

ONE

Everywhere one turns there are armored cars: Landrovers, Rangerovers, Jeeps, Volkswagen vans, etc...all roaming and cruising the streets. Each vehicle is packed up with soldiers and other security personnel armed to the teeth. Those dressed in civilian clothes wore floppy hats, dark wrap-around sunglasses and turned up collars and looked every bit like some hoodlum or character in a B grade movie. The sight of soldiers all decked out in their Commando Ranger uniforms filled one's heart with an eerie feeling just as such a scene of siege situations are expected to. The proximity of the mounted A4 machineguns on the Jeeps, the barrels of the security forces' AK47s, "Chikis" and other automatic rifles sticking out from the windows of the vehicles sent shockwaves through the spine.

The vehicles move at a pace of a running child so that their occupants could scrutinize every single individual on the street and alleys. We called these monstrous machines the "Madebo Pacers" in "honor" or rather "memory" of the villainous Chairman of the State-created All Ethiopian Trade Union (AETU). Temesgen Madebo not only led this State controlled trade union which was formed to replace the militant Confederation of Ethiopian Labour Unions (CELU)--whose leaders including Markos Hagos were murdered by the regime-- but he was also one of those merciless fascists who spearheaded this type of "search and destroy" missions on the streets. He was one of those who launched the "On Initiative" series of murders and tortures and detentions which let loose crazed thugs to kill or detain at will and with impunity.

Temesgen Madebo used to take his armored bodyguards on an evening routine of cruising along the streets near the AETU headquarters, AK-47 hanging down from his neck, arrogance written over his sinister face, he stopped and searched, interrogated, detained or shot summarily whosoever he picked up. To be beaten and let go by the Madebo Squad was to be lucky in those days of instant death.

Come dusk one November day in 1977, we had our decoy out on the street near the Gandhi Memorial Hospital dressed typically in what these Death Squads called "anarchist garb". Sighting a "prey" the Madebos brought their car to a halt and Madebo and two of his cohorts opened the doors to jump towards their prey. Our own squad, armed with a couple of Uzi guns and a grenade, eliminated Madebo and his bodyguards and even managed to pick up a damaged AK-47 which, after some repairs, was later used in other operations. Our squad made a swift and successful getaway right under the noses of the armored cars guarding the Ministry of Defense closely.

Upon losing its key henchman, the State held one of the most elaborate funeral ceremonies ever held at the so called Revolution Square and the Cemetery for Revolutionaries. The vow was renewed to kill thousands of anarchists for every "revolutionary" thus killed by our defense squads. It was like the time of the Nazis, trying to wipe out the resistance by resorting to mass murders and reprisals. Our defensive acts were, as our people knew, motivated by the regime's relentless repression and acts of extensive murder. The regime fired the first shot and took the murderous decision to "wipe out all anarchists" when it became clear that our struggle in the political field was defeating it.

Even though the evergrowing repression and horror were engrained throughly within the very nature of the military regime, the new wave of escalation of the Suppression Campaign was clearly evident throughout the city. The Madebo Pacers dealt death to all and sundry. The slogans, posted at every likely and unlikely place, in bright and psychedelic eye catching colours, cried: "We Will Intensify The Red Terror!", "Kill a Demo with a DMT4" (Demo being an abbreviation of the EPRP's organ, Democracia, it became one of the regime's name for an EPRP member).

Armed to their teeth, their ideologues from the Yekatit 66 Cadre School, from the POMOA (Office of Mass Organization), and from the five "clandestine" Marxist Leninist Organization (Mengistu's Seded, the Meisone, Ichaat, Malered and Woz League) were dispersed throughout the hijri schools, factories, offices and other palces considered as "bas-

SURVIVING THE RED TERROR

Derg threats & intimidation

tions" of the EPRP. They started their "weeding out anarchists" campaign by assembling all students, workers, etc in assembly halls and terrorizing and threatening the gathered people. These threats and ominous calls to "expose and denounce yourself and others" were laced with pathetic attempts at theoretically refuting the positions of the EPRP which, on the contrary, exposed the government cadres themselves as bankrupt and muddled. Their main weapon was none other than Terror. Every suspected "anarchist" was subsequently dragged out of the assembly halls, physically abused and beaten and threatened with summary execution. The remaining were promised the same of the rough treatment and annihilation by the Red Terror if they "failed to embrace the Revolution".

