

Remembering Eritrean heroes in contemporary history

A Short Biography
Of
Abraha Deboch and Mogos Asgedom



Mogos Asgedom



Abraha Deboch

Compiled and edited
By
Estifanos Ghebremichael

The Story of Abraham Deboch and Moges Asgedom

Abraha Deboch and Moges Asgedom, who are they?

Not much is known about the birth places and the early lives of these gallant Eritrean patriots who have shown the world what a colonized, suppressed and discriminated person can do against a mighty colonial power. The heroic act of Abraha and Moges was not just about killing Graziani. Mussolini can always send another Viceroy. They were more focused in teaching us all what can be accomplished when individuals set their focus and energy in search of freedom. The fact of the matter was it worked. The patriots were inundated by new recruits. The spirit of "Yes I can" became contagious. Apathy was replaced by action. Darkness was gone and the light shone high and bright. Colonized and suppressed people understanding the power of the individual to rise up and defeat the colonizer and the suppressor.

What is known is that Abraha Deboch and Moges Asgedom are both of Eritrean origin. Seeing that the education of "natives" was strictly limited in the Italian Colony of Eritrea, they had made their way to Addis Ababa. There they had enrolled in Ethiopia's most modern school, the Tafari Makonnen School, which was called after Ras Tafari Makonnen, the future Emperor Haile Sellassie, who had founded it in 1925. Early in 1937 the two friends decided to strike against the

Viceroy, whose oppression had by then incurred the hatred of many Ethiopian and Eritrean compatriots. They decided to act.

The main features of the story are well known. In February 1937 - the second year of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia - the Viceroy, Graziani, decided to hold a celebration at the Addis Ababa Palace - now Addis Ababa University, to commemorate the birth of an Italian royal baby: the Prince of Naples. The commemoration was scheduled for 19 February, and the principal Ethiopian courtiers in the city were all invited to attend.

Both of Eritrean Origin

Ethiopian opponents of the occupation included two young Eritrean friends - **The Two Plotters.**

The first of the plotters was Abraha Deboch, who had by then succeeded in finding employment with the Fascist Political Bureau in Addis Ababa, where his Eritrean origin, knowledge of Italian, and familiarity with the city made him appear useful. He was, however, bitterly opposed to the Graziani regime, and particularly its racial discrimination.

The second plotter was Moges Asgedom, who was unemployed, but looked after by a friend by name of Sebhat, who served as a language instructor in the German Consulate (formerly the German Embassy).

The two friends, Abraha Deboch and Moges Asgedom, decided to seize the occasion of the forthcoming celebration at the Palace to attempt to assassinate the hated Viceroy.

Could not be Trusted

Tradition has it that Abraha, not wishing to harm innocent Ethiopians, warned a number of them to stay away from the Palace on the fateful day. However, most of them reportedly ignored his warning, for they saw him as an employee of the Fascists, and felt that as such could not to be trusted.

It is told that Abraha and Moges had by then acquired a number of Breda-type Italian hand-grenades, and had on several occasions traveled into the nearby lowlands, in the direction of Mount Zeqwala, to experiment with throwing them.

Before Leaving His Home

On the appointed day Abraha, before leaving home, placed an Italian flag on the floor of his house, and stuck an Ethiopian spear into it - a symbol of defiance for everyone later to see.

The two men, taking a number of hand-grenades with them, then made their way to the Palace compound. They entered the Palace building, where, as assumed collaborators, they attracted no attention - and took up their position to strike. They were thus, it appears, standing immediately below the overhanging balcony, which was to be the Viceroy's saving, as it prevented the little bombs from exploding immediately beside him.

The bombs were hurled, it is said, shortly before mid-day. Graziani and some thirty of his colleagues were wounded - and the Viceroy, who was badly shaken, later claimed that no less than 250 pieces of steel had entered his body.

The official ceremony began as might be expected. Viceroy Graziani made a speech, a number of Ethiopian notables made their submission to the victors, Italian planes made a fly-over above the city, and at 11 o'clock officials began distributing the promised alms to priests and the poor.



