Meanwhile AESM (*Me'ison*) had been formed and a certain number of ESUNA members were informed that they had been recruited into the party. However, this recruitment having not been formalized yet, when I came to Ethiopia in 1969, I was a member of both ESUNA and Meison. In my former capacity, I contacted students and gave funds destined for Getachew Kitaw and other incarcerated students. My activities included teaming up with Walleign and Yerga to run off and disseminate political tracts. I soon landed in prison. There, I met Abdul and other detainees (whom you undoubtedly know) whose prison sentences ranged from five to seven years. Whether my relationship with them (Henock Kifle excepted) was by dint of my membership in the student movement or of being a member of a party was not clear.

Even after my release, there were no clear directives. I was assigned to the Ministry of Land Tenure. By a happy coincidence, there was a left-wing group actively committed to effecting reforms in land tenure. Most of them were with me back in the USA I recall Ta'eme Beyene, Alemante G.Selassie, Alemseged Tesfaye, Mesfin Kassu, Zegeye Asfaw (the last had gone for his post-graduate studies when I joined the Ministry). Both as leftists and as party members, one group in the ministry rejected reforms on the grounds that they would only help to prolong a regime's life. Another group argued that any reform would be an additional step forward in the peasant's struggle. Depending on the goodwill of the Ministers (there were those who vehemently opposed any reduction of the Emperor's power regarding land, while there were others who loathed the idea of Parliament regulating the relationship between landlord and tenant), we were trying to balance these divergent approaches when the Revolution erupted.

Another supplementary point to what both Abdul and Alem had said is the fact that I played a key role in establishing contact and working relationship between the Abdul group and ESUNA. From what I could observe, you (Abdul et al) were of the opinion that, since you had been imprisoned and had undergone many hardships, you were conversant with the objective situation.

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The ESUNA leaders, on the other hand, were “structured theoreticians” (as you put it) who read such leftist periodicals as *Monthly Review* and studied socialist ideology. They thought of the struggle as a long process and were averse to immediate action. When you consider the stand EPRP later took, it is easy to see that from the outset they gave priority to action. Meles Ayalew’s piece, “A Long Journey” encapsulated the view of the ESUNA leadership about the protracted nature of the struggle. I think this should be properly understood.

I am trying not to take too long. We in the USA who had joined Me’ison through the good offices of Hagos left it quite early. One of the reasons for this was the fact that the party’s leadership was in Europe while all the action was in Ethiopia. We therefore requested that the *Me’ison* leadership move to Ethiopia, but they refused to heed our request. We could see the dispute taking place in the USA. The party’s reply to our request that it clarify its position regarding its support for the organization led by Berhane Meskel and co. was to the effect that this was under consideration and would be shortly revealed to us. Meanwhile we were to continue our activities inside Ethiopia. Our response was to inform them that, if the leadership were reluctant to return, we would go on with the struggle but under the banner of our own separate organization.

Chapter IV

Demonstrations and Embassy Occupations

Dessalegn Rahmato

I can see that the topic - Demonstrations and Siege of Embassies - differs from the others. My presentation will be brief. I am afraid that my recollection leaves a lot to be desired. Alem is much better than me in that respect. When earlier he spoke on ESUNA, I noticed that he remembered a lot of things. The following presentation is made after consulting with him.

First of all, there was a general feeling of dissatisfaction among students who regarded the annual ESUNA congresses - and their ensuing resolutions - as being inadequate forms of struggle. The possibilities of taking more direct measures were being considered. After all, students back home were engaging in demonstrations and other forms of struggle, while we were content with reading about and doing studies on Ethiopia to indicate our solidarity with them. However, if I am not mistaken during the course of our Second Congress in 1965, a formidable youth - no sense in not naming him - called Atnafu Zewdie exclaimed: "How absurd! All this amounts to nothing but endless talk" (We had heard that students who had staged the "Land to the Tiller" demonstration had been beaten and thrown in jail) "So," was our query, "What do you suggest that we do?" His reply was, "Let's demonstrate our opposition by marching into the Ethiopian Embassy and burning our passports!" We tried to dissuade him but to no avail. I recall that as one proposal for direct action.

We first took such direct action in March 1969. It was in connection with those students mentioned earlier by Tamrat who had been sentenced to prison terms (ranging from five to seven years), when twenty-five student union members took control of the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington. Unless I err, it was the first time such a measure was taken by the Ethiopian student movement or any other movement for that matter, to demonstrate one's opposition. The coordinators were Alem and Andreas. The police who arrived on the scene urged upon the students to call off the siege or face charges and imprisonment. Thus the matter was peacefully resolved. There were students (including Hagos, I believe) who were adamant and ready to confront the police.

We had learnt our lesson by the time Emperor Haile Sellassie arrived in Washington in July 1968 at the invitation of the Nixon Administration. Intent on getting as much publicity as possible, we were better prepared and in greater number than in the past. While one group was chanting protests in front of the White House when the Emperor arrived (I believe Andreas was in the forefront of this demonstration), a second group broke into the Ethiopian Embassy, where

journalists whom we had earlier informed of the coming event were awaiting us. The police charged in and arrested us. (We all know how physically imposing American policemen are). When one of them grabbed Habte Kitisa and tossed him, a woman named Tsehay took hold of the officer's neck, I pleaded with her to let go off him, scared that he might mangle her. (Incidentally, I believe we have photographs of all these incidents.) Twelve of us were put under arrest. Andreas was in charge of securing a lawyer for our defense. We appeared in court and were released pending a subsequent hearing.

One of the detainees was Shibrú Tedla (now Professor), who had eagerly joined the demonstration. He was released ahead of us (for unknown reasons) and deported to Canada. I think I can state that the demonstration admirably achieved its objectives of striking a political blow, exposing the emperor and revealing the real situation in Ethiopia, as was evinced by the wide coverage given it by the press. For example, it was a prominent piece of news in *The Washington Post*. Subsequently, demonstrations organized by the student union in front of the U.N. Office on such issues as the question of Eritrea occurred with regular frequency.

Yeraswork Admassie

I believe that both the time and location of embassy sieges by members of the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe have been duly documented. Let me focus on one such siege I took part in. Following Tilahun's assassination, we received instructions to take control of the Ethiopian Embassy in Sweden as well as other embassies found in Europe to publicize our protests. As luck would have it, we were in Stockholm when word reached us about the assassination. We decided to strike while the iron was hot. Unfortunately, the Embassy, having been occupied repeatedly in the past, had more stringent security arrangements than most. Accordingly, a police car which had been patrolling the area spotted us and we had to abort the mission. We then held a meeting, where it was decided to form a two-man committee composed of Dr. Kebede Mengesha and I believe Mezgebe Teklehaimanot. They were to make arrangements for a meticulously planned and well executed siege. Everyone was instructed to keep the matter confidential. Obviously, our *modus operandi* was beginning to resemble a military operation.

Interestingly enough, the instruction that required our immediate presence in Stockholm had come in the evening while we were having a good time. We started the 800 kilometer journey (from Lund) right then. We drove the whole night and arrived at our destination. There were thirty of us when we entered the previously mentioned place (Zenith), which housed the mimeographing machine. Now the plan was disclosed to us, that is to say what strategy we were going to put into effect. We figured that the only way of breaking into the embassy was for an Ethiopian whose identity could not be readily associated to enter it on routine business and leave. A group of five people (who had synchronized their watches for this purpose) would immediately follow in his footsteps. A certain number of Swedes, sympathetic to our cause, were already inside the embassy in order to facilitate our mission. I was with the first group, and so was a man from the naval force reputed to be skilled in martial arts. (We had been informed earlier that the Ambassador was armed and would shoot us without any compunction.) Everything went according to plan - all the assigned groups took their place as agreed. The Embassy was under our control.

Meanwhile, Dr. Elehu, who had a good command of Swedish, was outside the embassy giving interviews and issuing prepared statements. Photographs (including those of the Emperor) that used to adorn the walls of the embassy were taken down to make place for our posters and pictures of workers and peasants. This was done without causing any damage. An inventory of the food and drinks found on the premises was taken, but nothing was consumed. Of course, we perused the Embassy archives and examined the kind of reports sent by the Embassy. (It is interesting to note that those of us who had arrived from Lund had had nothing to eat while all this was going on). Statements were issued

to the Swedish media from the windows. The Swedish police, who had not been formally asked to intervene by Embassy officials, had accordingly refrained from storming the building. But, as we started negotiating with the Embassy officials, they chose that moment to break in. When the Police commissioner announced, "I arrest all of you", the Embassy Secretary, Ato Getaneh protested, "Why do you arrest these guys? They haven't done any crime". The Police commissioner in turn asked him who he was. The First Secretary disclosed his identity. Whereupon Kebede Mengesha said, "Then, we are all political prisoners!" At this point, the policemen, who had taken up positions on the steps, arrested the students and marched out. At our appearance in court, each of us was fined (depending on their income) three Birr per day for 40 days. We spent that night in prison. Ironically, the First Secretary, who had earlier come to our defense, later wrote in his report: "If the police had taken decisive steps (measures), events would have turned out differently."

Abdul Mohammed

Let me tell you an amusing anecdote concerning public demonstrations. It was in 1969 that demonstrations began to take their shape. Repeated demonstrations and chantings in front of the U.N. Secretariat were becoming too commonplace and a new breed of militants was clamouring for more potent measures; accordingly, they came up with the idea of conducting a protest march from New York to Washington DC. We exhausted all our arguments in an attempt to dissuade them. Finally, Sisay Ibsa (who passed away a week ago, may he rest in peace!), who never minced his words, spoke up; "Listen, firstly there are five states between New York and Washington: Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and New York, which means that you need five different permits. Secondly, you cannot march on the freeway. So you are left with the state highways, which will entail your trespassing on private property and being sued for it!" Thus, he resolved the whole problem for us.

Netsanet Mengistu

It is apparent that the ESUNA contingent has monopolized the discussion. My own contribution is prompted by your request that those who were at Addis Ababa University share their experiences. When we first joined A.A.U., we came to realize not only that those in the leadership of the student union were well-read, but also that they spoke such “high-brow” English we were hard put to admit that we had gotten our education in that same language. We could not make head or tail of what they meant. As Zenebework pointed out earlier, we were suffering from an inferiority complex. We felt that as we could not comprehend what they were saying, then we must be inferior to them. To make matters worse, there was a “literary clique” which specialized in concealing books they had read. This was intended to foster their delusions of grandeur. It had a special impact on us girl students who entertained the belief - beginning in secondary school - that politics was the exclusive preserve of the powers-that-be.

Although we were eager to learn, no one so much as acknowledged our existence. The Habtu brothers were a different breed. For one thing, they were educated in the all-male Tafari Makonnen School, hence privileged. Their reputation had preceded them; however the language they used was totally incomprehensible, especially the language used by Tilahun and his friends. This is in no way meant to denigrate Tilahun, who was an upright and considerate person. It is just to assert that we were unable to understand his speeches, even with the help of a dictionary! I believe that this fact was one of the contributing factors to his losing the first election. When he came back after a year spent reading, however, he had changed beyond all recognition: he could pass his message to the well informed as well as to the uninitiated with equal ease. Things changed with Tilahun's election to the presidency. Books became more accessible, and no one looked down on us. A spirit of rapprochement had descended. Gone were the days when girls were castigated in the pages of *Struggle*; or the times when the female sex was regarded with contempt. We were beginning to understand each other.

One other item I would like to take up is the question of “action”. At the time, action had become a major issue right here in our country. After Walelign's death, we had to take his suitcase to Gebru [Mersha]'s house. Because Gebru and Walelign were really close, it was all the more necessary to spare Gebru additional torment and grief. We therefore took the suitcase to my place. On opening it, I was confronted by a piece of paper on which was written, “All my friends are a bunch of cowards. I cannot degenerate to their level. The only form of expression I know is action. Action Now!” What is the significance of this? It showed that he had run out of patience. Firstly, he was a young man. Secondly, he had led a stressful life, which we did not attempt to alleviate. Could he have

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opened his heart to someone? Why did he leave this written testimony? These were questions that have always tormented me. That suitcase was discarded and all of us were scattered in different directions; however, these words remained seared in my mind. May be those of us who remained here had a different concept of action from those of you who were abroad. Did the objective conditions existing at that time warrant taking actions? Why did this young man choose to pen those words in red paint - not red ink? Could it be that Waleign's cry for action was justifiable? I keep wondering.

Hailu Ayele

As related by Gebru Mersha, preceding the Shola Camp Demonstration, students and teachers had gone to the place and taken pictures, which were later posted in the dining hall. On the next day, a meeting calling for a protest march was held. The leading proponents were the students of the Main Campus Union (Eshetu and the rest). The group that was organizing the city-wide union worked closely with Abdul Mejid and others in staging the demonstration. When the march reached what was formerly known as the Prime Minister's office (now an appellate court), it found its way blocked by security forces, whereupon we sat on the road. "Where are you headed?" they inquired. "We are headed for Parliament, where the people's representatives are," we replied. "In that case, send your delegates," they proposed. "No," we rejoined, "we intend to stage a demonstration." After a brief consultation, they allowed the march to proceed to Parliament escorted by security forces. We climbed the steps and made our way across from the present Prime Minister's office. I vividly remember that we were met by the President of the Senate, General Abiy Abebe. I also clearly recall Temesgen Haile shouting: "Is poverty a crime?" The General then replied angrily, "That's enough! Each and every one of us is poor." We saw red. In hindsight, I tend to believe that his remark was not meant to be offensive; however, we were irritated by the fact that this speaker was ill-placed to get away with this facetious statement. A short disturbance ensued and we were pushed out into the street.

We had intended to head for Sidist Kilo, but we began marching towards Piazza. We were once more stopped near Ras Mekonnen Bridge. (I wish Taye, who got hold of a policeman and pushed him into the river, were here now!) The police used tear gas and there were some casualties. On our way back, a lot of students were limping. At lunch time the scene on campus was akin to a gathering of heroes who had returned from the battlefield! With all due respect to the psychologists among us, I am of the opinion that that demonstration was a catharsis in that it opened our eyes: the confrontation with security forces illustrated beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were not invincible. It even lent credence to the belief that, handled with caution, they could even be allies. That is why members of security forces summoned to quell subsequent demonstrations were those recruited from rural areas. Presumably, the ones in the city were considered to be too tame. The regime too had learned a lesson.

Looking back, I think that the demonstration would have come to a peaceful closing if in particular the Minister of Education and the Minister of Interior had not interfered. We had come to an understanding with the Police Chief of Addis Ababa, General Yilma, who was later reprimanded for it. The assembled group constituted, among others, Dean Paul, Mesfin Kassu (from the

National Union), Aberra Degu, Temesgen and myself. We let it be known that all we intended to do was present our grievance to Parliament. As usual, they suggested that a few delegates carry the message there, and a little later demanded that we submit the names of those students who were in charge. At first we were apprehensive, but we soon discussed among us and, emboldened, acceded to their wish. Mesfin Kassu declared that the National Union would take all responsibility. We, in turn, declared that every one of us would assume responsibility. Dean Paul had joined the negotiations when a Mercedes car with a passenger in it (it was only later that we realized that it was the Minister of Interior) arrived on the scene. He let us know in no uncertain terms that should we attempt to go on with the demonstration, there would be dire consequences. Everyone scaled the walls of the campus and jumped in. The police threw tear gas, stormed the building and caused untold damage.

Regarding the Fashion Show incident, it may be said that, on the one hand, students almost always would invite provocations, which the authorities would readily supply. One year earlier, when we celebrated “College Day”, on which occasion the poem “Berekete Mergem” was read, the Dean of Women's Affairs, Linda (I do not recall her surname) had arranged a separate program for girl students. Although dismayed, we had reached an agreement whereby a certain number of girl students would attend our function while a given number would be present at their own. That year a fashion show had taken place without eliciting adverse reaction from us. However, when a similar event was repeated the following year, students decided that Linda had set out to alienate the girl students from the boy students. By provoking an incident, the students wanted to show the impropriety of holding a fashion show. But they had certainly not bargained for the excessively harsh measures meted out by the regime, following which schools were closed for a long period of time.

One additional point, when we joined college and at USUAA, meetings were invariably conducted in English, and this discouraged those with poor command of the language from participating effectively. Accordingly, only a few students were able to express their opinions. I distinctly remember that this situation was turned around when we staged a demonstration in opposition to the law that set restrictions on public demonstrations. I attended the last meeting after being released from prison and that was when I had the opportunity to observe a meeting conducted by a USUAA congressman and later a graduate of Law School, Serabezu, in Amharic. This was the first time that student union members in A.A. witnessed a meeting conducted in Amharic. No wonder a great number of students were able to express their opinions. From then on, of course, Amharic replaced English as the medium of all verbal & written communication.

Bekele Taddese

My presentation differs from those of others because if what I have heard so far is anything to go by, everyone is progressive. Maybe after I have delivered mine, it will appear that I am the only person who is not. I will not go over the demonstrations staged during our stay in campus (1965-70) because they have been exhaustively described. I have no additional information regarding them. However, I would like to say a few words in connection with the Restoration Committee. As it was mentioned earlier, Gebru was its founder and leading figure. Maybe, if we were to pose certain questions about the Committee, we might get an inkling as to its *raison d'être*: Were all the University students of that era, especially those residing in Addis Ababa, progressive? Or were all, without exception, supporters of the slogan that each nation should secede? That is the real question.

Following the founding of the committee, we would openly discuss these questions. (I was chairing these meetings after Gebru's departure). We did not (in the manner of the Crocodile Society) hold clandestine meetings. We would meet at Amist Kilo or Varsity Hall. So what did we discuss in the course of these meetings? As Gebru pointed out earlier, there were amongst us AFS (American Field Service)³⁰ students. There were in our midst elements who spoke out in favour of genuine democracy, against socialism and in opposition to those who secretly backed the secessionist movement in Eritrea. Needless to say, there were other elements too. There were those who believed that the communist way of conducting affairs should be avoided, or there were in particular those who strongly advocated the distribution of land to the oppressed (the tiller). So, was there, at the time, a dissenting opinion? Yes, indeed; however, there were also those who dreaded the prospect of going against current trends. This platform gave them an opportunity to air their views.