The "Revolutionary Guards" of each City Dwellers' Association (Kebelle and Keftegna), factory, nearby Farmers' Associations and other institutions had also started to show their "force". After having recruited from the scums and dregs of the urban society and gathering in their ranks most of the riff raff and hoodlums which prowled the sewers and the underworld of the city, they launched their campaigns against us. Each morning, the thugs drilled shouting loud their anti-EPRP slogans and vowing death to "anarchists": the whole exercise was meant to instill fear in the people. The cadres were armed with AK-47s and other automatic and semi automatic rifles while the thugs of the revolutionary Guards had the bolt rifles (Lee Enfield 303s, Chekoz, etc...). All had the carte blanche when it came to killing: they all had the license to kill.

The murderous Guards started linking up and with every Kebelle and thus tied into a "Red Terror Front" they were all assembled under the overall Red Terror Committee which supervised their actions and observed their zeal in eliminating "anarchists". The Red Terror Committee was headed by fascist thugs like Derg member Legesse Asfaw and the vigilantes were thus protected and enabled to purge democratic elements from the structures of the Kebelles and associations and to assume control. The atmosphere in the city was foul with the stench of their malicious intent and deeds.

Around mid December two of these Madebo vehicles entered the Central Mosque at the Mercato (New Market) and machinegunned about 30 moslem pilgrims from the Kaffa area. A couple of days later, the State controled mass media tried in vain to impute the action onto "anarchists bent on Igniting religious differences".

In those days, hundreds of young people, workers, students, teachers, intellectuals, civil servants were picked up from their homes and palces of work and never seen again.... Gunning down suspected "anarchists" during rush hours in crowded areas became frequent and was intended to terrorize the onlookers. If one dead and mutilated corpse shocks and frightens why not a hundred?: such seemed to be their rationalization for they zealously piled up the mutilated corpses on the streets, displaying these at street corners, roundabouts, on bridges, at road junctions. The living were being given the message of death by the fascist regime: obey or else!

The goons played with the corpses before throwing them on the streets for display. Some were decaptiated, others had amputated hands and legs nailed to their foreheads, some had "I was a counterevolutionary" placard nailed to their chests... One married couple, elected members of the City Dwellers' Associations, were killed and displayed at the Habtegiorgis Bridge: the killers put one whiskey bottle, three glasses and a picture of the dead Empress Menen (wife of the late emperor Haile Selassie-BT) along with the corpses. Both victims were "adorned" with the shocking pink Red Terror poster. A young male and female lie face down in the alley of the Augusta Shirt shop in the Piazza, the canary yellow wall sprinkled generously red with their blood. Pieces of their flesh were stuck in the crevices of the gravel cement wall. They were apparently shot a close range. On the same wall, written crudely with their blood was the ultimlate absurdity of all: "Demo is responsible for the spilt blood of these anarchists". The killers have their own eerie logic, you are responsible for being their victim, the humour, if any, is black and bleak.

The pile of bodies in the centre of the Piazza—a pile of flesh and a pool of blood— was guarded by Revolutionary Guards for hours. Definitely the guards did not fear that the corpses would walk away or that anyone would pick them up and take them for burial. No. It was to test the onlookers, to see who sympathized, had tears in his or her eyes and thus exposed himself/herself inadvertently as an anarchist or a sympathizer, a candidate for harassment or arrest. Ye the people did not care whether they were being watched or not. One saw hundreds of people in tears, others showing indignation and/or disgust. They knew that not much worse than this could happen. With my own bleary eyes I saw once an old nun, on her way to the St. George's Church, defiantly wailing and beating her chest and chanting traditional mourning chants. Those boarding or alighting from the buses on that busy street wore sombre faces and some wept without fear of the consequences.

