



The Ethiopian family next door

Their family name is Leghesse. Originally from Ethiopia, they lived for decades in Asmara, Eritrea and were owners of several flourishing businesses, amongst them bakeries and a hotel next to my house.

Their children were raised speaking Tigrigna, the Eritrean language, and proud of the Eritrean culture. Their daughter Lula was raised with strong principles and was of a beauty that makes people talk to this day. When Berhane and I married, we lived in one of his father's building who was so close to the Leghesse's hotel, we shared a wall and could talk to each other while sitting in our respective balconies.

Lula was often at my house; my children called her - and still do "zia" Lula; the Italian way for aunt.

The day Berhane was taken away by the Ethiopian soldiers who ended up killing him, Lula never left my side. She was by my side when our house was singled out and searched 3 times. She was there when the Ethiopian soldiers came back to search our house for the 2nd time and planted an EPLF flyer. She was still there when they brought back Berhane and searched our house for the 3rd time; this time about 2 battalions of soldiers- armed with military radios and sophisticate weapons. She was fast in calling a doctor when I fainted. She was hugging my 3 years old daughter who was trying to walk among the Ethiopian soldiers and struggling to reach her father's hand.



Beloved Mamma Birrinesh (Leghesse family)

The remembrance I have of this family warms up my heart to this day. After Berhane's arrest, Mrs. Birrinesh Leghesse** (Lula's mother) would bring - each day - two (2) large size, fresh crispy bread for my kids. It might seem a very simple action to anyone who did not live under occupation.

Any bakery in Asmara was strictly supervised around the clock by Ethiopian soldiers; the rule was that the best bread be loaded into military trucks and distributed to the Ethiopian militaries and their families only. We, the people of Asmara, had to register and line up at government's cooperative stores (called Kebelie) and receive bread based on the family members' registered at these stores. What the occupier called "bread" was baked out of the remains of flour that would be normally used for

pasture or forage for animals by farmers. No human could chew, let alone digest the "bread" allocated for the Eritrean populations.

My children had their fresh bread each day. Mrs. Leghesse would not trust anyone but herself in delivering the bread. She would always tell me "zebukh zeelemedu koolut, kidmi temhirti mikhadoom ableeyom" ("these kids were used to the best, please, make sure they eat this bread before going to school"). I would hug her each time she crossed my house door. But that hug never translated my deep gratitude.

How could I explain that just staring at my daughter having her bread-and-milk breakfast and dipping her piece of bread in her cup with drops of milk around her lips while chewing it all with gusto, made me cry? I am short of words trying to explain how my son would open his mouth and hold my hand spoon feeding him with bread and- milk. My kids and I took for granted that Mamma Birrinesh would deliver the bread each day. And she did. Each day. Until the day I had to leave in order to save our lives.

I could see fear in Mamma Birrinesh's face each time she came. There was an un-spoken ritual between the two of us. We would greet each other, she would sit at my kitchen's table and take out the bread from under her heavy "nezela" (Eritrean shawl women drape themselves with) and she would then put it inside a bowl sitting on my kitchen table. My own mother was never told about this daily routine between Mamma Birrinesh and myself. The fear was so deep that we both would not trust anyone else but us. I told her children (including Lula) only after Eritrea gained independence. Mamma Birrinesh never abandoned us. She stood by Berhane's silent request that day on July 15, 1978. His eyes said "Hadera" ("promise me to take care of them") and Mamma Birrinesh stood by that promise.

We had many Eritrean friends that Berhane would literally "force" to stop by our house and have lunch in order to avoid long walks home (there were no buses, no taxis, no gasoline) and people walked home for lunch or just sat around until offices re-opened. They all pretended to not know me once they took him. I would gesture to them when I crossed them in the street of Asmara and they would turn their face to the other side. They were Eritreans judges, businessmen, etc.

Mamma Birrinesh never left our side and put her life on the line each day she gave my children the best breakfast. But you see, it was not only about the best bread she delivered; it was that each day she delivered one of their birth's rights: in our culture when in pain, non-blood related people replace some missing family members! She delivered that basic right until the day we left Asmara for good. And she based her life on the strongest principles of the Eritrean culture: loyalty, love and courage. After I left, I heard that she was arrested, tortured and jailed by the Ethiopians.

Her crime? Giving away fresh bread to the poor.

I want my children and my grandchildren to know that this Ethiopian woman - and mother to a family of her own - put all on the line and stood by me and my children ready to take the bullet when we were hurt, when we were constantly crying.

With the fall of Asmara and the Eritrean independence, she was one of the first people I rushed to see. I was sobbing in her arms while our hands wiped each other's tears. I told her "ayresaakun" ("I never forgot") the way she held me in her arms made me understand that she knew. She replied "gubueey gyere. Koluut aabyom do?" {I did what I was supposed to do. How are the kids"?} This is the Ethiopian family I cherish so much and both of us - Berhane and I are grateful for ever.

Kiki

To my children and my grandchildren

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** In the Eritrean and Ethiopian culture women do not adopt their husband's name at marriage. Since I cannot remember Mamma Birrinesh's last name, I am using her husband's and her children' family name (Leghesse). Their hotel was later name Leghesse Hotel.

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