Italian Viceroy, Rodolfo Graziani, the target of the attack

Abraha and Mogus managed to slip through the crowd to the bottom of the steps to the Little Gebbi, then began throwing grenades. According to one account, they managed to lob 10 of them before escaping in the resulting confusion. According to Richard Pankhurst, they were rushed from the scene by a third conspirator, a taxi driver named Simeyon Adefres. Pankhurst also credits him with providing the grenades that Abraha and Mogus threw.

Behind them, the dead included *Abuna* [Qerellos](#)'s umbrella-bearer. The wounded included the *Abuna* himself, the Vice-Governor General [Armando Petretti](#),

General Liotta of the Air Force, and the Viceroy himself; one grenade exploded next to him, sending 365 fragments into his body. Viceroy Graziani was rushed to the Italian hospital where he was operated on immediately, and saved. General Liotta lost his leg to the attack.

For a while Abraha and Mogus hid at the ancient monastery of [Debre Libanos](#) but soon moved on, seeking sanctuary in Sudan. Somewhere in [Gojjam](#) local inhabitants, always suspicious of strangers, murdered them.

Reprisals

The Italian response was immediate. According to Mockler, "Italian *carabinieri* had fired into the crowds of beggars and poor assembled for the distribution of alms; and it is said that the Federal Secretary, [Guido Cortese](#), even fired his revolver into the group of Ethiopian dignitaries standing around him." Hours later, Cortese gave the fatal order:

For the rest of that day, through Saturday and Sunday, Italians killed Ethiopians with daggers and truncheons to the shouts of "Duce! Duce!" and "Civiltà Italiana!" They doused native houses with gasoline and set them on fire. They broke into the homes of local Greeks and Armenians and lynched their servants. Some even posed on the corpses of their victims to have their

photographs taken. In three days, the Italians had killed 30000 Ethiopians in Addis Ababa only. The first day is commemorated as "Yekatit 12" (Ethiopian February 19) till now. There is a monument called with the same name in Addis Ababa in memory of those Ethiopian victims of Italian aggression.

The attempted murder provided the Italians with the reason to implement Mussolini's order, issued as early as 3 May 1936, to summarily execute "The Young Ethiopians", the small group of intellectuals who had received college education from American and European colleges. The same day as the assassination, a military tribunal was set up, and by nightfall 62 Ethiopians were tried and shot. "The Graziani Massacre marked the almost total liquidation of the intellectual component of the Resistance," writes Bahru Zewde.

Thousands of Ethiopians of all classes were sent to detention camps at [Danan](#) in the [Ogaden](#) and Nokra in the [Dahlak Archipelago](#). Conditions at Danan were inhospitable, and Graziani had given orders that the prisoners would receive only the bare minimum of food and water. As Sbacchi notes, "Poor facilities, including latrines, the humid climate, malaria, stomach infections, and venereal disease took many lives, especially among those compelled to work on the irrigation canal or on the banana and sugar-cane plantations." Between ten percent and half of the prisoners died at Danan.

Conditions at Nokra were even worse than at Danan, according to Sbacchi. The detainees sent there joined 500 prisoners serving life sentences for serious political crimes, increasing the total number incarcerated to 1,500. These inmates at Nokra were forced to work in the island quarries, manufacturing cement. Temperatures at Nokra averaged 122 °F (50 °C); the inmates suffered from lack of fresh water, sunstroke, marsh fever, and dysentery.

The final reprisal struck in May. Investigators found that Abraha and Mogus had stayed a while at Debra Libanos, and slight circumstantial evidence suggested that the monks had foreknowledge of their plans. Graziani, mindful of his misadventure at Jijiga, believed they were complicit and 19 May cabled the local commander, "Therefore execute summarily all monks without distinction including the Vice-Prior." The following day, ironically a feast day of their patron saint [Tekle Haymanot](#), 297 monks plus 23 laymen were shot -- the entire population of the monastery.

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