Hundreds of incidents like I described above transpired everyday. The people were shocked and disgusted and they tried by all means to resist. This was what was important really. Young and old, from all walks of life, they came together to set up protective and self defense committees, the "wailing committees", the "resistance committees", the anti repression committees" which sprung up in the Kolfe, Teklehaimanot, Gofa sefer, Gola Michael, Talian sefer and other places were examples. The people set up barricades, broke street lamps to deter the night prowlers of the regime, to hinder the vans and vehicles carrying the murderers. The cries of wailing women in the dark night, the beating of pots and pans warned the potential victims and unnerved the would be killers. The latter were so unnerved one evening at Gofa Sefer that they called in helicopters with search lights and some small tanks!

With the Coptic Christmas season approaching the searches, seizures and, in general, the Red Terror got intensified. Super saturating every street with security personnel to search pedestrians and passengers in cars had become normal. From the frequency of the search and the number of people stopped, searched and detained one could be excused to conclude that the government thought that nine tenths of the population had become "anarchist" (EPRP). The Kebelles and Keftegnas

had been given new and more sophisticated guns, yellow volkswagen vans with government license plates starting from A.A.9501-9525 have been given to each Higher Association (Kefteгна).

At the Janhoymeda (Jalmeda) Sports Arena a series of training exercises were being conducted. The most trusted Revolutionary Guards (some eight to ten of them from each Kebelle/district/ and other institutions), all throughly screened and given the seal of approval, were being given a special crash course. This notorious task force was being groomed for a special purpose.

The Mission? "Weeding out the anarchists from the Mercato area".

Condition? "Hostile territory infested by the 'Demos'; almost "the whole population sympathetic to the anarchists"

The Strategy? "Seal off and take the Mercato by surprise".

The Method? " Search everybody, every house, every kiosk, every nook and corner, arrest anyone without a valid ID, suppress dangerous suspects, intensify the Red Terror".

Time? "The busiest shopping day of the holiday season: Christmas eve, Thursday at 4.30 a.m. (07.30GMT).

The trained guards alighted from their Mercedes trucks on the fateful day and took up positions in their respective divisions. They were divided into scouting teams, search teams, arrest teams, cover teams and headquarters staff. The police and soldiers backing up this operation also took their assigned posts.

And what was the target, the adversary, like? I offer a few impressions. To sum up Mercato in one word I can only say it is a Maze. An asphalt, dirt road, shanty jungle. A huge mixture of everything from people to

moods and functions and architecture. A hodge podge of the traditional with the modern, the old with the new, a paradox where one sees an exquisitely dressed Madam side by side with a half naked leper with gashed and gaping wounds, a Mercedes Benz limo vying for space in the dirt road with an overloaded and panting donkey. An intriguing and mysterious place with lots of safe houses not only for the political dissidents but also for all others hiding from the police.

Though the EPRP was in the minds and hearts of the people, Mercato had a special significance for it. It was to us like the Casbah was to the Algerians during the anti colonial struggle. Some of the most downtrodden and impoverished people in the whole wide world lived here in the Mercato. The Mercato was also home to big merchants, petty and not so petty traders, middlemen, shoe shine boys, prostitutes, bar owners, brothel owners, workers, students, vagrants, rural people on temporary or prolonged visit to the capital, pensioned policemen and soldiers, confidence tricksters of all levels and varieties, smugglers, underpaid government employees, and more. Most were our eyes and ears, they shared with us a hatred for the military regime.

The small shoe shine boys were our lookouts and they could easily spot a security agent from the teeming crowd in the Mercato, the bar owners were a mine of information, the ladies of the night even more so. Women petty traders with their small mud platforms decked out with vegetables, semi rotten fruits, roasted grains and spices were one of our most active supporters. Squatting in rows with piles of baskets all around them, and chatting loud and all at the same time one would think they could hardly notice anything going on around them but they were one of our most alert informers. They spotted the security agents or the search party easily and they would come to the corner where we, the militants, would be holding one of our usual "standing up meetings" and warn us to move away. If we had a revolver or some leaflets to hastily dispose of they took these readily and hid them for us. Their "impromptu" loud quarrel scenes (raw language and lewd gestures in-

cluded) diverted the attention of the search party or delayed its movement.

These women were keen observers and justified the common boast "I can even tell a cross eyed fly". Just as they were able to spot the security agents of the governments they were able to identify us whatever the disguises we had tried on. When I passed by them, trying hard to look like a poor maid, they would call out to me and give me a banana or two gratis and say an "ayzosh" ("be brave") to me with sad expressions on their faces. (They bought the bananas six for a quarter and sold them for 30 cents).