I would like to impress on those who may wish to chronicle this history the importance of accepting that there were differences. The student movement was made up of assorted elements, and it was democratic. This should be emphatically stated in that chronicle. Were we in the minority? We were not, on the contrary. Had Anna Gomez been around, a proper investigation of that half vote allotted to freshman students would have had a different result. I mean it. Both Hailu and I recall (You too were present then, Netsanet, were you not?). When USUAA, which enjoyed unquestioned power, called a meeting, This meeting called by Hailu and the others was conducted in a manner that became known later as "democratic centralism", i.e. they would place their own men in

³⁰ This was a reference to a US program that allowed selected high school students from Ethiopia to spend their final year in high school with a family in the United States, after which they would join college in Ethiopia.

strategic spots in every meeting or assembly hall. Since USUAA was chairing the meeting, we never stood a chance of being called upon to speak. We were many; they were few, albeit well organized. As mentioned earlier, those members who had recently arrived from the USA were endeavoring to implement democratic principles as they were practiced in Britain and the USA. Our behavior was above board. For their part, they would take turns at the floor and finally terminate the meeting.

I must admit that I had a grudging admiration for the founders of USUAA. A friend or mine, however, invariably referred to them as the “GN”³¹ clique: **Waleign**, **Tekalign**, **Gezahegn**, etc. He is convinced that all those whose names ended with “gn” were Communists! Their “modus operandi” bordered on the incredible, I can vouch for that. We would spend the whole evening preparing propaganda material and disseminating it all over the campus in the dead of night. Then along would come Gezahegn and company to remove our leaflets and replace them with theirs. On one particular occasion (on the eve of the casting of ballots), we had adorned our material with a picture of a ‘nacet’ blade neatly cutting a crocodile into two – and scattered it all over the campus grounds. We were anticipating with great relish the students’ reaction to this. When we arrived on campus the next morning, however, not a single trace of our nocturnal labor was in evidence! To add insult to injury, we found some of their leaflets clinging to shrubs and trees. They were undoubtedly well organized, and we were not.

Be that as it may, most of us firmly believed that opinions should be expressed openly. Then, of course, the inevitable occurred: a referendum was held and we were defeated. Despite that, as far as I knew, most of us stood our ground; however, the stage the student movement had reached, the existing crying need for a change as well as the fact that USUAA proved itself to be a firmly-based and well-organized body tipped the scale in its favor, as a result of which a great number of students drifted to it.

In truth, personally speaking, I was vigorously opposed to USUAA, even more so than Gebru. What convinced most of us not only to join the struggle but to participate actively in it were the government’s repressive measures. In my case, I had a change of heart during my University Service year. I was assigned to Gbimbi (Wellega). (Berhane Meskel was in nearby Assossa, if I remember correctly). One of our colleagues was Araya Selassie Bekele, a student of Alemaya and son of *Dejazmach* Bekele. When Araya Selassie’s grandfather died, his father telephoned and instructed me to bring him home without divulging the sad event. Accordingly, I drove him back to his home town in his own car. After dropping him at his home, I went to the University. While I was

³¹ Pronounced as ñ in the Spanish “señor”.

in Adem Abdella's office, I overheard some student leaders inquiring which students would return to their assigned areas. I informed them that I would go back to Wellega. They handed me a carton box full of printed paper which they instructed me to distribute to University Service students along my route. At first I had no inkling of the contents of the paper. Once inside the bus, I opened one of the boxes and fished out a paper. It was Walelign's "Le Awaju Awaj"³². I started reading it in Ambo. I was captivated. At every station I arrived (Bakko, Guder, etc.) I would hand the paper to university students who had earlier been informed by phone of my arrival.

When I arrived in Nekemt, Tekola Dejene, Merse (Ejjigu?) and others informed me that a detachment of security forces was waiting for me in Ghimbi in order to place me under arrest. I had three more stations to cover: Dembi Dollo, Ghimbi and Asossa. I promptly decided on a pre-emptive action. I got off the bus, ran into the nearby woods, concealed the papers and proceeded on my journey. In Ghimbi, the police searched my luggage but found nothing. Later I got in touch with some students and let them know where I had hidden the papers. They retrieved and sent them to their proper destinations: Dembi Dollo and Asossa. Next day the portion destined for Ghimbi could be seen plastered on every wall, telephone pole and door. I was placed under arrest and brought in front of the governor of Wellega; and guess who the governor was - Kassa Woldemariam! They imprisoned me in Nekemt. Why did I bring this up? Well, we, members of the Restoration Committee had stood by our rights to dissent and maybe we might have even won the battle. In the end, though, we joined the struggle and fought to the last. However, there is a question that keeps recurring in my mind (may be Professor Bahru and others will investigate it in depth; it is over my head). Had we presented that petition which bore 800 signatures, held a referendum and emerged victorious, what direction would the Ethiopian student movement have taken? I leave this to historians. Thank you.

³² The famous tract that denounced the Emperor as "senile" and was the main factor behind the trial and sentencing of Walelign and others, including one of the retreat participants, Tamrat Kebede, to terms ranging from 5 to 7 years in jail. They were, however, pardoned a few months after they started serving their sentences.

Bahru Zewde

I recite the following not as a historian, but as someone who was part of that era. Dr. Hailu has rendered a good account; my own is intended as a supplement.

Firstly, what came to be known as the Shola Concentration Camp was a shelter built by the government to detain those fleeing the famine in Wollo. The demonstration was jointly organized by MCSU (Main Campus Student Union) and NUEUS (National Union of Ethiopian University Students), which explains Abdulmejid's high profile. (He was the Vice President of NUEUS at the time). I believe that it was students who secretly entered the camp and took photographs. Unlike the 1973 famine, no teacher was involved in taking photographs. The photographs taken by the students were blazoned on what used to be the main entrance to the building that now houses the ILS. Deeply stirred by the sight, the students took to the streets with gusto. I thought this was worth adding.

Secondly, we were in the beginning perplexed by Abdulmejid's call "to sit down": How could we sit calmly while surrounded by a horde of policemen? We later understood this to mean a "sit-down strike". The police too were confused and helpless. After a while, we were told to proceed, which we did. What came to be known later as the "Battle of Ras Mekonnen Bridge" was a fantastic scene worthy of being recorded. I do not recall seeing Taye throw the policeman into the river, though. All I saw was Taye boxing the policeman's ears.

Another scene I recall was the police mishandling the tear-gas they were supposed to throw at the students. The canisters of tear gas exploded in their faces causing them to weep. As you pointed out, Hailu, they came much better prepared the following year. There was a substantial difference between 1966 and 1967. The ones that came in the latter year were, I believe, from Debre Berhan. This truly formidable force turned Arat Kilo topsy-turvy. They left no room unexplored, nor any student (even African scholarship students), unpunished. They went into every room of the dormitory and beat everyone black and blue. We escaped through the alley behind Saba Hall, scaled a fence and arrived at Menelik II Hospital. Those policemen really instilled terror in us.

The other thing I remember is that when we first staged that demonstration it was in opposition to the bill that restricted the rights to public demonstrations. Then, you, the leaders, were imprisoned. Our demand then became: "Set them free!" This is something that has always amazed me. The routine never varied: Students would stage a demonstration with a list of demands. A handful of student leaders would be detained, causing the original demands to be replaced by: "Set our leaders free! We won't go to class unless they are released." As it was described in the distributed reader, the confrontation triggered by the anti-demonstration bill lasted a whole week, with neither the government nor the students willing to give in an inch. The government as well as the University left

no avenue unexplored to solve this impasse. For instance, I remember that the person who wrote the report, Awad, had made a speech designed to persuade us to return to class. Awad was a sociology instructor, but while in Egypt, I believe he was also a student leader. I recall his saying: "You are going about it the wrong way. You had better resume classes." I also remember *Lij* Kassa calling us to a meeting on what was formerly a football field and on which at present a building of classrooms and library stand: "I have come to deliver an Imperial order," was what he said. We sat listening to him until he exclaimed: "Aren't you standing up when His Majesty's words are read?" I think we scrambled to our feet then, the man so managed to intimidate us with those words.

Chapter V

The National Question

Abdul Mohamed

What follows is my personal opinion; my own reminiscences. Personally, the year 1969 (from March to December) was an era of major political significance; accordingly, I have included my own impressions. I confess that, if pressed, I may disavow my presently-held opinions. What I would like to focus on is Walelign and events surrounding him. I do not wish to dwell on the national question as such. As indicated by yesterday's discussion, the period between February and April of 1969 was a time when university and secondary school students demonstrated an uncommonly strong solidarity in struggle. It was also a period when secondary school students' participation in the struggle reached an all-time high level. My own participation is a reflection of that. As Professor Bahru remarked just now, we had assimilated the credo "Land to the Tiller", at least at the level of a slogan. Following this, the most important document penned was Walelign's "Lawaju Away". That was a definitive rejection of authority and hence a most provocative piece of writing.

In the wake of "Le Awaju Away", Walelign and others were incarcerated. I will disclose the list of other detainees later. We, secondary school students, were thunderstruck. There being no political movement around us, we could do little, if anything, beyond asking one another what measures we should take. We thought that the students' detention deserved the glare of publicity; accordingly, five or six of us decided to paint red His Majesty's statue which stood in Piazza.³³ We did that and within a week's time found ourselves in prison. Everyone except me was sent to different detention centers. Because I had a court case which required a certain freedom of movement, I was sent to "Kerchele"³⁴, where I made the acquaintance of some leading figures of the Ethiopian student movement. I would now like to disclose the identities of my cell-mates (my recollection is based on their bedding arrangement): Henock Kifle, Tamrat Kebede, Tselote Hizkias, Walelign Mekonnen, Mehari Tesfaye, Tsegaye Gebremedhin, Tesfu Kidane, Ayalew Aklog, Getachew Sharew, Zer'u Kishen, Berhane Meskel Redda (he was released after three months), Fantahun Tiruneh, Yirga Tessema, Mesfin Habtu, Yohannes Mebratu, Gezahegn

³³ This was a bust of the Emperor erected by the Indian community. It had stood in front of what was then the Cinema Empire until removed in the wake of the 1974 Revolution.

³⁴ As the central prison in Addis Ababa was called, after the Italian "carcere" ("prison").

Mekonnen (from the Commercial School). I was the only secondary school student in this group.

Prison life was fascinating. I had the privilege of attending some of the most informative discussions on both national and international issues. Experiences were exchanged. Thanks to Henock and Tamrat, who had been to America, we held discussions on the USA, and to a certain extent on Europe.

We were voracious readers. We would share books and hold discussions on their contents. Let me cite a few of these books:

- Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*
- Edgar Snow's *The Chinese Revolution*
- Pierre's *Imperialism & the Third World*
- Sweezy & Leo Huberman's *What is Socialism?*
- Regis Debré's *Revolution in the Revolution*
- Pool Bard's *The Political Economy of Underdevelopment*
- Brecht's *Vietnam Walloped*
- E.H. Carr's *The Russian Revolution* (3 volumes)
- Fidel Castro's *History will Absolve Me*

One other book brought from the USA by either Tamrat or Henock and which I found fascinating was Gorky's *Mother*.

We had easy access to the periodical *Monthly Review*. Once we had completed reading a given book, we would engage in hot debate. Those who particularly relished debates were the following: Walelign (predictably), Tesfu Kidane (a dynamic debater), Berhane Meskel (he had an encyclopedic mind), Yohannes Berhane (dynamic with a very inquisitive mind, reticent but very sympathetic), Henock and Tamrat, Yirga Tessema (a sedate personality), Tselote (rather quiet). Tsegaye Gebre Medhin, a.k.a. "Debteraw"³⁵, and Tselote hardly took part in the debates; however, Tselote was a very friendly and considerate person.

Let me now tell you about those persons whom I met in prison and whose presence there had, I think, relevance to the national question. These were the Oromo prisoners in our midst: Tadesse Birru and Mamo Mezemer³⁶. We did not meet these two men at Kerchele but rather when we were sent to Alem Beqagn

³⁵ A term used to designate learned clerics, with connotation of "intriguer". The term was also sometimes used to describe the ESUE leadership by their opponents.

³⁶ Both imprisoned in connection with the activities of the Mecha and Tulama Self-Help Association; the latter was charged with involvement of the Cinema Empire bombing incident that took place in 1966.

as a punitive measure and spent about a week there. We succeeded in reaching an understanding with them. Two other personalities whom we had the opportunity to meet outside Alem Beqagn were the leader of the Mecha and Tulema Association, Colonel Alemu Kitesa, Kegnazmatch Mekonnen Wessenu and his son. There was also an Eritrean prisoner by the name of Ali Yunus charged with taking part in a Jabha (ELF) plane hijacking attempt.

Another detainee was an articulate and much-respected person charged with being a bandit – that is right, Beze Ejjigu! In addition to this, I was fascinated by two personalities that were incarcerated because of their involvement in the abortive coup d’etat led by General Mengistu Neway. They were Major Teffera Wolde Tensay and the sharp-tongued but well-versed Colonel Asnake; the latter engaged in frequent discussions with Berhane Meskel.

I believe that these people were instrumental in making us aware, directly or indirectly, of the situation in Ethiopia. I would like to think that Walelign was likewise influenced. I believe that those prisoners from Mecha and Tulema and those brought from Bale and Eritrea had a great impact on Walelign’s post-prison behavior. This was because these were blatantly nationality-based revolts. As for Bekele Anasimos, he was a renowned person who had played a key role in the 1960 coup d’etat. By the way, he was one of the people who welcomed us upon our arrival in prison.

The discussions we held in prison had little to do with the student movement. On the rare occasions we discussed the topic, we focused on its weak points. It was unanimously agreed that the movement had reached its apex. The other item that held our interest was to find answers to the query “what are the subjective and objective requirements for a revolution?” I also recall that we were troubled by the Eritrean question. We discussed the causes behind the abolition of the Federation and its consequences; whether the movement led by Jabha was revolutionary or not; whether it was a run-of the mill rebellion; whether it was merely a puppet movement being manipulated by Arabs.

What gave vitality to our discussions and made our stay in prison less bleak was the hijacking of the plane. I recall that on the last Sunday preceding the hijacking, Berhane Meskel had come to the prison for a visit. Walelign was the one who Berhane Meskel talked to at length. I am sure he made no mention of the impending hijacking to Walelign, though I believe that Walelign suspected that some important event was imminent. I think the hijacking occurred in the first days of August. It was major Teffera who imparted the news to us. Radio sets being prohibited in prison, he brought us the news from outside. To recall, the hijackers were as follows: Berhane Meskel Redda, Gezahegn Endale, Benyam Adane, Eyassu Alemayehu, Ammanuel Gebreyesus, Abdissa Ayana and Haileyesus Wolde Senbet. Following the hijacking, we were

dispirited and at a loss as to what to do; the eldest among us must have discussed it, though.

Finally, we were set free. The situation surrounding our release was in itself a dramatic event. I should like to set the record straight: the contingent of university and secondary school students who appeared before His Majesty did *not* proffer an apology. What they did was make an appeal to be allowed to return to school and join the society at large. This is my recollection and I am sure that only Tamrat is well placed to rectify any errors I may be guilty of. The Archbishop was ready to intercede for a speedy release. He sent emissaries and talks began. In the course of the negotiations, we let it be known that, though we were open to discussion, we would not apologize formally. When repeated discussions seemed to bear no fruit, Walelign, who could be highly emotional, was beginning to get restless. At a meeting, he gave it straight to the others: “If you intend to appear before that desiccated old man, I will jump and seize him by the throat. If bullets start to fly, it will be your problem.” That effectively put an end to the meeting.

The amnesty planned for Hamle 16 (His majesty’s birthday) came to nothing and we remained in detention. We were finally released in Meskerem for the New Year. There was euphoria among the radicals because all their demands had been met. The fact that the detained students were released without any pre-conditions made students bask in their newly-found popularity and novel identity. In addition to that, no secondary student felt alienated on entering the University. First year students felt at ease and in no way inferior to the other students because they had fought side by side with them.

Political writings, with the exception of *Struggle*, kept being issued; however, some of the writings were blatantly passing off the student movement as a revolutionary one. When *Dejazmach* Takele Wolde Hawariat³⁷ was killed in November (1969), we students had made our stand clear, but what drove the campus into turmoil was the election of Tilahun Gizaw. Previously, Tilahun had to concede the election to Mekonnen Bishaw. Later, when Tilahun came back after a year of absence from the university (during which time he had become more mature and self-confident), he won the election hands down. It is interesting to note that in their election speeches, both Tilahun and the other candidates to Congress were using the word “Vanguard”. Presumably, until such a time that the working class and the peasantry attained the required level of consciousness, the student movement would be the vanguard of the revolution

³⁷ An implacable opponent of Emperor Haile Sellassie throughout the three decades following his restoration to the throne in 1941. For his life and career, see Bahru 2001, 210-211. He became a model of defiance in the student moment and was immortalized in the pseudonym, Tilahun Takele, that was used by the Algerian group to write one of the most influential pieces on the national question.

and armed struggle the only effective method of struggle. The public demonstration staged at the beginning of 1969 was regarded as a prelude to that.

I recall a Congressman (it was either Mohammed Mafuz or a student called Aemero, presently residing in Boston) reading aloud and verbatim the preface of a Franz Fanon book during his election campaign. That was his election speech, which we endorsed with loud applause and cheering. The other thing that I remember is President-elect Tilahun's famous speech: "Che Guevera said, 'Where are you the people of Bolivia?' and I say to the Ethiopian people 'Where are you?'" The Assembly was in an uproar and of course he got elected.

