

Remembering Michael Ghaber

By
Woldeyesus Ammar (May 19, 2005)

Recently, a compatriot sent me a message asking if I could say something about the circumstances that surrounded the death of Memhir Michael Ghaber in Kassala, Sudan, many years ago. The message was similar to numerous queries I received during the years on this issue, but did not until now volunteer to comment. Receipt of the latest query, however, coincides with the 13th anniversary of his death, and this time round, I feel compelled to say a few words of what I know on the subject.



Martyr Michael Ghaber

For many readers who may not know Michael Ghaber, he was an absolutely devoted nationalist agitator since youth, and between 1976 and his martyrdom on 25 May 1992, he served as social affairs cadre heading the UNHCR-supported and ELF-administered refugee high school in Kassala that assisted many young Eritreans to pursue their studies after displacement from home. (The school was popularly, but mistakenly, known as “UNESCO” high school). For a long time, Michael Ghaber was seen as ‘inimical element’ by the EPLF leadership whose publications categorized him as such before and after liberation.

Was Michael Ghaber Killed by ‘Halewa Sawra’?

The Eritrean arena witnessed horrible acts of assassination of leading individuals, and the frequency of such killings increased in the 1980s. The much talked-about culprit was Isayas Afeworki’s security apparatus, ‘Halewa Sawra’, a murderous machine that mercilessly chopped any head of a potential internal critique within the EPLF in addition to stretching its ‘long muscle’ beyond its own structure – to the masses and its rival organization. Examples abound, including senior cadres of the ELF.

On 5 June 1983, the heroic **Saeed Saleh** of the ELF-RC was murdered inside Kassala although no one could establish the identity or source of his killers.

But in many other cases, the killers were unmistakable 'Halewa Sawra' agents whose names are kept in fragmented records. On 20 July 1985, **Woldedawit Temesghen** was shot dead in front of his house in Kassala.

The murder of **Idris Ibrahim Hangala** followed on 20 September 1985, also in Kassala. During that same year, **Haile Gharza** was killed in Khartoum. The same Halewa Sawra also sent its agents to Kassala and killed on 3 September 1989 a prominent ELA leader, **Mahmoud Hassab**.

The killings and kidnappings continued even after Eritrea's liberation in 1991. On 26 April 1992, ELF-RC Executive Committee members **Woldemariam Bahlibi** and **Teklebrahan Ghebresadiq (Wedi Bashay)** were kidnapped on Easter Day and taken to Eritrea. (After 13 years, no one knows where they are or what happened to them!)

On 25 May 1992, exactly one month after their kidnapping, ELF-RC's Michael Ghaber died in Kassala, reportedly in an accident when his bicycle was hit, while on a routine route, by a public bus driven by a Sudanese national. He was buried in Kassala the next day, 26 May 1992. But, whether the cause of his death was an accident or not, everybody who knew the victim and the intentions of the Isayas-led organization automatically assumed that Halewa Sawra should be behind Michael's death. The cause remained blurred because people suspected that the bus driver could have been lured to a gainful complicity with Halewa Sawra to do the dirty act. All what Kassalans came to know was that the driver was taken for short questioning and then freed soon. But who in our third world police stations and court-room can trust investigations of this sort? (Add to that the well known complicity of the then security apparatus of the Sudan with the Asmara regime, as witnessed in the kidnap operation of Wedi Bashay and Woldemariam Bahlibi a month earlier.) Therefore, all what we assume for now, and until someone comes with a different finding, is that Michael Ghaber died in a bus vs. bicycle collusion - call it "accident".

But...

The claim that Wedi Ghaber was always a target of Halew Sawra is not unsubstantiated. In the spring of 1989, he was stopped at night near his house in Kassala by "unidentified" assailants who had beaten him severely by iron bars and left him lying in a small lane thinking he was dead. The victim bled the whole night although he did miraculously survive that attempt on his life. But because the assailants left taking his personal belongings including his purse and shoes, the survivor initially thought (as he told me so) that the actors might not have been Halewa Sawra agents but thieves looking for some money.

However, later developments revealed that this assumption was wrong: in the early 1990s, two paid agents were captured in Kassala after attempting to kill Abdulgader Jelani, chairman of the ELF-National Council (the former ELF-NC or Lejna Sawriya). During interrogations, the two prisoners confessed that they were sent by Halewa Sawra to do the killing. And not only that: they confessed that it was they who had beaten Michael Ghaber severely by iron bars in 1989 and left him lying thinking he was dead. According to a letter sent to me by Michael himself after the attempt on Abdulkader Jelani, one of the Halewa Sawra agents was a Nara/Bariawi youth and the other was a

certain Mussie from the Areza region. This is about all what I know regarding this death of my best friend and comrade-in-struggle, Michael Ghaber.

A few more notes about Martyr Michael

Born in the early 1940s in Musha, at the banks of River Ansaba, Michael Ghaber attended elementary and junior high schools in Keren residing with his uncle, Tuluk Hamad, a former vocal member of Blocco Indipendenza and father of Debrom Tuluk, who was martyred while leading the liberation of Mendefera in 1977. Michael and this writer became friends ever since their encounter in grade three in 1956 when they soon became among the youthful nationalist agitators of their generation, including classmates Mahmoud Jenjer (one of the 7 heroic martyrs of Bogu, 1966), Saleh Hayoti and others.