The thought of these women prods me on to reminisce about my underground life. Even though it may seem tangential at this juncture of the story, I am going to guide you through my experience partly because it has a relevance to the main story I had set out to relate. In relating my experience I would like to note that it may not be a typical case. Thousands of our comrades had rich and varied experiences in the underground and it is difficult for me to conclude that the underground was like this or that solely based on my experience. My story is just one of the many, part of the many, an experience on its own.

TWO

It was in the early months of 1976, Gregorian Calendar, that I had to curtail my activities as a "legal" person and go into hiding. The one room shack in which a young married couple sheltered me was located in the Ginfilé area of Addis Abeba. It had just room enough to take in their regular size bed, their roommate's small folding bed and a table for kitchen utensils and foodstuffs. The cracked mud walls were partially pasted up with movie promotions posters (one was for The Valachi Papers). Four people could not fit in there and move about without knocking each other out. Luckily, the fourth person, their roommate, worked the night shift as a guard at the main Commercial Bank. The husband, being a school teacher at a private school, did not hang around the house during the daytime. The wife was a high school student forced to stay at home because school was closed due to daily strikes, boycotts, etc....The roommate with whom the couple shared their house was as much a stranger to them as he was to me. The severe housing shortage had brought on this union of convenience.

The compound was also a very crowded one. We shared one 40 watt light bulb with the room next to ours and this wasn't all that we shared with our neighbours in the compound. Our common water supply was from one leaky pipe that one had to approach wearing rubber galoshes on account of the mud around it. The most popular of our shared accommodation was our outhouse somewhere in the middle of the compound. There were some really comical scenes going on each day at the footsteps of the toilet.

Some went in there and stayed for hours unbothered by anything at all. Others, specially the women, did not want to be seen going into or out of the outhouse (is it because women are supposed to be unencumbered by this biological necessity?). So, as they were forced by the

call of nature to go to the toilet, they did so surreptitiously, with embarrassment on their faces, looking left and right and dashing fast like a bullet into the toilet. Others would sing and whistle inside the toilet to cover all and any embarrassing noises.

Inside the toilet, which stank to the skies more than you can imagine, all one saw was a boarded floor with a little hole bordered with four thin planks raised about 5 c.m. from the floor, and a waste paper basket with some used pieces of toilet tissue and newsprint. Since there was no commode to sit on, one is expected to squat and aim to drop in the hole and, well, not so many people in the compound were good shots. So, you can now imagine the mess. After a bout of muscle spasm from the squatting I got used to it and it did not become a dreaded moment after a while.

Another adjustment required from me concerned food. The meals we had were always meagre and bland in taste. No beverages at all, not even tea since sugar was being rationed by the Kebele and coffee cost 20.00 Birr a kilo. If this was the situation in salaried school teacher's house for two I could imagine the situation in the houses of workers, guards and other disadvantaged families. For me, this was my first encounter with real hunger : in the past I knew hunger only when I dieted to lose excess weight. I had an ambivalent feeling as a consequence. On one side, I really felt sad and empty not to so much for myself but for all those who had to lead dreary and difficult life, for those who had a lifetime of deprivation and want. On the other, I felt glad at his opportunity to integrate myself with the lifestyle of the underprivileged for whom I cared so much and from my heart. I saw it as a test for me and at the sametime a chance to know what suffering really meant.

My cover identity was that I was the husband's sister from some small town in Wellega province, forced to come to Addis Abeba after having divorced my husband. It so happened that the fellow in whose house I was lodged had a strong Oromo accent (when he spoke Amharic) while I, owing to my background, I didn't. When I spoke Amharic at that time it sounded more like a Peace Corps Volunteer rather than a peasant

woman from a remote rural town. Fortunately, the roommate, who was politically backward, was always exhausted by the time he got home and never had the time to connect things and to cross examine me.