There are two other things I am reminded of: one was USUAA's decision to send a letter of protest concerning a dispute between University Service students and the local authorities. The second was what Tewelde had cited yesterday: the General Assembly of USUAA had issued a directive to the Alumni Association to hand over the administration of the cafeteria. This was purportedly designed to stem "domestic imperialism". The Alumni Association attempted to explain that the income from the cafeteria was used to help students who failed their ESLCE finance their re-examination fees. The explanation fell on deaf ears: nationalization was the order of the day. The Alumni Association, apprehensive that the University Administration might once again take this opportunity to attack the students, distanced itself from the whole matter.

It was in this ambience that Walelign's article on the question of nationalities appeared. It was a remarkable achievement. It was at first intended to be part of the orientation given to First-Year students. It appeared that Walelign wanted to familiarize new students with one of the burning issues in Ethiopia. This question of nationalities had been a topic of discussion groups for quite some time, i.e. the Eritrean issue, the situation in Bale, the question of the Amharic language, the minor role other nationalities (Amharas and Tigreans excepted) played in the nation's affairs, etc. I believe that prior to Walelign's article, Abdul Mejid had written a similar paper. Its content (very mild in tone) was to the effect that a certain number of students were holding discussions along tribal and religious lines. His article cautioned that care should be taken that the discussions did not disrupt the unity of the country. It was an invitation to have the issue discussed.

You will have observed that in the first two or three paragraphs of his article, Walelign was informing the reader that this question of nationalities was already a subject of clandestine discussions among students. He urged that it be aired openly. I would like to emphasize that Walelign's article was a summation of the subject rather than an introduction. What brought the issue into the limelight was the situation in Eritrea. We should not also lose sight of the fact that the topic was moderately discussed at the 16th Congress of ESUNA in 1968.

As everyone knows and recalls and as I pointed out yesterday, the demonstration staged in early 1969 was prompted by dissatisfaction with the existing educational system and the question of cultural identity. This last, however, had a lid put on it, hence Walleign's paper. It may also have something to do with Walleign's stay in prison. Following the hijacking of the plane, Walleign was highly apprehensive. "Who knows?" he would say, "I could well be the regime's next target." As I pointed out earlier, Walleign prefaced his speech with great care.

I am not aware of any tumultuous applause that Walleign's speech generated. For all that, students were hard put to absorb the message of the speech. While Freshmen were noticeably enthusiastic about it, the dyed-in-the-wool leftists' reaction was lukewarm. That very evening, Walleign's writing was a subject of warm debate in each and every room of the dormitory. It was most thoroughly discussed. I remember that Mohammed Mafuz, whose home was the venue of the discussion, Bedru Sultan (I do not know if you know him), Tesfu Kidane (he chaired the meeting), Tselote and myself sat down and discussed it. Mohammed Mafuz, who was highly captivated by the article, had memorized it word for word. That piece of writing raised the already heated atmosphere on campus to fever pitch.

The regime, of course, did not sit on its hands. It made it clear that students had crossed over into the danger zone (we also had a feeling that this was true). For the first time ever, the national press, in particular *Addis Zemen*, quoted Walleign's article verbatim and commented that the article was positive proof that foreign elements had infiltrated the student movement with the aim of implementing their own agenda. It declared that these were not students but avowed enemies of both the Ethiopian people and of Ethiopian unity.

Following this, the atmosphere in the University turned very tense. Word went around that thirty members of USUAA's leadership were in imminent danger of being imprisoned. A General Assembly convened to discuss whether to stage a public demonstration in protest resolved against the idea almost unanimously. The person who was instrumental for this resolution was Tilahun Gizaw, who warned that a demonstration at this juncture would provide the regime with an excuse to take measures against the students.

Andreas Eshete

I seem to recall that long before the national question became an issue in North America, a meeting was held in the Italian city of Tyrol. It was organized by a social psychologist from Yale University named Leonard Dub. He was one of the pioneers of “conflict resolution” (which has now become a major industry). The meeting brought together delegates from Kenya, Somalia and Ethiopia to confer on this issue. *Gash* (Professor) Mesfin came from Addis Ababa and I came from New Haven. Somalia was almost exclusively represented by journalists, while the Kenyan delegation was mostly made up of Members of Parliament (I cannot vouch for this last point, though). You may recall that at that time efforts were being made to bring all Somalis under one flag. That was the agenda of the meeting.

At the beginning of the conference, there was a general feeling that each participant would reflect his national interest in the discussions; however, when it was my turn, I spoke in favor of self-determination for the Somalis living in Ogaden. (I still have the written statement with me). I further advocated that a referendum be held to this end. Professor Mesfin gave me a look that conveyed his doubts about my sanity. The Somali delegates, who were shocked, wanted to know which part of Ethiopia I was from. At any rate, it was decided that delegates selected from all three countries should write a report on the conference. I represented Ethiopia. The book was finally published bearing Leonard Dub’s name. To the best of my recollection, that was the first meeting on the national question I had ever attended.

As to why this issue was raised in Philadelphia at that time,³⁸ I think there were a number of reasons. As it was mentioned by Abdul, not only were there national and regional movements, but some of them were on the upsurge: the Mecha Tuluma movement among the Oromo (especially Bale), Gojjam, naturally Eritrea, and the First Weyane, which was seen as a prelude to all these movements. Some of the movements, like Mecha & Tuluma, were very influential not only in the provinces but also in Addis Ababa, and they were being written about, including by Ethiopian authors. People suspected of being involved in them were being imprisoned and a number of explosions had occurred in cinema halls. In short, the movements were gaining both momentum and prominence. I think this was what brought the national question to the fore.

The other factor was the resolutions on the national question passed by Ethiopian students in Europe at their meeting in Zagreb. It was becoming increasingly clear that the ELF had become a credible and potent force and that the measures being taken by the Ethiopian government were exacerbating the

³⁸ That is, at the 17th Congress of ESUNA in 1969.

already deteriorating situation and no solution was in sight. This, at least, was my own view at the time.

Another issue was the Eritrean Liberation movements themselves. I recall how perturbed we were by the realization that they considered themselves part of the Pan-Arabic Movement. The Ethiopian Student Movement had always firmly endorsed the separation of state and religion as well as religious equality. The notion that Ethiopia was a Christian island surrounded by Arabs was deeply entrenched and was accepted by everyone, especially those in power. In that context, the Arab leaning of the movement in Eritrea was clearly a source of concern to us, not only geopolitically but also from the national and religious points of view.

Even though it was unknown to what degree they were organized, there were Eritreans who opposed these movements and/or the direction they were taking. There were a good number of these in the student movement. A large number of Eritreans (some who came from outside the USA) attended the Philadelphia Congress. I do not recall encountering there any Eritrean who either supported or was a member of ELF. Most of them are well-known, such as Haile Menkerios, and they later secured key positions in the EPLF, but they did not support the organization at the time.

Another source of anxiety at that time, though it may seem mild now, was the widely-held belief that the country would disintegrate if the monarchical system were to be done away with. Many believed that in His Majesty's absence, both Eritrea and Ogaden would secede. Those who opposed the students' struggle for the removal of the monarchical system pointed to the fact that the country, being composed of diverse nations and different religions, would break apart if the national question became an issue and the country's symbol of unity (the crown) were abolished. I recall our discussing this while drafting the resolutions prior to holding the meeting. While we were assured of securing the support of Oromo and Eritrean students, we were in the dark as to who would be averse to our stand.

The other problem was how to rally students under a socialist banner. Time, which was essential to accomplish this monumental task, was in short supply. Only a few years had elapsed between the Cambridge Congress and the Philadelphia Congress. While there was no denying that an attempt was made to rally students under a socialist banner, it cannot be claimed that it was wholly successful. After all, the student movement was composed of varied elements: those who were staunch supporters of the ideology and those who climbed on the bandwagon. So if the national question was raised prematurely, it could undermine the fragile unity existing at the time. This may not have been openly aired during the course of the conference; however, when I re-read some of the papers, I could see that they reflected this threat.

We differed from Walelign and his group, and later from Tewolde and his, in our belief that the national question and socialism were issues that would divide the students in their all-out effort to bring about change. Granted one would lend a supporting hand to the other, but there was still a contradiction. We believed that if we wished to rally popular support to pave the way for a popular struggle, we should take care to reconcile these different approaches.

Having said that, to the best of my recollection, (Dessalegn and the others can check the accuracy of this) we came across Walelign's and other similar writings only after the Philadelphia Congress. The reason I say this is because there were no conflicting opinions regarding the national question at the Philadelphia congress. While everyone came in support of a nation's right to self-determination, no questions were raised as to either the definition of self-determination or what form it should assume in Ethiopia. Naturally, conflicting opinions arose when Walelign's and Tilahun Takele's writings came out.

What came after that was what Zene[bework] referred to, i.e. Tumtu Lencho's response. Incidentally, it was I who wrote that piece. Nonetheless (I do not know if Dessalegn remembers) I had to leave for Berlin before it was printed. When I saw it in Addis Ababa, I found it altered in form, though not in content. It had polemics that were not in the original writing. I would like it to be known that I had nothing to do with those acerbic comments.

It was at the Berlin Congress that different views were aired, one can say for the first time. The debate on the national question was basically between Addis Ababa and North America. The topic was touched upon yesterday. Since both Berhane Meskel's and Haile Fida's groups had agreed on a common front, the debate was between Addis Ababa-Algeria and North America. If my memory serves me right, not one single item of importance was brought up by the leaders of ESUE at that meeting. What does this prove? Let us back-track a bit. In my opinion, the gap was being deliberately widened. This was seen in Los Angeles, too. Abdul maintains that it was Tilahun's writing that was presented there. In Berlin, it was Berhane Meskel and his group, and not the European contingent, which endeavored to exacerbate the rift. The main debate was on whether there were nations or not. We had the audacity to deny the existence of nations, of which we have such an abundance at present. However, there were no substantial differences as to what was to be done. But there was a distinct pressure to assert the existence of nations.

As to the underlying reason for this, it has been adequately explained. The main one is the struggle between the leadership of AESM (*Me'ison*) and that of EPRP, or the forces that evolved into those organizations. Both were convinced that the student movement was a source of power they must rally behind them. Both were fiercely competing to secure that support. In my view, the national question was only a pretext. Soon after Walelign's, Tilahun's and

Tumtu Lencho's writings, another article came out. It treated the question of secession soberly, advising that pre-conditions be set. One question that was raised at the Philadelphia Congress was, supposing the existing Eritrean Liberation Front were pro-Arab, and it refused to recognize the question of national equality and the right to self-determination within Eritrea, the separation of state and religion, would we support it all the same? We set the pre-condition that an organization that sought the right to self-determination should, of necessity, respect it in principle. Those papers that were written later (after those whom Abdul and his group referred to as "the old guard" left the scene) were in the same vein.

Generally speaking, the major point of difference between the Ethiopian students in North America and those in Ethiopia with regards to the national question was that the former considered it as a democratic question, and a democratic question did not always go hand in hand with socialism. Since our primary goal is socialism, democracy (no matter how desirable it is) should be subordinated to it. I would not want to oversimplify the stand taken by those in Ethiopia, but from what I understand they considered the student movement to have reached its zenith and it should therefore make way for a popular armed struggle, which would succeed only if it embraced the national question. They gave priority not to democracy but to armed struggle, which, to their way of thinking, would have greater chance of success if it raised the national question. We thought that while this could be either right or wrong, it was opting for a shortcut.

You may know Kifle Betse'at, who was one of the persons responsible for establishing the Ethiopian Student Union in Europe; he still lives in Paris. In a UNESCO publication that carried an analysis of the African student movement, including Algeria, Tunisia and many other African countries, Kifle's article, entitled "The Ethiopian Student Movement: Class Struggle or Jockeying for Power?", starts with Menelik II. The title of that paper aptly summarized our view (may be a biased one): was the national question intended to promote class struggle or was it an instrument to seize power? The question was applicable not only to the stand taken by students in Ethiopia at that time but also to the stance taken later by organizations like TPLF.

Melaku Tegegn

Basically, the national question should be discussed in a given context. For instance, in Addis Ababa, it was discussed in a political context. There were also local and universal factors at play. It would be pointless to consider the question without taking these factors into account. But first let me state that what made me join the student movement was the question of social justice. I believe that the student movement was instrumental in making me conscious of my obligations as a human being vis-à-vis two issues: the gender issue and the national issue. It is not merely the political stand I took on the national question but also the fact that I succeeded in discarding chauvinistic concepts and accepting the equality of nations and turning that into a deeply felt conviction.

Abdul has presented to us the discussions held in prison after the national question was first brought up in 1969. I will deal only with the general aspects. I will begin with the briefing that we received from USUAA representatives when we came from Alemaya to Addis Ababa but will add my own opinions to it. The first aspect was the ethnic movements existing at the time. The second was the measures that the state had designed and brought into effect to cause a split among the student body. The third was the question of where the student movement was heading. The fourth was the sense of euphoria and triumph felt within the student body as a result of a series of “winning streaks”, i.e. the release of students from detention, the hijacking of a plane by Berhane Meskel and others, the election of Tilahun Gizaw to the presidency. All these factors were interlinked. This, I believe, was the political context.

We have to be clear when we refer to ethnic movements. Although those movements did not measure up to the present ones, it is still important that we study their nature because the crux of the argument lies therein. The main ethnic movement going on at the time was the one in Eritrea led by ELF. A few years after its establishment, ELF had splintered into different factions, i.e. outside the ELF, there were five or six independent groups waging war. There were at the same time groups which made attempts to merge, for example, Issayas and Saleh Sabbe succeeded in forming ELF-PLF, which was later renamed EPLF. That was the chief ethnic movement at the time.

Although the movement in Bale had been suppressed by the army, its effects were still being felt. A breakaway faction had abandoned the movement led by Wako in order to form what came to be known as the WSLF and was operating out of Mogadishu. I am not sure of the exact date (it could be either 1971 or 1973), this group emerged naming itself the Ethiopian National Liberation Front (ENLF). That is the way the crisis started in that organization; however, WSLF was operating in certain areas of the Ogaden. All other ethnic opposition is best described as a fermenting process, political in nature. In the

wake of the Mecha and Tuluma movement and the imprisonment of Tadesse Birru and Mamo Mezemer, Oromo ethnic feelings were on the upsurge. These were the political conditions that prompted the (national) question.

And these developments were inextricably linked to the question of where the student movement was headed. A closer scrutiny of Waleign's writing reveals that he was not solely concerned with the national question but also with how best to establish an egalitarian state. In other words, it focuses on two objectives: struggle and revolution.

The other pressing issue was how best to combat the problem of inter-ethnic clashes instigated by the regime. The row between Eritreans and non-Eritreans at the Wingate School was a case in point. It is believed to have been fomented by third-party infiltrators. That incident was repeated at the Teachers Training Institute in Harar and was resolved solely thanks to our intervention. All these were blatant examples of the regime's attempt to divide and weaken the student movement. That was the reason why a frank discussion was necessary. As I mentioned earlier, this question should be seen together with the direction that the student movement was taking. That was why the altercations that plagued the national question from the very beginning have to be linked to the genesis of organizations.

You will recall that yesterday I gave a brief description of my experience at Alemaya. I had more extensive involvement in the Dutch branch of ESUE. Upon arrival in Holland, we were instructed to do research on the national question for the 11th ESUE Congress. The fact that I conducted the research in person enabled me to learn a great deal about Ethiopia. Tereffe Woldetsadik brought me six books on loan from Leiden University. I would simply have failed in doing the research without those books, in particular the one written on Eritrea by Kennedy Trevaskis, which was a revelation to me. What I knew about Eritrea up until that time was next to nothing. It was such a remarkable document that it helped transform my whole outlook.

Prior to the congress, Tilahun Takele's piece had reached us (either in May or June). The main message we gleaned from Tilahun's article was that there was a clear and imminent danger: chauvinism. The article argued forcefully for doing away with it, or else (as you know, the writing was highly polemical). The other important point was a nation's undeniable right to self-determination. The Eritrean movements, for example, should (within limits) be given support. These were the chief points. We wholeheartedly approved this line; accordingly, we ran off copies of the article which we packed with our luggage and later passed out among those attending the congress.

I think that, to do justice to history, we need to look back on the stands taken earlier regarding the national question. It was first brought up at the 6th congress of NUEUS in 1966, where resolutions were passed. Later similar

resolutions were passed in Zagreb by ESUE. Following this, Walelign's article came out in Addis Ababa, which caused a shift in stand, later manifested in Europe and the USA. I think this fact needs to be put on record.

Even though it is not necessary to engage in a substantive discussion of the national question, it is imperative to bring up certain points related to the whole context, i.e. the similarities and differences between Walelign's and Tilahun Takele's articles. The two writers were in accord regarding two essential points: acceptance of the right of nations to self-determination and support of ethnic liberation movements; however, there was a substantial difference with regard to what I consider an essential point. The quintessence of Walelign's article was a clear demonstration of the existence of nations and nationalities in Ethiopia – a point-of-view never before contemplated by any of the protagonists of the student movement. Granted that none of us would espouse the ruling class's conviction that there was only one ethnic group, to wit, Amhara; nevertheless, we had a biased perspective when we defined ourselves as Ethiopians. Walelign's writing was quite a revelation. In essence, the chief message of his article was that Ethiopia was the home of an assortment of nations and that there was national oppression.

The second message was a call for the establishment of an egalitarian/socialist (Walelign uses these terms alternately) state, where all rights are respected, and to achieve that recognition of the rights of nations is a "sine qua non". This is his second message. His third message is that, instead of taking an anti-secessionist stance, we should consider what these movements would achieve if they were socialist-oriented. In other words, we should not, out of hand, condemn all secessionist movements. We must evaluate them thoroughly. Both unqualified support and outright opposition are irrational. This is yet another message. When I re-read Walelign's article during the course of my research, I was struck by the fact that nowhere in his article is any reference made to "the right to self-determination". In contrast, Tilahun Takele's article not only emphatically endorses "the right to self-determination" but also extends it up to and including secession.