Wedi Ghaber was one of the key student agitators in Asmara between 1961 and 1965, a life-time task that was continued in Addis. It is also interesting to note here that in 1961-62, Michael and Isayas Afeworki (today's PFDJ-regime head) shared a desk in grade 9 in former Prince Makonnen Secondary School. Other classmates of Michael Ghaber in Prince Makonnen during 1961-65 and who shared his nationalist fervour and agitation included Seyoum Ogbamichael, the current chairman of ELF-RC; Haile Wondetensae (DeruE); Martyr Mussie Tesfamichael (leader of 'Menkae'; Martyr Woldedawit Temesghen; Abdurahman Hassen Mehri; Arefaine Berhe, the current PFDJ agriculture minister; Joseph Ghebreselassie, one-time PFDJ trade minister; Berekhet Ghebretinsae (Aket); Habtom, PFDJ diplomat and his twin brother Andom Ghebremichael, this writer and others. Also following in their footsteps in Prince Makonnen Secondary School were other student agitators (read patriots) who included Gherezgheher Tewolde, Abdalla Hassen Ali, Martyr Dr. Bimnet Ahmed, Martyr Tsegai Yoseph, Berhane Redda and others.

It is the modest opinion of this writer that nationalist awakening in the Asmara region in the 1960s would have been different without the presence of Michael Ghaber and a few of his classmates and schoolmates who together helped in grooming a generation that made a difference in closing a political gap created in the previous decades.

Another interesting footnote that one can add while talking about Michael Ghaber was his unease and dislike to the ways and utterances of Isayas Afeworki, who, even as a young boy was as 'good' as today in making foul language. While in grade 12 in March 1965, the two schoolmates clashed over details on preparing that year's mammoth student demonstrations that sparked at Prince Makonnen and engulfed the whole country. And because of their continued distaste of each other, this writer had to see to it that Michael Ghaber wouldn't become a member of the top committee of ELF cells in the Addis Ababa university as of October 1965. And when Michael was informed by this writer that Isayas Afeworki had left Addis on 17 October 1966 to join the ELF in the field, Michael regretted and said, with anger and frustration: "Believe me, Isayas will desert the ELF and go back to Asmara together with the few boys who went from here [Addis Ababa] or he will create his won splinter group and divide the struggle in two". The second part of Michael's prediction became true only three years later. As to the first part, it was half fulfilled when Isayas went to Asmara in 1970, but opted to return to the field after his CIA encounters at Kagnev Station.

Martyr Michael graduated in history from the former Haile Selassie university (with thesis on the Bogos/Blin). In the end of 1976 and early 1977, he and Heruy Tedla were requested by the ELF to set up an institution for medium

and higher studies and a center for research, a project which did not materialize soon because of Heruy's reluctance to take up the assignment. But the ELF and Michael Ghaber pursued part of the project when the UNHCR expressed its willingness to cooperate with the ELF to assist refugee children to complete their interrupted middle and high school studies (grades 7 to 12) in Kassala. Memhir Michael and Istaz Saleh Mohammed Mahmoud became the co-directors of that productive school, commonly but mistakenly called "the UNESCO school" that assisted many young Eritreans to complete their high school studies. That setup continued to function even after the death of Wedi Ghaber but it came to a halt in 1997 when the UNHCR stopped the necessary funding that covered the modest salaries of the instructors and small stipends for the students. Since then, Catholic missionaries took up the project which is still running at its minimum.

Beside teaching and administering the Refugee High School in Kassala, Memhir Michael wrote a history textbook entitled "A Short History of Eritrea" and other educational materials in Tigrinia which are still in use in the refugee schools run and supported by the ELF-RC in eastern Sudan including the Wedisherifey School for Eritrean Refugees, with 800 refugee children, that is operational and gives Eritrean children education in the two official languages of Arabic and Tigrinia under the old ELF curriculum. Other ELFRC- supported schools in Kassala (the Soriba and Sawra schools with over 400 children) also use the said material.

During the entire 1980s, Michael Ghaber adamantly rejected many offers from relatives and friends suggesting assistance for his resettlement outside the Sudan. He was always saying that he was not willing to see his kids grow up in an environment far away from home. But that remained to be only a dream even after 1991, and especially after Isayas Afeworki talked of 'Hashewiye wudibat' on 20 June 1991. After Michael's martyrdom, his wife, Ghimja, and two kids, Redda and Weini, migrated to Australia. Coincidentally, at this 13 anniversary of Michael's death, his daughter is due to celebrate her wedding in Australia these days – but still away from home. And that is what it is to many Eritrean patriots and their offspring who contributed more than their share to the birth of Eritrean nationalist awareness and statehood.

**In this commemoration week of our Independence Day, we ought to say
in unison:**

Glory and Eternal Memory to Our Martyrs!!