My disguise, to say the least, was quite amateurish. The tinted goggles that I used to wear had left their mark on my face and one could easily notice the contrast with the more tanned portions of my face. I was plump and bottom-heavy with a youngish looking light skinned face. I wore an ordinary shemma (national costume) dress with plain borders. Yet, I could feel it was not a convincing attire. The neighbours treated and spoke to me as if they were talking to someone not quite in their mold.

Much of the first three days of my stay in the underground were spent lying on the couple's bed, under the bedcloth, pretending to be exhausted from "the long trip from Wellega". On the fourth day, I reestablished my organizational contacts and I made my initial steps outside. I felt giddy and self conscious and kept warily looking in all directions. I felt as though everyone was looking at me and there were indeed some eyes directed at me and they belonged to ordinary lecherous old men trying out their luck. Assuming that I came from Dessie, Wello, one old man even accosted me to say that he was himself from Wello and made me offers of jewels and gold. When he tried to pinch me and I shoved him away roughly people laughed and snickered at him. I was soon to get used to this kind of behaviour from men and to realize the conditions of women at everyday level. And when I gained some confidence, I even tried to continue inoffensive conversations with these lecherous types. It was a good cover at times. I became good at playing the innocent lamb, betrayed by a cruel man, left alone in the city, etc.... a conversation which did not interest much those ears belonging to security agents stationed at bus stops and other possible contact areas.

On the whole, my period of adjustment was over fairly quick even if it was painful at times. I developed a skin rash from the friction of my fat thighs as I had to walk rather than use cars (as I used to). I suffered

A FIGHTING WOMAN'S TALE

from inflammation of the lymphnodes and I lost a lot of weight in a very short time. But I was also able to roam the back alleys, side streets, know the shanty neighbourhoods, the noisy beer parlours, the tea houses and markets of Addis Abeba. I learnt, I came to know my own city, to know her smells, her secret spots, her twisted roads and shortcuts, her rhythm and beat.

I felt so invisible, so one with the anonymous crowd that I even walked past my former office and apartment. Early in the mornings it was not unusual to see hordes of women, some with monogrammed work uniform overcoats draped over their traditional shemma dresses, striding along the pavement, talking loud, on their way to ill paying work. I would often blend with them on my way to my various appointments and when sometimes I walked behind the women cleaners who worked in my own office they never recognized me.

Not that I had not come face to face with these or others who knew me before. But, they see me and they sort of see through me, the eye believes not what it sees sometimes. My comrades had spread confusing rumours about my whereabouts and, thus, those who saw me did not believe their eyes. It was safe, of course up to a point.

One thing I never got used to was haggling at the markets. This brought suspicion from other women and even the vendors but I usually gave some naive excuse which seemed to work. With my basket full of vegetables thus purchased I was able to move anywhere. Under the vegetables or sometimes in a hidden recess woven into the basket went the underground leaflets, or a dismantled machinegun, pistols, posters, duplicating inks, bullets or any other necessary item for the underground. If not the basket, I carried plates or porcelain glazed milking containers in which I put my materials at the bottom and some injera at the top. At times, I carried loaves of bread stuffed with coded messages inside. There were a variety of ways to transport various items. I was, along with hundreds and hundreds of other women and young girls from all walks of life and in various guises, part of the invisible underground army that racked the nerves of the State.

SURVIVING THE RED TERROR

During the first month, I had grown through from the infancy to adulthood of underground life. The house that I was using as a shelter became more and more inconvenient. The politically backward roommate entertained opportunist thoughts specially after our comrades liberated a million and three hundred thousand Birr from a State owned bank in the Mercato on February 8/1976. He kept condemning the "damned anarchists" scared of losing his own guard job at the Commercial Bank. Another problem was that the shelter, the room, was tiny and did not enable me to do writing or necessary printing work. I could not hide leaflets or other items also. Moreover, the fact that some of my contacts started to come to my shelter was also arousing suspicion and stirring the interest of the Keblle association. I was forced to change to another house.

In this other house, there were others hiding like me and they immediately assumed that I must be like them though we hardly ever talked about who we were and what we did. I had to leave this house also. Three days after I left this shelter I settled into my new surroundings.