In my opinion, Tilahun Takele's writing had a greater impact than Walelign's on those students who joined the University after 1970. The operative phrase was "up to and including secession". These basic differences should not be glossed over because they are at the root of all that was to come later.

Since what occurred was the subject of discussions at both ESUE and ESUNA Congresses, let us address the problems now. Those who initiated the national question during these discussion sessions expressed their belief that the problem arose not only from the fact that Marxism had degenerated down to Leninist and Stalinist clichés, but also from the fact that Marxism and the

national question were reduced to the formula of “up to and including secession”. It had been lowered to that level. The problem with that is that it gave rise to the notion that other Marxists had nothing to say or write on this topic. It was as if the sole authorities on this issue were Lenin and Stalin. However, a good number of Marxists did write on this subject. Austro-Hungarian Marxists as well as the Polish Marxist, Rosa Luxemburg, Roy of India and countless others can be cited as examples. In point of fact, Roy had confronted Lenin on this issue at a Comintern Conference and Lenin had to retract. However, these facts have never been brought to light. The whole issue has revolved around the writings of Lenin and Stalin.

The real danger, of course, was the fact that Marxism itself had become dogmatic, not only when dealing with the question of nations but also at the international level. What those in the Communist movement accepted as Communism was at first Leninism and later Marxism-Leninism. The student movement had espoused this reductionist ideology. That is why, for instance, when we consider “the question of organization”, the proponent is once again Lenin. The same applies to “democratic centralism” and the “vanguard party”. These things should be seen in their entirety as they had a strong impact on the shape of our ideology. They were the sources of our subsequent problems. As we heard yesterday, such a sound and strictly-run group as the “Crocodile Society” had total control over situations and caused a lot of damage. This trend may have changed in form and shape but its content remains intact.

In conclusion, the national question has to be examined within its context. We saw yesterday that the national question was nothing but an instrument in the struggle between organizations. It was not a fundamental question.

Zenebework Taddese

A little earlier, Andreas had informed us that he was not in a position to speak on the 1971 Los Angeles Conference because he had not attended it. I was present on that occasion. On the other hand, I and many others did not attend the earlier meeting in Philadelphia.

Between that meeting and 1971, a good number of chapters had been established; for instance, the Chicago Chapter, of which I was a member, was set up in 1970. As members, we would read old copies of *Challenge* and ESUE publications as well as, when it was available, *Tagel*. At one point, there was argument within chapters over whether the correct term was “region” or “nationality”. As Abdul would probably recall, in 1971, prior to the Los Angeles Congress, I happened to be in New York, where I watched one of the most amazing debates. (Our chapter was a new one and, since the likes of Abdul had not joined us, we conducted our debates in a civilized manner). The debate between Mesfin and Alem Habtu (he has now left the meeting) was one of the most astounding scenes I had ever witnessed. Normally, both Mesfin and Alem were known to speak calmly and sedately. On that occasion, however, they had changed beyond all recognition. I still remember clearly Alem standing on a chair and exclaiming: “Let me tell you something. If Tadesse Birru were to secede tomorrow, I would not give the act automatic recognition. Even though someone might legitimately take up arms for a cause, he must clearly underscore the democratic nature of the question and clearly define his final objectives.”

Prior to the conference in Los Angeles, we had held, among the various chapters, continuous discussions on whether the issue was one of “regions” or “nationalities” and which kind of struggle was to be supported and which not. Although we were short of funds, we still managed to hold sub-regional meetings. Maybe Andreas recalls that lengthy and heated debates were held prior to the Los Angeles Congress. There was a consensus that the national question would be a topic for discussion at that Congress. Meanwhile, as we were preparing for the Congress, as mentioned by Andreas, Walelign’s and Tilahun Takele’s writings came out.

To add to what Andreas said, hearing about my trip to Berlin, Dessalegn had given me copies of *Challenge*, which I had taken with me. Even though there were not enough copies to go around, I distributed the publication to union leaders of my acquaintance. I also had with me the altered version of the article written by Tumtu Lencho in response to Tilahun’s article. I had also taken some polemical piece to add fuel to the debate over the national question scheduled for the Berlin Congress.

But no one was interested in reading the material. The debate was a “fait accompli”. With all due respect to Yeraswork³⁹, I would like to relate my version. While, as Yeraswork said, the Congress had broken up into four or five discussion groups, most of us (including some of the ESUE leadership) had abandoned our designated discussion groups in favour of the one in which Berhane Meskel and Andreas were taking part. They were the only two who were actively participating in the debate. I recall that despite our elaborate preparations, we had no chance to take part in the debate. An announcement urging people to move to their designated breakout rooms was totally ignored, which prompts me to believe that no debate on the issue went on elsewhere.

When the plenary session commenced, there was a clear indication that everyone was determined to settle matters once and for all. Yesterday, I had touched upon procedure. Mesfin, Solomon [Tesema?] and myself were out of order when we joined a discussion group we were not assigned to, but nothing came of it. As for the resolutions, we all know too well that they are prepared elsewhere.

As I said before, we had high hopes to engage in a debate at Los angeles; however, instead of a debate, what we encountered was a lengthy altercation over procedure. I remember Eshetu Chole [who chaired the session] bitterly regretting his being involved in that situation. I am sure Abdul remembers the multitude of strangers that had arrived from LA to cast their votes. There was a heated argument over who would be eligible to vote: should everyone present be allowed to vote or only members of ESUNA? Needless to say, this row left us very little time for discussing the question of nationalities. The opposition said that their stand was that of Tilahun Takele, we invoked *Challenge*. They charged us with denying the existence of nations and their rights because, they said, we were intent on perpetuating Amhara dominance over others. We refuted this accusation by stating that we did accept the existence of nationalities and their rights, but not to the extent of endorsing their secession.

At any rate, as we had no wish to sit on our hands while non-members and known anti-ESUNA elements took over, so we walked out in protest. The next day, we had our own convening to elect our officials and departed to our respective chapters. A year later, a General Assembly was held. However, I cannot speak on anything that occurred after 1972 because by then I was back in Ethiopia. The arguments and debates continued, and other issues went on being raised.

³⁹ Who had taken exception to Andreas’ earlier assertion that the debate at the Berlin Congress was between ESUNA and Algeria/Addis Ababa, with the ESUE leadership hardly venturing a view.

One final item regarding what we were discussing over coffee: an Eritrean named Yordanos Gebremedhin made the observation that when people from the central part of the country wrote a polemical piece, they invariably used an Oromo pen-name!⁴⁰

⁴⁰ An allusion to Andreas' use of the pen-name Tumtu Lencho for his piece on the national question. Interestingly enough, this use of Oromo and Southern Ethiopian names was to be even more prevalent during the EPRP-Me'ison debates in the "Revolutionary Forum" columns of *Addis Zaman* in early 1976.

Tedla Seyum

Let me share my reminiscences with you. I am afraid I do not have any recollection about who said what and where, any more than I can remember who participated well or poorly; consequently, I shall refrain from passing judgment. I think the nub of the matter was our failure to understand the nature of the union. This is my own view. At the time, the union was not structured into seasoned and beginners. Everyone came well prepared. We all remember Yeraswork's humorous barb, i.e. "We were redolent of 'nations'." We had assiduously studied the national question for a year, practically every day. By the way, I do not subscribe to the opinion that seniority necessarily means either more wisdom or more eloquence. I speak from experience: I was chairman of one committee and I had a share in the preparation of the draft resolution. Berhane Meskel and Andreas most undeniably stood out as first-rate debaters.

Sometimes one has to take a measure of one's environment. The group that arrived (from the US) before the meeting cut an intimidating figure. Senay Lekke, who was barefooted and had on fatigues, resembled a hermit. I fancy myself a smoker, but Mesfin Habtu was puffing on an endless chain of cigarettes, and so was Andreas. Those of us who lived in Europe were positively convinced that we were in the presence of lunatics. It boggled the imagination to picture a barefooted hermit in Europe! For our part, we took both sober and light activities in our stride. Between meetings we would chat, joke and sing folk songs. Our behaviour must have appeared odd to the new arrivals because they would occasionally glare at us. (I admit that I still have a weakness for cultural entertainment, such as "azmari bet".) It would appear, though, that enjoying oneself there was considered "reactionary" and "in bad taste".

What scared us was: when Endrias Abebe arrived in Lund from LA on vacation, he was wearing fatigues. We were hard put to recognize the man we grew up and lived with. On one occasion, we were dismayed when he berated us for our "relaxed" attitude towards meetings. We were, however, completely floored when we witnessed the events in Berlin.

Secondly, we have to take into account the character of our veteran leaders. For the most part, they were not inclined to venture into heated debates. This, however, did not mean that they had no stand or that they did not express their opinions in writing. At any rate, Berhane Meskel and Andreas were the star debaters, closely followed in rank by those who came from abroad, particularly those from the USA. What I wish to reiterate is that, with the possible exception of Negede, the ESUE veterans were not accustomed to speaking in public, but their lack of experience did not mean they did not participate.

That there may have been a tacit agreement (though not to the best of my knowledge) did not warrant censure. In fact, I would say that there were those who took Andreas's side for fear that the topic might get out of hand. They wanted more clarifications and/or elaborations of the issue. They may also have wanted to avert a potential row. I also think that great care was being taken to prevent the Algeria-Benelux situation from turning into a fiasco. (I will try to elaborate on this if I get the chance at the close of this meeting.) ESUE did not deem the question of nations to be decisive by itself. It was just an issue which would be solved in time and should certainly not cause any rift. I can understand that it may appear to an outsider that there was a tacit agreement. I, however, find that highly improbable. This was my honest assessment of the situation.

Chapter VI

The Gender Question

Netsanet Mengistu

Before dealing with the main topic, I would like to state that firstly, when Professor Bahru informed us that there would be a meeting, it took me back so many years along memory lane that I was really looking forward to it. Unfortunately, owing to circumstances beyond my control, I could not attend the sessions of the last two days, a fact I regret very much. Secondly, I feel strongly that this matter should have been given the attention it deserves (may be conditions were not favorable, I admit) and that it is long overdue. I would like to thank profusely Professor Bahru and all those who made this gathering possible. I like to think that I speak also for those who have passed away because their presence is best felt on occasions such as this. Hence my deepest appreciation (applause).

I would like to refer to those points taken up yesterday, particularly what happened after some of you, who are my seniors, graduated and secured employment. I am sure that you had a goal in mind when you started earning a living. I should like to touch upon what changes were effected in the University community, especially regarding girl students. There may or may not have been significant changes; nevertheless, I would like to say a few words.

As University students, the word “gender” meant to us nothing more than a grammatical term. In fact, it was then known not as such but as “the women question”! You may recall that there were panel discussions on this subject, especially in the early sixties. The question, however, is: Were girls encouraged to take part in these discussions? The answer is no. I am still referring to the early sixties in the Ethiopian calendar. I remember in particular our arranging a welcoming social event for first-year students, before students “graduated” at Christmas. That is where “Miss USUAA” was selected. Unfortunately, winning this contest on the basis of beauty, charm and geniality was not without its attendant risks. A girl who was my life-long friend since boarding school won the “Miss USUAA” title. That girl ended her life when she fell from a building while fleeing a would-be rapist. As a result of which USUAA was temporarily banned, school was closed and we had to leave the campus. It was an occasion for rumor-mongers to comment that “Miss USUAA had met her destiny and USUAA had received what it richly deserved”.

Looking back, I am amazed at the numerous heated debates taking place, to the extent that people would push each other off windows. However, I do not remember witnessing any girl raising her hand to speak her mind or to express

her opinion. A first-year student could come and blabber while a senior girl just sat by quietly. We had no say in the proceedings. True, we cheered, did chores and ran errands, but we had no chance to speak. This much is clear.

Struggle contributed its fair share in belittling women. Everyone knows the cartoonist Zewde Hailu. He invariably portrayed women as creatures obsessed with cosmetics, miniskirts and parties. (Some of his cartoons showed girls scaling a wall after coming late from a party.) His message was: that is the sum-total of their achievements. The same period of time witnessed women being harshly condemned in verse. For all that, we took part in public demonstrations, such as the one staged about Rhodesia. We, women, may have been reticent, but we did not lack commitment. Not only did we participate in demonstrations, but we were at the forefront.

The other thing that I remember is that, despite all these obstacles, whenever the opportunity arose, women were eager to offer succor to those students in need of help and assistance. In 1969 (GC) students, especially those from the rural areas, had withdrawn from the University and were without food and shelter. It was at this time that Marta Mebratu, accompanied by two students, got in touch with us to enlist our help. We would, accordingly, make the rounds of the city in an effort to find accommodation for these students in distress. No one assigned us this duty; we were doing it on a voluntary basis.

However, conditions changed when Tilahun became president. Personally, I think no other person was as sincere a militant as Tilahun. By comparison, most of his predecessors in office were hypocrites. As I mentioned earlier, they considered themselves much, much better read than anyone else. We quaked and trembled every time we walked past them because we knew that we were the butt of their cruel jokes. In their lexicon, a heavily-built girl was Wondamagegn (“I have found a brother”), an unattractive one Waldaw Aytelu (“you can't discard your offspring”), one who walked unevenly “a tragic sight”, etc. It seemed as if they had nothing better to do than create derogatory terms all day long. In view of what they read and the ideology they professed, one would have thought they ought to have strongly condemned such practice, not engaged in it.

This is what makes us realize all the more Tilahun's greatness. When first they took office, Tilahun, Mohammed Mafuz and Yirga Tessema came straight to our dormitory to speak to us. They wanted to find out from our guardian (by the way, we had a guardian!) why we girls would not participate in student activities, why we were confined to our quarters. They proposed that girl delegates be allowed to discuss this matter with them. Our guardian, who was at first uneasy, later gave her consent and three girls from amongst us volunteered. As they had come adequately prepared, they briefed us well. They assured and encouraged us so warmly that we felt confident that we could participate. This was followed by a modest offer to girls to contribute to *Struggle*. Dignified

cartoons began appearing in place of the cruel and demeaning ones. As I mentioned yesterday, when the cafeteria was “nationalized”, it was we, girl volunteers, who started working there. Later girls came to be nominated even for Congress.

When Tilahun died, a large number of University girl students were up in arms in the hospital and later on campus. It was suggested that for safety's sake, they leave the campus, which they declined to do. One of those killed was a girl student (a secondary school student, admittedly). I have heard that 1970/71 was a bad year (I was doing my University service then), not in terms of gender discrimination but as regards the student movement. There was a misunderstanding between senior students (Tselote and others) and the rest of the student body. However, measures were taken to reconcile their differences.

I went on University Service with the man who was later to become my husband, Yirga Tessema. Since my assigned area of service was where my parents lived, a good number of people knew where I was, they also knew that Yirga was with me. I believe that it was mentioned yesterday that a large exodus was underway at the time. Our task was to send groups of students mounted on donkeys across the border to Sudan. As luck would have it, the man whose duty was to escort them got arrested and, in panic, gave us away. Even though they knew that I had sheltered these students, in deference to my gender, they subjected me to nothing harsher than interrogation. Yirga, whom they knew to be a stranger to the area, was not so fortunate. They handcuffed his hands and feet, dumped him on a truck used to transport charcoal and carted him off to Central Interrogation Center (in Addis Ababa). Yirga had been warned before that, should he try anything, he would be incarcerated again. When earlier he had been wounded by a bullet and hospitalized,³³ he had been sent to prison. This was his third round. However, he was lucky in that he had become a familiar figure to the authorities as a result of his frequent arrests and releases. Accordingly, Colonel Daniel remarked “What did they expect of you anyway? You are not border patrols after all!” and set them free.

The year 1971/72 saw a proliferation of study groups. In my opinion, the fact that the question of women was getting the serious attention it deserved and that efforts were being made to induce girls to join these study groups indicated a positive step forward. At this point, I would like to remember Yohannes Berhane. At the time, Yohannes was a professional student who had already obtained one degree and was working on another, providing him with the chance to remain in the University. A dedicated person, Yohannes was instrumental in

³³ On 29 December 1969, when security forces (Imperial Bodyguard troops, to be precise) stormed the main campus of the University to take away the body of the Tilahun Gizaw, who had been slain a day earlier. This was only about four months after Yirga was released from prison, where he had been serving sentence with Walelign and others.

bringing to the field of struggle such prominent figures as Mezgebnes and Selamawit Dawit. Our fourth year was marked by young women taking part in debates.

A little earlier I was reminded of something, which had dwelt in me. It was prompted by the discussion of the question of nationalities. I recall Eritrean students being given particular attention with a view to their departing to Eritrea and democratizing the struggle, which would smooth the way to a unity based on democratic principles. In connection with that, I remember some Eritrean boarding schoolmates. Because they had been well prepared, these students left the University when they were only four months shy of graduation. This was a telling blow to the system because it clearly indicated the low value that students put on the degree they were about to get. Unfortunately, they chose, along with Yohannes Sebhatu, to join a secret organization called “Menka'e”, which led to the execution of its leaders. Two of them returned home after the victory and I met them in Asmara some time ago. I suppose one should expect some negative results from positive intentions.

Both Martha Mebratu and Adanech Kidanemariam were well politicized before the 1972 plane hijack. They got along fine with boy students and were good comrades. Not surprisingly, we considered them the epitome of courage. I bring this up to indicate how the early 70's were years in which the warped and contemptuous attitude towards women was beginning to undergo a change, for which those who were in the student leadership are to be commended. This cannot be emphasized enough.

