



“Enda Afras” Ethiopian torture room Asmara, Eritrea

The ordinariness of the surrounding places and the suburban areas makes “Enda Afras” even more difficult to accept, for this place is the symbol of humanity at his worst.

“Enda Afras” torture room and the former prison under the Ethiopian occupation is located in the heart of Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea. When you look at this place from outside, it has a grassy area that calls for kids to play and run from one end to the other.

You see, Enda Afras” means “stable for horses” and it is part of the compound formerly hosting the Ethiopian Emperor’s palace, during the occupation of my country – Eritrea – by said Emperor and his government. The gardens were beautifully tailored to meet the tastes of the Emperor and his royal family vacationing in Asmara. The leaves of palm trees surrounding the palace, shifting benevolently in the afternoon breeze.

Some privileged young people of my generation, had access to request a horse and would ride the street of Asmara towards the fields surrounding the airport of Asmara.

Later on – during the Ethiopian Derg {that took over power with a coup overthrowing the Emperor}, turned the stable “Enda Afras” into a torture room and jail.

My husband was tortured and killed at “Enda Afras”. The torture room of “Enda Afras” is a very small and dark room sitting next to a fountain that served in the past as a water fountain for the Emperor’s horses.

Eritreans that went through that place underwent tortures such as drowning, removal of toe-and-fingernails followed by electric shocks applied to genitals, suffocation with plastic bags, forcing prisoners to eat humans’ excrements, along rape with metals sticks and roughed wood sticks to both female and male prisoners. At times, some soldiers would urinate on prisoners that refused to talk. The Ethiopian occupier carefully refined its ideas about torture and applied it to Eritreans.

The victims’ remains were dumped in the same gardens once admired for the flowers and palm trees, then turned into mass grave after mass grave. “Enda Afras” is in the middle of a large compound that was also used to host soccer games among the Ethiopian torturers and military, all while taking turns in the torture room.

The only crime these prisoners were accused of was to be proud Eritreans.

"Enda Afras" is today a lonely place. I do not dare say "neglected", for it has been decades I did not visit the place; **but nevertheless it should be turned into a symbol of the occupier's dystopia.**

Maybe a museum showing the graffiti our prisoners left on each wall of that stable turned into prison. "Enda Afras" became one of the most infamous prison camps of the Ethiopian occupation in Eritrea.

When I had permission to visit "Enda Afras" - in 1993 - to my horror, I saw a person painting the wall of the main room called "Adarash". He was standing on a tall ladder and painting the walls in white color all while whistling a melody of his own.

I remember standing at the bottom of his ladder and telling him: "If you do not stop, I will make you fall by pulling this ladder". He stopped his whistling sound, but kept puckering up his lips on a whistling shape. He was surprised, but immediately said, "If you do not want to be hurt, please, move away". I kept my eyes staring up to his face and did not move. I was still holding the ladder. He slowly came down and - with a very defiant attitude- stared at my face. But once he saw tears silently streaming all over my face, with a very soft and sad voice he said "Were you tortured here?" I replied, "My husband was and he died at the hands of his torturers. I am trying to find his name or a message from him on these walls. I beg you not to cover their messages and help me find his".

The man put down his brush, took off his hat and asked for my husband's name. "Berhane" I replied. He suggested we walked around and try to find his name. But he said "There were so many Berhane here" I smiled bashfully and told him that he would have left a message for me using the nickname he gave me. "And what was that?" he asked. "Fekrey" {my love} I replied.

The man said, he liked the nickname. I asked him to hold my hand and walk me around. He hesitated because of the paint on his hands, but I grabbed his hand and asked his name. He said "You will not believe it, but my name is Berhane as well". I felt it as an omen for a good friendship that was born in such a sad place; the name sharing gave it a much better feeling.

We looked around and wondered how some writings were all the way up to the ceiling. He said that the only possibility was that the prisoners took turns to hold one another on their shoulders and reach higher levels of those walls. He walked me around and took me to the single stalls used in the past to hold one (1) horse at a time. But Eritrean prisoners were stuffed by a large number in said stall/booth - sometimes 20 at a time making them standing at all times. They would breathe on each other's faces and sleep on a standing position until the next round of torture. I was told that each "stall" would stink with human excrements and urines. Often with human remains of someone dead by asphyxiation.

We could not find any writings that personally belonged to my husband. The man tried to console me by saying that all the general writings, such as "pray for me; forget-me-not; I love you, etc.etc." could have been my husband's.

At the end of my allowed time, I asked him what he was going to do after I left. He said, "I am going home and give a nickname to my wife, just like your husband did"

We laughed and I told him it was good idea. He told me that both himself and his wife met in the field during the liberation war and walked hand-in-hand after the fall of Asmara to a liberated Eritrea.

Before we parted I asked him to stop covering up our history for, many souls would scream at him! He said he would try, but orders had to be followed.

Berhane/the painter soldier and I became friends. When I met him a while later, I asked him if the place was honored and kept the same as our martyrs left it. He kept his eyes to the ground. I knew he had to follow orders and paint it.

I again held his hand and asked what nickname he chose for his wife. He said "Abaditey" {my source of peace}.

I asked him if he could paint with some washable and light colors.

He said he would try and promised me to be there to wash it off when the moment came. I still long for the day I can take my children, my grandchildren and all my friends to visit "Enda Afras" in the beautiful city of Asmara. We are all ready to volunteer in washing away the paint and carefully bring back all the cherished messages our hero Eritreans left for us. I hope our government is protecting such places saturated with our history and human pain. I have faith they are.

I also hope to find Berhane the painter/soldier and his wife. Her and I will compare the nicknames our husbands gave us, all while listening to her husband's whistling and feeling my own husband's gratitude.

Kiki Tzeggai

Dedicated to "Enda Afras"

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