



## Ghietachew – an Eritrean hero

My brothers and their friends made always a lot of noises when they would gather at our house. They would listen to the latest songs through the radio waves of the Kagnev Station, the largest US military base all over Africa in the 70's. Among my brothers' friends Ghietachew stood out as silent and caring giant. He always had a smile in his face. He was shy, but had a steady and strong voice.

This was a time when Eritrean families did not know which of their children was a member of an underground group belonging to the Eritrean struggle for Independence from Ethiopia. Few of my brothers were, but my family – like most of Eritrean families- did not want to ask further or know more. The terror of the Ethiopian killing squads roaming the street of Asmara in their white Renault or their VW were notorious for suddenly stopping and dragging away young men into their cars, torture and kill them without any respect for legal rule .

When the Ethiopian occupier searched my house on July 15 th 1978 and took my husband – Berhane – away to never let him take the return road home, my brother – we all called him Lello – made me seat and told me these words:” The y might come to take you as well. That is what they do. I want you to start wearing layers of clothing. You need to wear 3 layers of each clothing you normally wear. I want you also to know that the enemy will torture you. The first time it will hurt like hell. The 2 nd time it will hurt some more and the 3 rd time “ci farai il callo” (Italian way of saying “You will get used to it).

My brother said all this without breathing, like it was a page he memorized from a military survival kit. His voice soft and steady, his eyes never left mine. His hands shaking a bit. But when he seemed to have reached the last part of this explanation – or shall I say preparation to death row – his eyes filled with tears and he tried to regain composure. He then said “You are very beautiful and the enemy is known to gang rape women prisoners. They will not back away from that kind of torture with you. I want you to mentally prepare yourself and make yourself believe that all that will happen to a dead body, not your body OK? You have to survive this for your kids. Berhane might not come back. I also want you to know that your husband is and always will be a leader. I love you beyond words, not because you are my little sister but because I know the woman you are. You are worth all the brothers in our family. Be strong when I will not be around”

That made me understand that I was losing the one brother that let me walk in his shadow all our life and spoiled me rotten. I gathered my breath and told him “We hear that the front provides you with poison pills. Can I have one? I can take the idea of beatings, but not rape. Can you give me a pill my beloved brother?” At this point my brother sobbed without any control. He hugged me and held me in his arms as if it was the first and the last time. He left abruptly my house and our beloved city. He did not tell our mother, but she was kind of expecting it. Two days later, the “Afaagn” {the notorious Ethiopian killing squad} broke into his apartment and all his friends' apartments. They found no one, for they made it out just on time.

**However, the Front asked Ghietachew to stay behind because “he was not suspected of any involvement”. But it did not take long for the enemy’s long tentacles to find out and arrest him.**

I, myself was going through the agony of feeding my husband in jail and not knowing how to make ends meet with two toddlers, a young sister and an elderly mother. At one point my older daughter developed a sort of depression; she refused to eat, her sleeping routine was disrupted because she was badly missing her father to whom she was fiercely attached.

I took an appointment through the Catholic Nuns running my alma mater. My mother and I took my child to the hospital at that time called "Etege Mennen Hospital". We were sitting in a corridor and waiting for our names to be called. I was trying to entertain my daughter by pointing out at nurses rushing from one room to another or pushing carts filled with medications. The waiting room was filled with all kind of noises. People talking loud and names being called.

Suddenly a silence fell and all the noises disappeared as if someone had turned off the volume button on a loudspeaker. It was just a silence broken by the sound of heavy clanking metallic chains. The sound was sharp and loud. These chains had an effect so terrorizing that made the floor shake under our feet. It was like an earthquake that focused on the grounds these men were walking, without shacking the building itself. What we were looking at were Eritrean prisoners being brought into the hospital and escorted by heavy armed security personnel. They all looked so young and scared. Their eyes searching around for family members or friends, when suddenly a voice screamed in Ethiopian language "look down, no one keeps his head up. Keep your heads down. Look down I said!!"

One of the prisoners defied that order and walked holding his head up. His shoulders were draped with a "Gabey" {traditional heavy hand made blanket}. His hands were handcuffed in the front by a heavy chain usually used to tight a dog in Asmara private villas' gardens. His feet were tight as well by a heavier and longer chain. At each step he took, the chain made a clanking metallic noise of chains being dragged step after step. That was Ghietchew. My brother's best friend. The only one in their group that did not make it out. He looked at me straight in the eyes and gave me a shy smile. He passed in front of us. I almost touched his leg, but instead fear made me hold my child even tighter. The metallic chains' sound disappeared from the corridor into a room. I looked at my mother, and her frozen face made me decide to leave for home. I could not take it to maybe see Ghietchew leaving the hospital while handcuffed like an animal ready for the slaughter room.

### **Ghietchew was killed by a firing squad not long after.**

I told my brother when I saw him in the liberated fields of Eritrea in 1989. He told me that he knew. He also told me that at each time he had a chance he asked about me and my safety. Only at that time he revealed to me that he had made arrangements to provide me with a poison pill inside the prison in the event I was arrested, tortured and raped. We hugged each other and cried for Ghietchew, a kind giant that all he dreamt about was an Independent and free Eritrea.

### **To Ghietchew and his family: I would like to send all my gratitude and love with this writing.**

Kiki Tzeggai - September 9, 2015

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