Asfaw Damte

It has always been a source of amazement for me when I look back on the relationship that existed between University male and female students in the sixties. I believe that if a boy student purportedly used such derogatory terms as have been claimed when referring to girl students, the offender would be the object of much disdain among his male companions. As I pointed out earlier, the chief problem was the fact that in 99 cases out of 100, the schools did not provide co-education. Boys attended different schools from girls, and the latter attended single-sex schools like Empress Menen. Cathedral School had two distinct branches for males and females. The result was that when the two sexes met at the university for the first time, they looked upon each other as alien beings. This was true of students who came from Tafari Makonnen, General Wingate, Menelik II and Empress Menen Schools. It should be pointed out, however, that, for all this, boy students did not look down on girl students because the latter would often score higher grades in tests. The real problem was that girls did not feel at ease, or did not have the nerve to run for public office, or generally behaved bashfully.

An additional problem was the scarcity of girl students: only 12 out of the 200-strong student body. In our particular group, we numbered eight until a contingent of foreign girl students arrived in the middle of the academic year. One was the daughter of a British Embassy official, another was the daughter of an American couple (both of whom were instructors), and two Indian students (teenage children of the Indian Ambassador). These last befriended the Ethiopian girl students; it was like opening a window to the outside world. The three others who preceded us into the University were not outgoing. On the other hand, the only girl in the third year, Wudenesh Amsalu, was self-assertive and spoke her mind at meetings.

When I listen now to what was prevailing in the 60's, it strikes me as a regression. Our fellow girl students owed their fame to their active participation in politics and their eloquent speeches, though that is totally another thing. The fact remains that a great number of girl students persevered in their education despite adverse conditions. Admittedly, there were academically weak girl students as there were feeble boy students. That is what I recall.

Zenebework Taddese

You will recall that, in the program sent earlier, I was designated to be the resource person. I will explain why I was not able to fulfill this assignment and move on to another topic. It was in the 1970's that I joined the student movement. I feel saddened when I consider that, to date, the gender question, instead of acquiring a national significance or being viewed as a question of development, has remained just that. I want to emphasize that I declined the offer because I harbour neither the illusion that I have the monopoly on this question nor that I am the definite authority on the subject; also my familiarity with the gender question in the student movement is rather limited.

It was in 1970 that I attended my first Congress. Prior to that, I had been elected (though not on the basis of my gender) as a member of the Chicago Chapter. When the chairman, Andreas, called upon me to deliver our chapter's report, I was perturbed when I realized that I was being stared at by 300 male eyes. I was so nervous that I even forgot to give my name; it was Andreas who communicated that to the audience!

The two other ladies who were called upon to deliver their reports, Tsehay Yeshitela and Abebech, were, to the best of my knowledge, the only women who were participating in ESUNA at the time. (If I err, I am ready to be corrected by veteran members of ESUNA) When Tsehay and Abebech confronted me with the question of how I could have been elected to represent a chapter, in view of the fact that, traditionally, women had little chance of being elected to public office, I had no answer for them. I believe that their question was prompted by their desire to hear me expound on the gender question; that there was discrimination against women, a problem which even the student movement had not succeeded in solving. Frankly speaking, I was not sure that I understood their question. I, therefore replied, "Chicago is free of such biases. I was elected and here I am." They were disheartened, and in any case they had no further opportunity to express their opinions. (I would like to remind Bahru that, unlike Tsehay, who has passed away, Abebech is still alive and harbours very bitter memories. She ought to be invited to share her experiences, which I feel will enrich the documentation on women's participation in ESUNA. After all, not only did Abebech participate very actively in ESUNA, but when the split occurred, she also played a prominent role in the leadership of the Federation. This is a salient point).

What I realized in the short time I participated in ESUNA was that it was a male-dominated organization. As Melaku pointed out earlier, the gender question had its genesis in Marxist ideology. Because we were aping Marxists in this respect, our outlook was for the most part similar to theirs. Outside the Congress hall, Abebech and the others castigated me on my failure to give them

an opportunity to present their case. At any rate, on my return to base, I began to consider seriously the question of gender. As Melaku mentioned earlier, the gender question was gaining momentum and I became progressively fascinated by it; accordingly, I began studying it in depth. To all intents and purposes, the presence of women was acknowledged only when a fund-raising event was to take place. Then women would attend such an event for a two-fold purpose: cooking and dancing. Other than that, I did not ever witness women being given the chance to participate, demanding an entry into the dialogue, or being elected to office. Of course, I was elected after the split; however, I consider that a different matter. Abdul can later tell us what the situation was under the Federation.

As far as I know, no such blatant antagonism as the one seen in the University at home existed abroad. We were graciously accepted and were encouraged to express our opinions. On the other hand, ESUNA never considered giving leadership roles to women and was even averse to acknowledging that the gender question was essential to our cherished class struggle. Consequently, it never encouraged propaganda work to enhance women's participation. It is sometimes a good thing to be reminded of the gender war at Addis Ababa University, for it brings the truth to light.

Before I finish, I would like to address the following questions to Netsanet: What did Tilahun and the others say during their election campaign? For example, in reference to the gender question? We can assess that only in the context of that time. It is widely believed that in most leftist organizations the gender question was a hot issue, even though left-wing organizations were already raising feminist questions. So my question to the leaders of ESUE here is not only if there were women in the leadership but also what the stand and attitude of the male leaders vis-à-vis the gender question was. The research done is definitely to be commended, but beyond it, were women expected to have a place in the revolution? What link, if any, does this have with the issue we fought for and was ultimately the cause of the split, i.e. the national question? Was the question raised as a separate national development issue?

It is well and good that Tilahun and the others took the trouble to pay a visit to the girls' hostel for the purpose of agitation. It is hoped that this was not done solely in order to secure more female voters. Given the non-existent encouragement given to girls to speak in public, I do not take any issue with the fact that those girls did not participate in the debate. This type of activity has always been shunned by our society. When the University cafeteria was taken over by the student union, no one found it odd that girl students were appointed cashiers, waitresses, etc. That is a right we have never been deprived of. I would appreciate being apprised on what innovations those leaders brought regarding the gender question. On the other hand, it would be very beneficial if we were

Bahru Zewde

informed on the contents of studies conducted by the gender discussion groups before the Federation's Women Study Group was set up. I am aware that there were women leaders in ESUE; however, I have no knowledge of their spoken or written opinions.

Original Wolde Giorgis

I joined the University at a later date than *Woizero Netsanet*. Whenever girl students joined the University, their male senior counterparts would compete to get their attention. But it was not motivated by a desire to encourage their participation as members of the student body. As far as I know, as late as 1965 (EC), girls were given nicknames that corresponded with their attires and hair-dos. This was, mind you, just one year before the Revolution broke out! Realizing that, we, girls could rely only on ourselves, we joined forces in matters that pertained to our exclusive needs. This, however, does not mean that we sat on our hands. Activists like Martha served as role models for a good number of students to participate in the movement.

Admittedly, from 1966-1969 EC, some progress was seen in the form of women being encouraged to run for Congress or offices in professional associations within a given faculty. For instance, Girmachew and others initiated certain measures which later came to fruition; however, it is not certain if this were due to individual initiatives or due to a group effort. (If I err in this respect, I stand to be corrected). Personally, I was always eager and ready to attend meetings. I do not, however, recall any topic related to the gender question ever being on any agenda of a USUAA meeting. I do admire and applaud, though, individual efforts exerted on their behalf.

This trend continued later. It was most assuredly true that even those male members of EPRP reputed to be well-read never accepted female leadership; this was openly expressed in meetings. (Netsanet had mentioned it earlier), women contributed immensely in (EPRP) squads and other activities. I remember an incident at the Darg Interrogation Center where an interrogator wondered aloud what sort of discipline could have been instilled in women members that enabled them to withstand such tortures as having their breasts set ablaze by torched newspapers. Those heroic young women endured it without divulging any information. Women, contrary to popular belief, are singularly tenacious. It is not everyone who can remain undaunted by the variety of roles that they are forced to perform. Women, however, have proved themselves equal to the task. This is undeniable.

And yet, even now, the role women have played has not been given the attention it deserves. Kiflu Tadesse, who has witnessed these things abroad and at home, did not find it important enough to write about the numerous dead and maimed women, or about the countless females beaten black and blue, or those left hanging from ceilings, or about those crippled as a result of hideous torture. Their ordeal has remained un-chronicled, unless we ourselves write it. I find it very hard to give credence to claims that women were given the opportunity to participate in the movement as far back as 1973 when a recently written work

makes no mention of women's contribution to the struggle. Maybe male students have gone a long way in reading profoundly, in refining both their ideology and attitude; if so, I would be the first to applaud them. However, this change has in no way been reflected with respect to the question of women.

And yet, in those years of struggle, woe to the woman comrade who rejects the advances of a male comrade! She would be accused of bourgeois tendencies. To consent readily when asked for a date – that was her unmistakable role. Not in other respects. All this notwithstanding, many women participated in the struggle and paid huge sacrifices. As women, they were subjected to all sorts of abuse.

Yeraswork Admassie

I have the feeling that conditions regarding the student movement varied from place to place, including Addis Ababa. The scarcity of girl students on campus in particular played a decisive role. W/o Almaz Eshete, making a speech during the 50th anniversary of the Addis Ababa University, provided us with some fascinating information. The first few girl intakes were not provided with sleeping quarters in the University. They slept in Menen School and were driven to classes by an instructor. W/o Almaz's brother would bring her both lunch and dinner to school. Girls at that time faced such practical hardships, not to mention their being intimidated by dint of their number.

A lot can be said about the problems that afflicted girl students. However, I think that a question directly linked to the point under discussion is: how did the number of girls who joined the struggle increase? For instance, what accounted for the great number of Ethiopian women in France was the fact that they were there on scholarship obtained at the Lycée [in Addis Ababa]. In direct contrast, there were, at one time, only one or two girl students in Sweden. Then, when their number grew, we started raising the gender issue. As mentioned earlier by Melaku, there were calls for giving space to the lyrics of "Arise, woman!" as well as to start a column in the publications prepared by ESUE.

However, when the split occurred, the question of gender and all organizations associated with it began being exploited to serve the interest of this or that faction, to such an extent that such organizations became barely tolerable. This exploitation was done under the guise of Marxism, civic society, mass organizations, and class struggle. It also continued at the state level, following the creation of a split among the student population. When the split came, there was a rush to recruit women. All the propaganda extolling women's cause was a thinly disguised mechanism to access women's votes. We began hearing how Lenin enlisted the aid of his wife Krupskaya to proof-read his writings. However, this could only mean that she was just a glorified maid. Alexandra Kolonte (?) too did not fare well among Bolsheviks.

I think that we slavishly adopted the Marxist and Communist tactics of smothering civic organizations. Decidedly, it is only now that a certain number of civic organizations and women's associations (outside the realm of political conflicts) have appeared and their voices are being heard.

Chapter VII

The High School Factor

Gedeon Wolde Amanuel

I personally believe that the student movement was greatly influenced by given neighborhoods (Gulele, Arat Kilo, and Kazanchis), by proximity to learning institutions (secondary schools and the University), correctional institutions and their inmates and military camps. For most of you, it took a long time for the change to come; however, those of us born in the fifties (EC) were able to witness a revolution in sixty-six. The youth seemed to say: “All it took for things to fall apart was to shake and rattle them”. This emboldened them to try even more audacious moves. This gave the revolution vim and vigor. When the Ethiopian student movement set out to fight feudalism and imperialism, it succeeded in winning and consolidating the loyalty of students of such secondary schools as Teferi Mekonnen, Etegue Menen, Menelik II, Kokebe Tsebah, Prince Makonnen, Madhane Alem and Shimelis Habte. These schools in Addis Ababa were at the forefront of the struggle. Woizero Schin, Debre Berhan and Haile Mariam Mammo were provincial schools who followed in their footsteps.

I can say that secondary school girl students participated more actively than what I am hearing about those in the University. The other link between the University and secondary school students was the year-long University Service Program. This program made it mandatory for University students to serve their nation for a year before being allowed to graduate. I shall always remember my seventh grade teacher at Teferi Mekonnen School, Ato Eshetu. He would tell us about Che Guevera and Ho Chi Minh. Unless I am mistaken, he was in the same year as Tilahun Gizaw at the University. I vividly recall his engaging us in a debate entitled: “Did God create man or did man create God?” Most of us argued that God created man. He refuted our argument and won; so we were compelled to concede that man had created God.

We had a peculiar yardstick for this. Take the case of Jobir, someone who dared to eat the flesh of an animal butchered by a Muslim. Jobir took up the challenge and that automatically converted us into atheism overnight. Back in 1974, there was another teacher called Tadele, since deceased I believe, belonging to Tilahun’s batch. He read to us the poem “Berekete Mergem” in class one day. The police picked him up after he did a repeat performance in another class.

What were the causes of student “disturbances” in secondary schools? Tilahun Gizaw’s death was commemorated on 29 December. In the course of the

ceremony, trouble was inevitable. On one such occasion (in 1969 EC), about 20 secondary school students lost their lives, among which was a boy living in the same district as us, Tedla Moges. He fell into a dug-out latrine and died. The fact that I could see a great number of University and secondary school students frequenting our district made me realize the truth of a neighborhood being an important factor in the struggle. The other day that was commemorated was in December 1972, the anniversary of the death of Walegn Mekonnen and Martha Mebratu and others. The slogan - “Why did Tilahun die? Why? Why did Walegn die? Why? Freedom is won through violence and struggle!”⁴¹ –chanted on that day drove the point home. This question of proximity to the scene of struggle and access to information was of paramount importance. Consider the case of Ammanuel Gebreyesus, who hijacked an airplane with Berhane Meskel. The fact that he was from our neighbourhood enabled us to obtain information on the event. That incident was instrumental in publicizing his fame around Abware and Kazanchis. Another was Mesfin Habtu’s brother, Daniel Habtu. He had access to foreign newspapers and other sources, whose contents he imparted to us. From the deliberations at this meeting, I can see clearly how things were interrelated.

The famine that afflicted Wollo and Tigray Provinces made a big impact on the student population. When the victims of the catastrophe came to Parliament to plead their case, there were tremendous activities going on regarding collection of food and clothes. Another memorable event was man’s landing on the moon, which inspired a number of poems. The one I vividly remember was to the effect that “The Whites are so refined that they have landed on the moon, leaving the earth for us Blacks. By the time they are back from their trip, we will still be struggling with the alphabet.” So, such poems would be read and applauded. Our families, of course, frowned upon our activities, which in my opinion expedited the youth’s rush into the arena of the struggle.

During the outbreak of the Ethiopian Revolution, University and secondary school students and taxi drivers elevated the students’ slogans of “Land to the Tiller”, “Education for All”, “Bread for the Hungry” and “Down with Corruption” to the level of popular demands. I never assimilated the slogans then as I have managed to do so now. Most of the demands were so radical in nature that I doubt that even those who advocated them vigorously really understood their significance. I say this because most of those demands have not been fulfilled to date. I believe that because we had witnessed Haile Selassie’s feudal regime being overthrown and replaced by a military government, we took it for granted that this last too could be removed with equal ease. Our behavior

⁴¹ The original Amharic version ran thus: ጥላሁን፣ ለምን ለምን ጥተ፣ ዋለልኝ፣ ለምን ለምን ጥተ፣ በኃይል በትግል ነው፣ ነገነት የሚገኘው።

has not been unlike the animal of the cat family (the cator?), which provokes everything around it - bodies of water, mountains and the sun.

It should be mentioned here that USUAA'S *Struggle*, ESUNA's *Combat* and WWFES's *Forward* played a tremendous role in forging a solidarity of struggle between Ethiopian students inside the country and those abroad, as well as defining the direction for the anti-feudal and anti-imperialist struggle. In my opinion, these publications went a long way in raising the level of consciousness among secondary school students and in broadening the scope of the struggle to include anti-apartheid and anti-Zionist stances.

There is one thing that I could never forget. In 1974, a bookshop called "Progressive Bookshop" came into being. Delegated by youth councils, we met Ato Haile Fida, Negede Gobeze and Dr. Kebede Mengesha. (I was amazed that, beginning in 1965 EC, students were copying issues of "Tatek" and "Tiglachen" by hand and distributing them to readers.) Haile and the others, surprised and delighted by these efforts, made us a donation of a vast number of books by Marx, Lenin and Mao. We were pleased by these men's return from abroad and were determined to forge further links with them. Although we had a legal union at the time, we had to form a clandestine one for fear that the former could be banned; accordingly, we formed The Ethiopian Students Union and started an underground paper named *Dil Betegel* ("Victory through Struggle"). One of the most important lessons that secondary school students learnt from local and overseas Ethiopian students was the necessity of getting organized. In its first issue, "Victory through Struggle" carried a poem:

Forget biology, never mind Amharic;
If you crave freedom, fighting will do the trick.

Another source of amazement for me was a publication that came from abroad, dedicated to the memory of Mesfin Habtu and entitled "Handbook of Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization". It taught us a lot about keeping appointments, revolutionary discipline, etc. We learnt a great deal about clandestine operations and how to set a revolutionary code of ethics. At the time, secret members of the Ethiopian Student Union numbered 5,000-10,000. At one meeting held on the premises of a church, there were delegates from every section of a secondary school.

Following the Derg's seizure of power and the enactment of repressive laws, it became virtually impossible to hold meetings where 40-50 people could attend. Another lesson we learned from that handbook was how to conduct the struggle under a variety of guises, i.e. as mass organization, teachers' association, or workers' union, in order to appear politically neutral. We soon adopted this method; accordingly, such publications as the "Voice of the

Masses”, *Democracia* and “Red Banner” (which were issued well into 1969 EC) were being distributed by members of our discussion groups. In 1967 EC, the clandestine Ethiopian Students Union, wishing to join the bandwagon, decided to publish its *Dil Betegel* (“Victory through Struggle”) (prepared with the help of a duplicating machine pilfered from an elementary school).

It was amazing how the youth enthusiastically cooperated with all political organizations. All of them taught you Marxism-Leninism and we had a keen desire to imbibe it. In order to finance our publication, we would charge students fifty cents per issue. That was all the funds we had. That was how the clandestine organization operated.

I would like to reiterate my belief that neighborhoods played an essential role in the student movement. To be a native of the Gulele neighborhood, for instance, was decisive. (Though I cannot now help wondering what a student living in Aware would be doing in a place like Gulele). Be that as it may, such dynamic youths as Alemayehu Egzeru, Tito Hiruy and Binyam Bogale were always to be found around YMCA. They would organize students in groups of four or five people, rent houses (Oh, how cheap houses were then!) and start Marxist-Leninist discussion groups. They would also supply us with copies of *Abyot*,⁴² whereas Gebregziabher (who resided behind the Police Garage) would give us copies of “Voice of the Masses”. Jarso Kirubel and Nadew Haile, who were friends of my brother, on the other hand, made “*Democracia*” available to us. We read all three publications. Since we did not leave on the 1967 (EC) “Development through Cooperation Campaign,” we were, so to speak, in charge. That was the way things went.

We would distribute those secret publications in schools. Secondary school students had by then become well-versed in such struggle tactics as boycotting classes, staging demonstrations, chanting popular slogans and songs in public, holding political discussions, hijacking aircraft, preparing Molotov cocktails and operating a mimeographing machine nicknamed “Adefris”, getting organized in secret and preparing underground newspapers, thanks to lessons learnt from local and overseas student unions.

When and how did the Ethiopian Student Movement turn into a political organization? To get an insight into this, one may call attention to the article entitled “Our Differences”, which set out to demonstrate that the genesis of political organizations was the political split between ESUNA and ESUE. We were in a quandary because both sides were equally persuasive. One side would win us over with *Abyot*, but we would soon be fascinated by the “Voice of the Masses”. One day, Binyam Bogale, who supplied us with *Abyot*, and Gebregziabher Hagos engaged in a heated and lengthy discussion; neither side

⁴² One of the clandestine newspapers. The group that had coalesced around it eventually merged with the *Democracia* group to form EPRP.

would concede defeat. When they were too exhausted to argue, they resorted to throwing insults at each other. (By the way, having shared imprisonment in “Boter”, they knew each other quite well.). Our political consciousness at the time was such that we were unable to fathom their differences. We believed that since the bottom line was Marxism-Leninism and our common foe was the Derg, there was no reason why we could not all work for a common goal. There was no lack of good will on our part.

I believe that even handwritten copies of these underground papers were being disseminated in secondary schools and even within the Ethiopian Students Union beginning in 1967 EC. The years 1965-1966 EC saw a quantum leap of youth associations in every district of Addis Ababa, the most prominent of which was the youth association of Gulele.⁴³ Using it as a model, a good number of youth associations sprang up in Piazza, Kazanchis, Arat Kilo and Aware. (I have no idea as to who laid their structures or how they proliferated at such a rate.) While the chief goal of these associations was to teach the community how to read and write, there were other activities they were engaged in, such as sanitation, afforestation, bridge and inner road construction and local development projects. The community was very fond of us. We participated in calisthenics and football and excelled at table-tennis. There was a gymnasium and a library as well as regular debating sessions. The youths of Gulele would ask anyone they met if they had a mailbox. If a person gave an affirmative answer, they were guaranteed to receive a copy of *Peking Review*, *China Constructs* or *China Pictorial*. Even after we had joined the Ethiopian Student Union, we were the recipients of these publications. (Can you imagine, though, your father’s reaction when he came across a copy of one of the publications?) Personally, I used to wonder how a publication I never subscribed to never failed to turn up in my mailbox. Having said this, I must admit that they did wonders in enhancing our consciousness.

However, these developments were preceded by the establishment of gangs known as “Kenbebit group”, “China Group” and “Al-Fatah group” at Arat Kilo and Filwoha areas. They spent their time molesting girls and beating up everyone. In 1967 EC, they turned their “talents” into a different channel: whenever students of Kokebe Tsebah School staged a demonstration, the school director never found it necessary to summon the Police; he would call upon the “Kenbebit group”, who, armed with knives, would drive the students back into their school. In retaliation, we organized ourselves into an “anti-Saboteur” force (we were 5,000-10,000 strong) and on one occasion about 5,000 of us met them

⁴³ Interestingly enough, the militancy of the Gulele neighbourhood was such that the Derg set up a special detention and interrogation center there known as “Kefteгна 25” at the height of the Red Terror.

on the battlefield, vanquished and turned them around. Eventually, they joined our discussion groups, socially rehabilitated.

Arat Kilo YMCA was the venue of heated discussions. It played a notable role not only in developing the conscience of the youth but also their bodies. Dr. Senay Lekke would train us in martial arts (Karate). He would train 20 people and those 20 people would in turn each train 20 other people. We became ideologically and physically fit. We had the feeling that we were readying ourselves for some big task. We were joining this study circle and that one. We did not give much thought to the fact that we were being groomed by three different organizations. Our studies continued uninterrupted. The youth would ask when the time was that he would be deemed to be ready to engage the military regime (Derg).

The other amazing thing was the rapidity with which situations were changing in 1975. “Progressive Bookshop” and “Giannopolous Bookshop” were doing their best to cope with the growing demand for books on Marxism-Leninism. Seeing the level of our English proficiency, though, we found Mao-Tse-Tung’s works most suitable. We mastered quotations from Mao in record time. We shunned the more complicated writings on socialism. In short, we were in love with Maoism. In late 1975, the clandestine leftist organizations came out into the open. The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party (EPRP), known for its two publications, i.e. *Democracia* and *Abyot*, and the All-Ethiopian Socialist Movement (AESM), known for its publication “The Voice of the Masses.”⁴⁴ We, too, were entertaining the idea of following suit with our publication, *Del Betegel*, forgetting that ours was a mass organization. The question was: how did these publications turn into organizations? It seemed as if a trend was being set. A little later, the Ethiopian Communist Party (ECP) emerged attended by its newspaper, “Red Banner”⁴⁵, and others followed – Waz, Malerid, Ech’at, etc.

The chief objective of these underground political parties was to organize secretly secondary school students into youth wings and youth leagues. As I said before, we had links with every group and got along with all. Then the *Abyot* group began recruiting members of the Ethiopian Student Union by taking advantage of the wobbling leadership and the disorganized state of its structure. These people were past masters at concocting codes. They divided the city into four zones and went about their duties with fascinating efficiency. Our group found itself out of its depth. For one thing we had to slow down when schools were out of session. Finally, we were taken over by the *Abyot* group.

In 1975, as a result of the political differences, secondary school students beat one another severely. (Nothing similar, as far as I know, had occurred before). Branding students according to their political line and administering

⁴⁴ In actual fact, more commonly known by its Amharic name *Yasafiw Hezb Dimts*.

⁴⁵ Again, more famous by its Amharic name *Qay Bandira*.

swift punishment resulted in many students being seriously injured. I vividly remember weeping bitterly when Gebregziabher Hagos was assassinated by the squads of EPRP. We came to realize then that we had to decide which organization we would work for. It became only too clear what a clandestine organization was capable of.

One thing that Gebregziabher's assassination demonstrated was that any party could and did make a political decision in the "Derg" style; accordingly, the killing continued unabated. It would seem that no lesson was learnt from the 1960 coup because both Mengistu and Garmame Neway were praised as heroes. I have never heard a differing opinion on that. I believe that this has always been our weakness and a dubious legacy we are obliged to bequeath to our children.

Then, all of us, regardless of political lines, found ourselves in prison. In the six years that we spent there, we learned Marxism in depth. We were also taught academic subjects by some of the best instructors in the country. This was evinced by our superior results in the ESLCE (we scored the best results for three or four successive years). When we left Kerchele (the Central Prison), we were educated past the college level. Take me, for instance, I had by then mastered micro and macro economics. We were taught accounting and calculus. We had the best education. I think that we were adequately compensated, which really counted.

Original Wolde Giorgis

I think that the fact of Menen School being so close to the University had a strong influence on our involvement in the student movement. No sooner would the alarm sound in the University than we were in the streets. Barring a few holdouts, the students of Menen were prompt to boycott classes or to stage a demonstration. I still can't figure it out whether it was because we had become politically conscious or were overly fond of University students that we behaved thus. When Abdul informed us that while in secondary school he would travel by bus to a destination where he took delivery of political material, I was reminded of students who got prompt wind of a call urging them to join a demonstration. I am inclined to conclude that there must have been among us individuals who were close to University sources. We would discuss politics and political figures, such as Walegn and Tilahun, in terms of our level of consciousness. I do not at all recall any time in my sophomore, junior or senior years of secondary school when I did not boycott classes or take part in a demonstration.

I am not sure but I think it was in 1961 EC that all the students of secondary schools in Addis Ababa were promoted to the next grade without sitting for an examination, although we had missed a quarter semester's worth of lessons. The reasoning for this seemed to be that the ESLCE would separate the men from the boys in any case. We would go to school, attend only a quarter or half of a full day's session. Since we would not get the opportunity to eat lunch at school, we would take back our untouched lunch-box home. Lunch consisted of bread. In fact, we consumed such a great quantity of bread at that time, that we developed a loathing for it, so much so that we succeeded in tolerating bread in our diet only after a long time. As I said, we were simply fascinated by the student movement. (I think that there should be a demarcating line separating the pre-revolutionary era from the revolutionary one.) As far as I am concerned, there was not a secondary school student movement separate from the University student movement. If there was one, I must have missed it.

The most unforgettable event then was Tilahun's death. When he died I was in my senior year in secondary school. I recall our filing into the University with our uniforms on. We stood in front of the Arts building crying our eyes out, but holding onto each other's hands for support and encouragement. I can still recall scenes of loud hailers blaring songs and slogans, droves of people packing the campus. It was enthralling. When shooting started, everyone started running every which way. The wounded and dying lay on the ground, I remember the girl running alongside me was wearing a tight skirt which impeded her speed. I also recall a male student running behind us, encouraging us every step of the way. We gave him our names and home addresses so that he would get in touch with our family in case we were killed. (As if one could be sure who would

survive whom!) My classmate and I lived to tell the tale, although, in a recent telephone conversation, my classmate in the USA could not believe that we were in such a state of hysteria. But for that Good Samaritan, whose name/or face I do not recall at all, we would have been left to die in an alley. Difficult as it may sound to believe, we sat for the ESLCE that year and joined the University.

That was a most exhilarating year. We knew and/or understood little of such issues as Rhodesia, armed struggle, “Land to the Tiller”, etc, but our enthusiasm knew no bounds. For instance, boarding girl students were strictly prohibited to leave the school compound; to facilitate detection, they had a red stripe on their uniform. To bypass this problem, we would lift up short boarding school girls among a cluster of students and shove them out of the school compound without the guards at the gate being any the wiser. This type of technique went a long way in refining our struggle later on. This, incidentally, was also true of other secondary school students who contributed immensely to the student movement.

Decidedly, we did not deeply question our motives at the time, but we did our best to co-ordinate our efforts with those of the University students. When that generation passed the ESLCE and entered college, I do not believe that there was a single semester during which we regularly attended classes. Secondary school had adequately prepared us for the struggle, which we were to renew once we joined college. No hardship (like imprisonment) could subdue us. This was the situation in Addis Ababa then. When the revolution broke out (Gideon once again has admirably described it), the youth fulfilled not only its duty as student but also as a member of the Ethiopian youth.

Genenew Assefa

Being a secondary school student at the time, I, too, have a few things to recall. As I lived around Sidist Kilo, I was strongly influenced by the University; however, I began actively participating in the secondary school movement at the end of 1964 and 1965-67 EC. I think that 1964 was a very decisive year in the history of the secondary school movement. This was the time that university and secondary school students (such as Ayed Mohammed, Hagere Mihretu, etc.) shared a lengthy period of incarceration in such places as Chinaksen, and especially in Boter (Shoa) in the company of such renowned figures as those cited earlier. Previously, the agitation of secondary school students was confined to the slogans of “Land to the Tiller”, “Education for All” and “Away with Poverty” or to demand the setting up of a city-wide secondary school student council. When released after three months, they had gained a sound knowledge of Marxist theory and acquired skills in reading texts in their correct order of importance, as well as learned about the preconditions required to establish study groups.

When we met them at the opening of school in 1965, there was no more claim to be a “revo” or an “activist”. They instructed us on how studies were correctly conducted in study groups. Those of us who came from such schools as Teferi Mekonnen, Wingate and Sandford (English) School were quick in the studies because of our proficiency in English, even if we did not grasp everything we were taught. A highly efficient study group, of which I was a member, emerged at Arat kilo. Eventually this group, apart from me, became the Central Committee of EPRYL (Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Youth League). These people have for the most part passed away - Tito Hiruy, Sirak, Gebeyehu, etc. Thus very efficient Marxist-Leninist study groups proliferated in secondary schools.

Not content with “Land to the Tiller”, students began to consider a two-stage revolution and the state of the world in the future. Our reading level moved from strength to strength, from Regis Debrey to Sartre and on to Nietzsche. We began perusing Deutscher and questioning Stalinism. Reading all sorts of books was encouraged and free discussions on already read books were approved. No one was confined to a given political line. The writings of AESM (*Me’ison*) were read and discussed.

When the revolution broke out in 1974, the various study groups in secondary schools staged demonstrations that rivaled those by university students. I remember an instance when secondary school students played a leadership role because a crisis around the establishment of USUAA had occurred. Most of the demonstrations that were staged during the Endalkachew era were by secondary school students. For instance, they joined forces with

elements in the mosque in order to form the “Ramadan Committee” responsible for preparing the massive Muslim demonstration. I do not recall any university activists who were members of this committee or who participated in the dissemination of political pamphlets/leaflets. There were difficulties in 1974. Next came the “Land to the Tiller” demonstration⁴⁶ in which secondary school students played a major role. Secondary school students had forged a sound link with university students and had matured beyond recognition. I recall that they were adamant about not throwing rocks at buses, which they deemed an immature act worthy only of anarchists.

The year 1975 saw the proclamation of “Development through Cooperation Campaign” and “Land to the Tiller”, which caused virtually all students to become ardent supporters of the Derg. We left-wingers had agitated against the Campaign, but the moment the Derg proclaimed the rural land proclamation, all of us secondary school students turned pro-Derg. I remember the activist elements being out on a limb. Later, secondary school students played a significant role in establishing Peasants’ Associations; however, in less than five months, the call for “evacuation” picked such momentum that practically all Addis Ababa students turned pro-EPRP. I still find it difficult to understand how such a thing could have come about. Soon only EPRP writings were approved reading materials. People who harbored a different opinion were labeled “banda.”⁴⁷ On the other hand, during that short period of time, secondary school students had done a creditable job in establishing peasants’ associations.

When students who were on the campaign returned to Addis Ababa, almost all of them fell under the control of EPRYL. Possibly, the same may have been true of those in Gondar and Dessie. Although 1974 was supposed to be a year when readers were unfettered in their choice of reading material, the truth of the matter was that anyone of my age caught reading any other publication but *Democracia* was labeled a “traitor”. The study group to which I belonged featured students who had managed to secure posts in the Central Committee, except me. The reason for my dissent from the group lay in an article by “*Me’ison*” entitled “Our Differences”. I strongly urged our members to read the article as it contained a number of salient points. I also had some reservations about the “Provisional Popular Government” slogan. As a result of my stand, I was given the cold shoulder. Regular venues for meetings were changed and all links severed.

⁴⁶ A reference obviously not to the February 1965 demonstration around that slogan, but to the massive demonstration in support of the Derg proclamation of March 1975 that nationalized rural land.

⁴⁷ “Traitor”, a term that was first used to describe collaborators with the Fascist Italian Occupation force (1936-1941), with which Derg rule had come to be likened by its harshest opponents like the EPRP.

I feel that the demonstrations staged in 1975 and after were not spontaneous expressions by students but products of directives issued by parties. At that time, the student movement was dead and its death was caused by factors that were beyond its control and/or knowledge. Discussions were supplanted by tedious readings of *Democracia*. Anyone who ventured critical opinions regarding it was ostracized, which is a relatively light punishment. In 1975-76, I witnessed alleged members of *Mei'son* being hurled from high-rise buildings. The situation became unbearably tense and then, to our horror, Fikre Merid was assassinated in front of the Mortgage Bank. (Everyone recalls that Fikre Merid made a fascinating speech on the occasion of the inauguration of the USUAA leadership.) He was charged with being a “banda”. Secondary school students who knew him were horrified. Where was it all going to end? And when Gebregziabher was killed, everything became crystal-clear. There was no more room for equivocation. Then EPRP turned its attention to us. At one point, the Derg had announced that every death caused by its opponents would be repaid a thousand-fold. The situation had reached a point of no return.

Chapter VIII

From Student Union to Leftist Political Organization

Efrem Dagne

What I am going to tell you revolves around my participation in the Ethiopian student movement and how political organizations emerged from that movement.

I would not say I was an active participant in the student movement during my years at Haile Sellassie I University. But I do remember that I took part in the 1967 demonstration. That was the first time the police used tear gas against students. I left for the Soviet Union the following year with entreaties from my parents not to turn Communist. I had little appetite for Communism myself as it did not have any room for religion and the monarchy. Contrary to the general socialist orientation of the Ethiopian student movement, what I wished for Ethiopia was the institution of a constitutional monarchy. For sometime, I and my two friends who had accompanied me to the Soviet Union distanced ourselves from the student movement.

However, I felt pangs of conscience as I saw the other students striving so hard in that harsh weather to solve the problems of their country. Although I was anti-communist, I loved my country and was convinced that there was need for change. I therefore decided to join the other students and bring my own perspective in the quest for the betterment of my country. When I told this to one of my friends, he also concurred. Thus, we began attending the Sunday morning meetings. The discussions mainly revolved around the benefits of socialism for Ethiopia and it was dominated by the senior students, with the others just listening and with hardly any dissenting opinion.

I surprised everyone by countering this trend and arguing that, as socialism does not tolerate religion and the monarchy and our country's history was inextricably linked with the latter, what Ethiopia needed was a constitutional monarchy, not socialism. There followed a few minutes of shocked silence among the audience. Then, Alemu Abebe proposed that two groups be assigned to present the cases for socialism and constitutional monarchy, respectively, on the following Sunday. I and my roommate readily agreed to present the case for constitutional monarchy while two senior students took up the case for socialism. On the designated day, my friend and I went to the meeting prepared; on the other hand, those who have taken up the case for socialism failed to show up. Alemu then proposed that the paper on constitutional monarchy be presented that day, while the one on socialism was to be deferred for the following week. I walked out in disgust, accusing them of wasting valuable time. I was hoping that

other anti-socialist students would follow me. But, what I could hear from behind were the footsteps of only one person and they were my friend's. We went back home and they went on with their meeting.

At another time, Alemu came to me with the idea of forming a study group. I agreed and we set up a group known as "Wisdom Trail" and I was elected chairman. That was the very first study group in the history of the Ethiopian student movement in the Soviet Union. The study group helped a lot to raise socialist awareness. That notwithstanding, our understanding of Marxism still remained rather shallow. This goes to show that, although the Ethiopian student movement stood for socialism, the objective conditions in the country were not yet conducive for socialism. One consequence of this ideological inadequacy was the fact that branches of the same union came up with different slogans. For instance, whereas the student union at home and ESUE rallied behind the motto of "Land to the Tiller", ESUNA stood for the "socialization of land". Nor were those in the leadership seen trying to reconcile these differences. As for the rank and file, they did not wish to be seen as ignorant, so they followed the leadership blindly. If any one dared to raise questions, he/she would be shouted down. The irony of the whole thing is that such a culture of blind following and intimidation was being fostered by a generation that claimed to be striving to entrench democracy in the country.

As the student leadership came to realize that, in the objective conditions of Ethiopia, it would be difficult to build socialism, the idea of "national democratic revolution" in Ethiopia came to gain currency. By this time, Berhane Meskel and his group, who had left the country after hijacking a plane, had begun to realize that they could not work with the Haile Fida group. Thus, what had appeared a monolithic student movement had come splintered. I think what exacerbated the divisions was the divergent stand of the two groups vis-à-vis the Eritrean fronts, i.e. the sympathetic attitude of the Berhane Meskel group and the hostile attitude of the Haile Fida group.

This was also the time when Marxist-Leninist study groups had started to emerge. I belonged to one of those initiated by the ESUE leadership. In 1972, while I was in Aix-en-Provence, I met Negede Gobeze and Fikre Merid. After I submitted the report on the activities of our group and emphasized the need to grow out of student activism into political organization, I inquired as to what they had done on their part. I think it was Negede who replied: "Not much has been done on our part beyond active participation in the student movement". I concluded that either they were trivializing the struggle of the Ethiopian people or they were hiding something from us. When I returned to the Soviet Union, I reported to my group on the situation and proposed that we go ahead with the formation of a political organization.

I think it was in 1963 EC that Kiflu Tadesse, who was a member of our group, had gone to Algeria without my knowledge and met the Berhane Meskel group. On his return, he conveyed to us the desire of the Algerian group to work together towards the formation of a political organization. Around early 1964 EC, Binyam Adane had also come to Moscow from Algeria and asked us to send two representatives to the Congress due to take place in Berlin the following April. I thought we had delegated Mekonnen Jote and Desta Tadesse; I now understand from Malaku that it was actually Kiflu Tadesse and Mekonnen Jote. At any rate, what I emphasized to our delegates was to ensure that the ESUE leadership attend the Congress.

When our delegates returned from the Congress, I posed to them two questions. The first was whether the ESUE leadership was present at the meeting. The second was, since I was apprehensive that the Congress would be confined to students, whether any of the social forces from inside the country were represented. I was told that the ESUE leadership was not invited because colleagues inside Ethiopia had expressed fears for their safety if the ESUE leadership participated as the latter believed in coups d'état. As for the domestic social forces, I was told that 99% of them were represented. Honestly, I was far from convinced by either response. All the same, I continued in my membership for some time.

Then, my organization began to forge ever closer links with ELF. Before long, the organization informed us through Kiflu Tadesse of the need to discuss the importance of armed struggle. Mekonnen Jote and I argued that, if we initiated armed struggle without first educating and organizing the people, the peasant would wipe us out. Kiflu and Co. countered that ELF would provide the necessary military training and equipment. I objected strongly to this, saying that both Eritrean fronts were bent on secession, as they insisted that Eritrea was an Ethiopian colony. The Ethiopian Left had not yet taken a stand on the issue. Relying on the fronts for training and equipping our organization would prejudice our relationship with the fronts. In the end, we reached a consensus that, under the circumstances, it was not yet time to initiate armed struggle.

The student movement no longer had an integrated leadership. The WWFES, led by the Berhane Meskel group, had come up with a structure undermining the former World Wide Confederation⁴⁸ of Ethiopian Students. The aim was to smother and drive *Me'ison*, which had been operating clandestinely within the ranks of the student movement, out of the struggle. At that time, I did not know that *Me'ison* had been in existence since 1968. However, although I

⁴⁸ "Union" was the correct name of the existing organization.

was affiliated to the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Organization⁴⁹ (the future EPRP), my political orientation was more towards the ESUE leadership.

I strongly objected to the new constitution of WWFES. I particularly found two of its articles pernicious to the student movement. These were the provisions that brought the journals under the control of the Federation and barred branch unions from having any foreign relations on their own. This was tantamount to sidelining the group that happened to have a divergent political line and sowing divisions within the student movement.

After attending the founding congress of WWFES, the ESUE leadership undertook a tour to explain its concerns regarding the new constitution to branch unions. Accordingly, I think it was Haile Fida and Andargachew Assegid who came to Moscow. I happened to have been hospitalized at the time. They explained the situation to Mekonnen Jote and Desta Taddese, who suggested that the matter be communicated to me and hence brought them to the hospital. I think it was Haile who said: "these people are going to kill the student union with this kind of organizational setup, as has already happened in North America". I said: "It serves you right. You were exhilarated when students applauded you on issues that they barely understood." In the end, we agreed to forget the past and to work together to withstand the current threat.

It was under these circumstances that some of those who belonged to our clandestine group in the Soviet Union suddenly disappeared. I had Kiflu Taddese brought to the hospital and asked him where they had gone; I reminded him of our earlier decision not to initiate armed struggle without doing the necessary ground work among the people. Kiflu replied that he did not know anything about the matter. I told him that nothing could transpire in the region without his knowledge and added that if they had been sent for political education, it was alright. He immediately responded that that was indeed the case. I was furious at this and retorted: "You cannot play tricks on me as if I were a kid. If we are not going to abide by our decisions, then I am not going to obey orders like a foot soldier. As the organization has no respect for democratic procedure, I am leaving it as of today." (As I feared, those students who had gone into the field ended clashing with peasants in Wollo; some of them died, the rest were made prisoners).

Later, I heard through Nigist Adane that they were prepared to talk over the matter with me. The meeting, which took place at Nigist's house, was attended by her, Kiflu Taddese, Gabra Egziabher and myself. They asked me why I was averse to the idea of the Federation. I replied that I had no quarrel with the name; my reservations concerned two articles. They proposed that, as I was a law student, I prepare an amended version of the constitution. I submitted

⁴⁹ Again, this is at variance with the organization's name given in Kiflu Taddese's book, which is the Ethiopian People's Liberation Organization (EPLO)

my revisions, including the one to the reference in the preamble to the intense struggle going on both in the cities and the countryside, at the next meeting. They rejected the amendments to the preamble and accepted the revised articles. I relented, as I was chiefly concerned with the removal of the problematical articles.

Finally, I proposed – and the other side agreed – that we cool down the tension that we had fanned among our partisans and strive to bring the students to support the revised constitution at the 10th Congress of the Ethiopian Students in the Soviet Union. I do not know about the other side, but I was regarded as a traitor for accepting the name “federation”. I explained patiently that the problem was not with the name but with the two articles. Thus the amended constitution was passed unanimously at the 10th Annual Congress of the Ethiopian Students Union in the Soviet Union.

After the resolution was passed, I proposed to the chair that the ESUE leadership disseminate the approved constitution among other branch unions so that they could discuss it and take a stand before the 13th Congress of ESUE. Accordingly, branch unions discussed the constitution and supported the stand taken by the Ethiopian students in the Soviet Union. The Federation leadership was unhappy with this and in a letter that Berhane Meskel wrote to Kiflu Taddese, he accused him and the others of treachery. At the 13th Congress of ESUE, Tesfaye Debessay tried to raise the question of the constitution once again. But the majority disagreed, saying that a stand has already been taken on the matter at the branch union level. Thus collapsed the strategy that had been devised to stifle dissenting opinion.

I describe all this to underscore the point that the rift between EPRP and *Me'ison* goes back to before 1974. The divergence pre-dated the differing stands the two organizations took regarding working with or against the Derg. Nor could it be reduced to a mere matter of semantic nuances: “yashenfal” vs. “yachenfal”, or “wazader” vs. “labader”⁵⁰. We returned to Ethiopia with our differences. We failed to narrow down our differences partly because of the close links that EPRO (EPRP) had developed with the Eritrean fronts.

⁵⁰ The Amharic terms for “Will triumph!” and “proletariat” that came to indicate affiliation to *Me'ison* and EPRP, respectively.

Melaku Tegegn

I hope that you will grant me sufficient time which would enable me to effectively document these events. I am going to speak on my assigned area – how the EPRP was established. Yesterday, we described how students had gradually isolated themselves from the movement. The first step in establishing the party was the setting up of an organizing committee, which was composed of Berhane Meskel, Eyasu Alemayehu and Kiflu Tadesse. There was also a direct link between this organizing committee and members of the founding body. These were in Addis, Algeria (those in Algeria were also the organizing body), Moscow, North America (around ESUNA), Switzerland and Holland. This was in 1971.

You may recall that an article issued by Abdul and others (from the New York Chapter), entitled “Critical Remarks on the Ethiopian Student Movement”, had expounded on the merits of replacing the student movement with an organization. There was also a critical analysis, written under the pseudonym of Alebachew Damte, dealing with the December coup. It had appeared in *Tatek*, the periodical prepared by ESUE. It can safely be stated that these writings were instrumental in prompting this move. I think it is time now to ask why Algeria became the focal point for the founding of EPRP. Two factors were at play here: the background of Berhane Meskel and Ammanuel Gebre Yesus, etc., and the fact that Sudan had reached a point in its history when it could no longer afford to give shelter and protection to insurgents. Therefore, after being given assurances, they proceeded to Algeria, which at the time was a militant government.

It is interesting to note that Algeria was then a haven to practically every liberation front: the Black Panther movement, the South Vietnamese National Liberation Front, the Eritrean Liberation Front, the EPLF (the Sabbe group), etc. The Algerian group found the atmosphere conducive to acquiring knowledge and experience, especially on how to initiate armed struggle, how to produce literature, how to set up a political organization. In short, it became a superbly informed group.

One factor of paramount importance, which has not been mentioned so far, was the issue of diligence. Everyone was toiling like a professional revolutionary. The revolution had precedence over all other concerns. What one did for a living was less relevant. Take my case: whether I was employed in a restaurant or a factory, I would put in my eight hours, go back home and work for five or six additional hours. When the World-Wide Federation elected me as press secretary, I single-handedly saw to the preparation of the Federation’s Bulletin and other printed materials, in addition to those issued in the USA. I

think what made EPRP a high-calibre organization in its early years was this dedication of its members.

Now on to the founding conference. As I mentioned the other day, logistics were assigned to me; accordingly, I went to Berlin, where a Trotskyite woman in charge of the Fourth International branch office assisted me in securing the house of another Trotskyite professor teaching at Free University. The Congress took place there from 2-9 April 1972. The participants, as per the seating arrangement, were as follows: Mekonnen Jote (chairman), Kiflu Tadesse, myself (Melaku), Eyasu Alemayehu, Berhane Meskel Redda, Kiflu Teffera, Tesfaye Debessay, Mohammed Mahfuz, Abdissa Ayana.

These were the nine founding members. Before the start of the conference, Tesfaye had been delegated to travel to Addis Ababa in order to find out what stages of preparedness the party had attained there. (We had to hold off the meeting until he returned.) I believe he came back on a Tuesday morning. Before the meeting opened, he, Berhane Meskel and Eyasu spoke for about 45 minutes. For our part, we had no way of finding out if the message sent to the conference from Addis Ababa was conveyed either accurately or in its entirety; nevertheless, we were led to understand that the ESUE leadership as well as one or two members of ESUNA were to be excluded from membership of the party. As chairman of the Organizing Committee, it was Berhane Meskel who addressed the meeting. He stipulated that it be placed on record that 4/5th of the Marxists in Ethiopia were in attendance. He further made it clear that even though the European group was not present (no one at the time knew of the existence of *Me'ison*) at the conference, the time may come when unity with that group may be achieved. To that end, it was desirable that the fact that 1/5 of Marxists were absent should be documented.

Why nine members, one may wonder. It was only when Efreem was speaking earlier that it struck me. When one recalls that the founding members of the Chinese Communist Party numbered twelve, one realizes that nine is not a number to be sneezed at. Well, what were the highlights of the conference? First, a political program was drawn up! However, in view of the party's intent to carry out armed struggle, it stood to reason that a communist party would not sit well with Eritrean insurgents, much less with neighboring countries. Therefore, it was agreed that the proposed party should be known as the "Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Organization" and no mention of a communist party should be made in the document. It was further stipulated that there should be no written evidence that would link it to any communist movement.

So a political program was drawn up and a constitution drafted. Then the crucial decision was made to start armed struggle. The responsibility for effecting this was laid at the door of the Politburo. The politburo was also instructed to find ways and means of starting talks with *Me'ison*. With regards to

ideology, within EPRP at first there were not what one would term hardliners. For example, there were no Maoists among the nine members of the Central Committee. Amazingly, within the Algerian group, Gezahegn Endale was a Trotskyite. The others (Ammanuel G/Yesus, Eyasu, etc.) had a critical outlook and did not espouse either the Moscow, or the Albanian or Peking line. It is possible that this was to be a problem when they later merged with the “Abyot” group.

The main dangers that were plaguing the communist movement were also discussed at that meeting. You may recall that back in 1969, the Chinese Communist Party at its 9th Congress had resolved for the first time that the Soviet Union was a social imperialist force. The party even went so far as to declare that, as social imperialism was a worse blight than imperialism, the socialist camp should wage war on it and, to that end, even go as far as befriending the imperialists. Our congress did not subscribe to this opinion. For us the chief dangers were:

1. the revisionism led by the Soviet Union, and
2. the right opportunistic ideology espoused by the Chinese Communist Party under the guise of socialist ideology.

These were the resolutions passed by the congress. The next task was how best to start armed struggle, given the fact that the Congress had shown no preference for a particular site. Since I was close to the Politburo, let me tell you a few facts. Bale was the first choice because of the following factors: 1) it already had insurgents operating there in the late 1960s; 2) Oromo nationalism was a fertile ground for armed struggle; 3) neighboring Somalia could be used as a spring-board for conducting cross-border attacks and as a haven for retreat; and 4) the Western Somalia Liberation Front having been supplanted by the “Ethiopian National Liberation Front,” it was thought that we could link forces with that organization. However, tentative talks with them held in Beirut broke down. We strongly suspect that Tesfaye Tadesse had something to do with that fiasco.

We had reached a point where we were left with no option but to conduct armed struggle, using Eritrea as a rear base. Decidedly, Sudan, whose Communist Party had been wrecked beyond salvage and where all the offices of the Eritrean liberation fronts had been closed down, was out of the question. In fact, an agreement signed between Ethiopia and Sudan had smoothed the way for a cordial relationship between the two countries.⁵¹ So Eritrea was the only alternative; accordingly, a place in Tigray, named Ad Irob, was selected. The

⁵¹ A reference to the Addis Ababa Agreement brokered by Emperor Haile Sellassie that brought the civil war to an end, at least temporarily.

reasons for this were (1) the fact that Tesfaye Debessay was very familiar with the area, and (2) natives of Ad Irob, whose knowledge of the area would be invaluable for logistics, had been recruited in Rome.

Members were selected from different areas for military training. I am naming here only those known to me: (1) from North America - Mohammed Mahfuz, Zer'abruk Abebe, Mehari G/Egziabher, Semere'ab Haile; (2) from Western Europe - Tesfaye Mekonnen from Holland (I too had been selected but was later withdrawn because I was needed for the work of the Federation); (3) from Moscow - Wubshet Retta, Teferi, Abebe Beyene, Adugna Mengistu (there were possibly others that I do not recall presently); from Algeria – Berhane Meskel, Abdissa Ayana and Benyam Adane. The training took place in Beirut under the auspices of the Palestine Democratic Liberation Front led by George Habash. That organization made a donation of arms at the conclusion of the training. I recall that it was again George Habash's organization that gave us 400 rifles in 1967 EC.

Two elections were held: for the Central committee and the Politburo. The election of members of the Politburo was effected by the Central Committee, not by us. Those elected for membership of the Central Committee were Berhane Meskel, Tesfaye Debessay, Zer'u Kishen (*in absentia*), Kiflu Tadesse, Eyasu Alemayehu, Kiflu Teffera (from USA) and Desta Tadesse (from USSR, also *in absentia*). These in turn held a meeting and elected Berhane Meskel, Tesfaye, Zer'u, Kiflu Tadesse and Eyasu Alemayehu for membership of the Politburo. This was prior to the eruption of the February Revolution, at which time it was deemed necessary for the leadership to move inside the country, which entailed the replacement of Eyasu Alemayehu (who was abroad) by Aberra Wakjira. After the resignation of Aberra, due to ill health, Tselote took his place in the Politburo.

Following the establishment of the Central committee and the Politburo, various units were set up. They were, as far as I can recall, the following: (1) Foreign Relations, (2) Propaganda, and I do not recall the third now. Officials were assigned to the various units; I was placed in charge of the Political Department. There were party committees for North America, Western Europe (of which I was a member) and Eastern Europe. Tesfaye had at first been appointed to lead the Western Europe Party Committee; after he left, I replaced him.

Subsequent to the conference, tracts came out. (As you are aware, these are distributed by student unions). The first of these was *Elementary Notes on Revolution and Organization*; it was later that the word "Handbook" was added. I was assigned to translate it into Amharic. (It is in the course of these deliberations that I discovered it had found its way to Ethiopia!). The second major writing, taken from *Challenge*, was entitled "National Democratic

Revolution”, as distinct from the “New Democratic Revolution”. These two became ideological markers: the former, we were told, was pro-Soviet while the latter was pro-Albania or pro-China, i.e. Maoist. Be that as it may, the fact that the majority of the articles that appeared in *Challenge* were favoring the Vietnamese experience over the Chinese one was indicative of where the party’s sympathies lay.

A year later, the World Wide Federation came into being; we have already heard yesterday the trajectory it took. Before I conclude, I would like to draw attention to some points of importance. To my way of thinking, EPRP’s debacle lay in its poor leadership. In fact, the party started being plagued by that problem immediately after the founding Congress. What were these problems?

First, the issue of Desta Tadesse. Efrem says (sorry, make that “thinks”) that the people delegated by Moscow were Desta and Mekonnen Jote. However, during the course of the Congress, it was disclosed that the rightful delegates were Kiflu and Mekonnen. The problem was not whether Desta attended the Congress or not. The problem was that Desta, who up to that time was an EPRP member, joined *Me’ison* for reasons best known to himself. This led to speculations that he might have leaked some information to his new party. This in turn could have created problems around the leadership of EPRP.

However, what was by far worse was what occurred in New York. Kiflu Teferra, who along with Mohammed Mahfuz had represented North America at the founding Congress, had been elected to membership of the Central Committee and entrusted with the party document. One day, he rode on the subway with same and forgot to take it with him when he left. On hearing this, Berhane Meskel was livid and the rest of us were horrified lest the document fall into the hands of the CIA, an organization notorious for its snooping activities. (In actual fact, the chances of the document being discovered by the CIA were very minimal.) At any rate, Berhane Meskel conferred with the Central Committee, which recommended that the North America Committee suspend its activities for a while.

A more serious problem appeared when the Politburo held a meeting in Lausanne, Switzerland, where they deliberated on how best to take control of the on-going revolution. (At the time, Tesfaye Debessay was residing in Freiburg, a city about an hour from Lausanne.) During the course of the meeting, Berhane Meskel made a harsh critique of Zer’u on the Kiflu Tefera affair. (I can not say for certain, but I believe it was then the rift between the two began. It may be that Zer’u came to bear a grudge). As it happened, four members of the Politbureau had by then returned to Ethiopia; Berhane Meskel, along with Eyasu, had remained abroad. That was when Zer’u began an anti-Berhane Meskel campaign, accusing him of acting “like a latter-day Stalin”.

In the wake of this dissension, eight of the eighteen insurgents deserted from the battlefield. Their reason for this was that the Derg's rural land proclamation having satisfied the needs of the peasantry, there was no longer any rationale for them to wage armed struggle. In fact, they asserted, the Derg had turned into a progressive regime with which they were more than willing to cooperate. The difference in opinion between those who favored giving up the fight and those willing to remain reached such a critical stage that one group began shunning the other.

Incidentally, the first batch of insurgents that had trained in Beirut had to travel across territory occupied by the EPLF. EPLF was then a negligible force while the government was in virtual control of most of the territory. The insurgents had to cross the desert under cover of darkness and with great speed. This exertion under extreme heat was more than they could bear; as a result Mohammed Mahfuz and Benyam Adane perished. This was one development.

Now back to Zer'u. The eight insurgents' desertion was due to the different stand they had taken on the Ethiopian revolution. But, upon their arrival in Addis, when questioned by Zer'u as to the reason for their action, they declared that they could no longer tolerate Berhane Meskel's dictatorship. The Politburo then decided that, given his behaviour in the field, they would not put it past him to destroy the party. Retaliation came in the form of the party's extraordinary meeting in July 1974, when Berhane Meskel retained his seat in the Central Committee but lost the one in the Politburo. Given his high ambitions and ego, this must have come as a shattering blow to him. I believe that he was biding his time to get back at the party. This was a dire problem.

Another problem, albeit not so pressing, was the one plaguing ESUNA. As time went on, and especially after Abdul and the others left the union, it degenerated into a Maoist sect. As things worsened, "Beijing Review" became the sole approved reading material. On the battlefield, fighting would break out among guerrillas belonging either to one or other school of thought. This proved to be a thorn on the side of the Foreign Relations Committee. In fact, in 1976, altercation arose over the "Provisional Popular Government". One side advocated the strategy of the Chinese, i.e. waging rural guerrilla warfare, encircling a city and taking it. It rejected urban guerrilla warfare. (At that time the party had not commenced urban guerrilla warfare). This created a rift between the party and the Foreign Relations Committee. Save for Tesfaye Debessay, who could accommodate different opinions, the EPRP leadership proved true to the traditional USUAA *modus operandi*, to wit, violence. This provided Eyasu with an excuse to write them a vitriolic letter, which proved decisive when the rift occurred.

Tamrat Kebede

I would like, from personal knowledge, to elucidate some of the points discussed here. When we arrived from the United States as members of *Me'ison*, the only resident member we found here was Dr. Worku [Ferede]. The person who liaised between our discussion club and the leadership was Daniel [Taddese]. There were four of us. Our pre-revolution techniques of recruiting members were similar to those of EPRP (I do not know if conditions changed during the post-revolution era). Disciplinary weaknesses within our leadership were traits we shared with the leadership of EPRP. Be that as it may, the order we received was to establish links with the student movement, but the student movement was fraught with danger brought on by the printing and distribution of underground material. Although conditions dictated that we watch our steps and work covertly, we were made to contact a group which was operating out in the open. The inevitable happened: we were arrested. The first victim, Dr. Worku, was fortunate in that he was a classmate of the officer in charge of the case, Colonel Daniel; accordingly, he was not put under too much physical duress. He was released without having to divulge any of his organization's secrets. For our part, we were more apprehensive how those of our members in Europe would fare.

At any rate, we began moving at a sedate pace. Let me quote here what Haile Fida advised me in a letter: "Haste makes waste; therefore proceed cautiously." By then I had a good idea at what rate our struggle would move – at a slow pace. As you have heard in detail, the split that arose in the US had repercussions for those of us who were inside the country and we had to quit the organization. Meanwhile, during my stay in prison, I made a rapprochement with the future leaders of EPRP.

Both the EPRP and *Me'ison* took the opportunity offered by the Land to the Tiller Proclamation to place their own men in key positions inside the Ministry of Land Reform. Their task was to organize peasants' associations. The following incident amply illustrates how fierce the competition was between the two organizations. Two candidates put in an appearance at the office for a job interview: Tesfaye Debessay and Kebede Mengesha. Zer'u phoned in to tell me not to miss the opportunity to hire Tesfaye. Ten minutes later, Negede Gobeze gave me a call in order to impress upon me the absolute necessity of employing Kebede.

Obviously, I could not take it upon myself to decide whom to hire. In conformity with the regulations of the CPA, the decision lay with a committee set up for this purpose. On the other hand, both organizations had their own men on the committee – Mesfin Kassu (for *Me'ison*) and Yoseph Adane and Alemante (for EPRP). The proposed salary for the post was 700 Birr per month. Kebede Mengesha, who was at the time an employee of the Awash Rift Valley

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Authority and earning a monthly salary of 1,500 Birr was hoping to be paid at least 800 Birr for this job. Tesfaye Debessay, on the other hand, expressed his opinion that 700 Birr was more than an adequate salary in revolutionary times, and he was promptly employed.

Annex 1

Documenting the Ethiopian Left: Workshop on Oral History of the Ethiopian Student Movement

**September 2-5, 2005
Adama, Bekele Molla Hotel**

Program

THURSDAY, 1 September

4:00 at the latest - Minibus leaves for Adama. Assembly point –
Ghion Hotel, Unity House parking lot, at **3:00** pm.

FRIDAY, 2 September

9:00-9:30 am Introductory Remarks by Project Coordinator
9:30-10:30 am Early Beginnings (UCAA)
CHAIR: Bahru Zewde
Resource Persons: Asfaw Damte, Eyesuswork Zafu
Student Council
Newspapers - from UC Calls to News & Views
10:30-11:00 Coffee Break
11:00 am-12:30 pm Early Beginnings (contd.)
College Day
Debates and Oratorical Contests
12:30-2:00 pm LUNCH BREAK
2:00-3:30 pm The radicalization process
CHAIR: Shiferaw Bekele
Resource Person: TBA
The impact of African Scholarship students
The 1960 coup d'etat
The "Crocodiles"
"Land to the tiller"
3:30-4:00 pm Coffee Break
4:00-5:30 pm The radicalization process (contd.)
Resource Person: Dessalegn Rahmato
Reverberations in Europe and North America
International Dimension: Vietnam and Global student protests

7:00pm DINNER (Sangham Indian Restaurant)

SATURDAY, 3 September

9:00-10:30 am Organizational Matters
CHAIR: Tekalign Wolde Mariam
Resource Persons: Hailu Ayele and Mulugeta Bezabih
From University College Union (UCU) to Main Campus Student
Union (MCSU)
NUEUS
USUAA and *Struggle*
10:30-11:00 am Coffee Break
11:00am -12:30 pm Organizational Matters (contd.)
Resource Persons: Alem Habtu and Yerasworke Admassie
ESANA/ESUNA
ESUE
WWUES vs WWFES
12:30-2:00 pm LUNCH BREAK
2:00-3:30 pm Major Demonstrations
CHAIR: Zegeye Asfaw
Resource Persons: Gebru Mersha
The "Shola Concentration Camp" (1966)
The Anti-Demo Bill Demo (1967)
The "Fashion Show" Incident (1968)
3:30-4:00 pm Coffee Break
4:00-5:30 Major Demonstrations (contd.)
Resource Persons: Dessalegn Rahmato and Yeraswork Admassie
Demonstrations and Embassy occupations abroad
1969 as a turning point in the ESM
7:00pm DINNER (Rift Valley Hotel)

SUNDAY, 4 September

9:00-10:30 The Question of Nationalities
CHAIR: Bahru Zewde
Resource Person: Abdul Mohammed
Waleign's Xmas Hall Presentation and its repercussions
10:30-11:00 Coffee Break
11:00am-12:30 pm The Question of Nationalities (contd.)
Resource Persons: Andreas Eshete and Melaku Tegegn
The 11th Congress of ESUE (July 1971)

Annex

The 19th Congress of ESUNA (August 1971)
The birth of nationalist movements
12:30-2:00 pm LUNCH BREAK (Yilma Restaurant; for those not so
carnivorously inclined, lunch will be served at Bekele Molla Hotel)
2:00-4:00 pm Gender and the Woman Question
Resource Person: TBA
4:00 pm on - FREE
7:00 pm Barbeque Dinner (Bekele Molla Hotel)

MONDAY, 5 September

CHAIR: Tekalign Wolde Mariam
9:00-10:30 am The High School Factor
Resource Persons: Gedeon W. Amanuel and Original W. Giorgis
10:30-11:00 Coffee Break
11:00am-12:30 pm Embryonic political organizations
Resource Persons: Efreem Dagne and Shiferaw Bekele
12:30-2:00 pm LUNCH BREAK
2:00-3:30 pm Concluding Session
Resource Person: Bahru Zewde
4:00 pm Departure for Addis



Retreat Participants

Annex

Annex 2
Participants' Profile

No	Name	Position at time of Retreat	Role in the Ethiopian Student Movement
1.	Abdul Mohammed	Board Chairperson, InterAfrica Group; UNICEF	Activist in high school (St. Joseph) and ESUNA
2.	Alem Habtu	Associate Professor, Dept. of Sociology, Queens College, NY	President of ESUNA and Editor of <i>Challenge</i>
3.	Andreas Eshete	President, AAU	ESUNA leader and author of a major article on the Question of Nationalities
4.	Asfaw Damte	Retired Civil Servant; Literary Critic	Editor of <i>UC Calls</i> , the first college student paper; Secretary-General, UCU; President, Ethiopian Students Association in UK
5.	Bekele Tadesse	President & CEO, Wireless Africa	Vice-Chairperson, Restoration Committee (against USUAA)
6.	Dessalegn Rahmato	Executive Director, Forum for Social Studies	Editor, <i>Challenge</i> , and author of numerous articles in that journal.
7.	Efrem Dagne	Private Businessman	Leader of the student union in the Soviet Union
8.	Eyesuswork Zafu	Director-General, United Insurance Co.; President, AA Chamber of Commerce	Vice-President, UCU, 1961-62
9.	Gebru Mersha	Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, AAU	Editor, <i>News and Views</i> , and USUAA activist
10.	Gedeon Wolde Ammanuel	Marketing Expert, Saba Engineering	High school activist
11.	Genenew Assefa		High school activist
12.	Hailu Ayele	Associate Professor, Technology Faculty; formerly Academic Vice-President, AAU	First Secretary-General, USUAA

Bahru Zewde

13.	Melaku Tegegn	Formerly Director of PANOS Ethiopia	Leader of the student union in the Netherlands
14.	Mulugeta Bezabih	Board Chairperson, Sunshine Pharmaceutical	First President of NUEUS
15.	Netsanet Mengistu	Executive Director, PROGYNIST	USUAA activist
16.	Original Wolde Giorgis	Attorney	High school activist
17.	Shiferaw Bekele	Associate Professor, Dept. of History, AAU	University student in the early 1970s
18.	Tamrat Kebede	International Humanitarian Action	ESUNA activist
19.	Tekalign Wolde Mariam	Assistant Professor, Dept. of History, AAU	High school student in the early 1970s
20.	Tedla Seyoum	Director, Bekele Molla Investments	Executive Member, ESUE, 1971-72
21.	Tewolde Wolde Mariam	Formerly Member of the Politbureau, EPRDF	Congress member, USUAA (1970-71)
22.	Yeraswork Admassie	Assistant Professor, Dept. of Sociology & Anthropology, AAU	Executive Committee Member, ESUE, 1972-73
23.	Zenebework Tadesse	President, CODESRIA	Executive Committee Member, ESUNA (1971-72)
24.	Bahru Zewde	Emeritus Professor of History & Project Coordinator	University student 1965-70; active member of student union in UK, 1972-76
25.	Mekonnen Tegegn	MA History, Rapporteur	

Annex 3
Documenting the Ethiopian Left:
Workshop on Oral History of the Ethiopian Student Movement

September 2-5 , 2005
Adama Bekele Molla Hotel

Recommended Guidelines

General Guidelines

In undertaking this workshop/retreat, the hope is that we will do one last service to the cause that we had embraced and struggled for in our student days. Alas! So many of our colleagues have perished in the past turbulent decades; others have left us under less turbulent circumstances. And the record is bound to be that much deficient. Yet, all the more reason for those who have been fortunate enough to survive to record as faithfully as they can what they aspired and struggled for.

Memory has always been a contested terrain. And the acrimonious divisions of the 1960s and 1970s have left behind their scars. Nor have all the issues that were raised then run their full course yet. Nevertheless, these apprehensions should not deter us from using a rare opportunity to record our collective experience.

To help us steer through what can sometimes be contentious ground, I am suggesting that we adhere to the following guidelines:

1. As can be seen from the attached program, the terminal dates for our reflections are c. 1950- February 1974. This will help us skirt the more lethal divisions of the post-Revolutionary period.
2. The aim of the retreat is to give faithful testimony of the events in which we had participated in one form or another. The overriding objective is to understand, not to celebrate or castigate. To achieve that objective, we have to be able to take ourselves back to that period, not judge it from the vantage point of the present. The contemporary documents distributed in advance will hopefully help us in this.
3. This should therefore be an occasion not so much to vindicate with the old kind of single-mindedness one's point of view as to be able to see the other side; indeed, to go even further and be able to laugh at oneself!
4. In such reminiscences, names of individuals are bound to crop up quite frequently. While this is often unavoidable and sometimes adds juice to

the story, the thrust of the deliberations should be as much as possible around ideas and issues rather than personalities. Where participants require that the anonymity of the individuals that they mention in the course of their reminiscences be kept, that wish will certainly be respected.

5. In brief, this should be an event to look back at ourselves and our activities critically and dispassionately, yet cheerfully.
6. The language of the workshop will be Amharic.

Specific Guidelines to Resource Persons

As indicated in the first circular, there will be no formal presentations papers in this workshop. Instead, some of the participants have been scheduled to serve as resource persons to **initiate** the deliberations. To help us attain common standards and ensure the maximum participation of all, the following specific guidelines are suggested:

1. Presentations should be for a maximum of 15 minutes (a total of 30 minutes where there are 2 resource persons). There will be ample time for elaborations in the course of the discussions.
2. Resource persons are expected to have recourse to the pertinent documents provided as well as their own resources (written or oral). To help them in this regard, the documents are categorized in concordance with the program.⁵³
3. Presentations should be as much as possible factual rather than interpretive.
4. It would help if resource persons could conclude by identifying major points for general reflection and discussion.

Bahru Zewde
Co-ordinator

⁵³ Unfortunately, we have not been able to unearth any documents pertaining specifically to the last two items (“The High School Factor” and “Embryonic Political Organizations”). Resource persons assigned to these two particular sessions will have to draw on the documents in the other categories as well as their own resources. Participants of the retreat generally tended to use the Gregorian calendar, but there were instances of using the Ethiopian one.