The whole town was buzzing that unforgettable day. It was a horrible day, one I could never forget. Daro Negash, the labour union (CELU) activist and an active militant of the Ethiopian Women's Coordinating Committee was murdered near her residence and work place (Berhanena Selam Printing Press, Arat Kilo). What made her murder so horrible and the killers' crime so heinous was the fact that she was nine months pregnant and her killers had disemboweled her and the first eye witnesses to the murder stated that the child she was going to give birth to was alive for a while. People were shocked, the news spread and many, who found the story incredible, flocked to the scene of the crime to see for themselves.

Daro's murder was not the only one that day. Also murdered was a monk (near the St. Mary Cathedral), 3 workers near the old airport, 5 more people near Sebeta and many others in various places. The killers let loose by the regime were having a field day. I learnt, on the same

A FIGHTING WOMAN'S TALE

day, that four teachers had been killed near the Ginflé bridge and their corpses thrown in the small irrigation garden. With trepidation, I rushed to the scene only to find out that one of the murdered teachers was indeed the same one in whose house I had been sheltered. His face was hardly recognizable but I picked him out because he was wearing a clay colored sweater that his wife had knitted for him.

The gruesome political murders caused an uproar. The killers were no mystery men, the death troopers strutted arrogantly, shooting anyone they chose to kill, no scruples, no qualms. The deranged Girma Kebede and his gang were directly responsible for the murder of Daro Negash and others at Arat Kilo. They were so sadistic and exposed the government to violent criticism that the State disavowed them.

Not that the government did not condone their actions, no. Only that the Girma Kebedes were slightly ahead of their time, they anticipated the Red Terror since, later on, during the Red Terror, their sadistic acts and the displaying of mutilated corpses were going to be ordinary and routine. People marched protesting against the killings of Daro and others. The State decided to sacrifice Girma Kebede and his gang, there were internal power struggles which were dividing the ruling clique too. Girma Kebede was sacrificed by those who wanted to score a point against the group he belonged to, his public execution caused considerable chasm within the ruling clique and its hirelings.

Girma Kebede and his gang were publicly executed and their photos displayed in the newspaper and other media. To my surprise, I saw a familiar face and name, Ayalew, amongst them. Ayalew had worked with me in an Interministry Committee (he represented the inland Revenue) and had now become the henchman of the murderous Girma Kebede. Ayalew and I had our differences at the time we worked together in the government committee and he must have interpreted my absence, I surmised, as my hiding in the underground. He was now unable to do anything about it!

SURVIVING THE RED TERROR

Weeks later I contacted the wife of the slain democrat, the teacher, and we met somewhere in a church. She told me that two of the thugs had broken down their doors at around 3 a.m. and that they had beaten them up and searched the house. Then they were both gagged and tied, Girma Kebede had come and ordered his goons to "take these anarchists out", and they were marched three minutes away from their house. At the Ginflé bridge, the thugs had rounded up ten more people. Girma came and picked out randomly a woman and three men and shot all of them himself. After that, the murderers boarded their Taunus and Lanover cars and drove off burning rubber without even bothering to untie those they had left behind.

She told me sobbing that it was the same Ayalew who had searched their house and arrested them. Besides identifying him from the newspaper photo, she also described his most familiar tics (his stuttering and the nervous twitching of his face). Needless to say, that had I been in that house a little longer I would have been a victim of Ayalew and Girma. The wife of the teacher told me that she had hidden that fateful night in a sewer hole and never returned to her house for fear that they may come for her again, a fear I did not find exaggerated at all.

My new shelter was a more tolerable place with quite good accommodation. With a noticeable loss of weight and slightly dirtier clothes, I was passing myself as a maid servant to the Eritrean family. The first day I arrived, they were laundering their clothes and I decided to join in to make my cover convincing for the neighbours. The exercise made my arms and hands so sore that I was not able to make a fist or hold a pen for at least three days!

The compound of my new shelter was quite nice. There were only three households; the two were bachelors' pads. Two other bachelors who had rented the basement apartments rarely showed due to the nature of their jobs. Ours was the largest household with four women, one teenage boy and a seven year old child. The two young women were politically active and quite liberated. Their mother was an extremely rel-

gious person who was thoroughly dedicated to her daughters. She was aware of their political involvement and she prayed for them all the time.

I recall one incident at the end of my first week there. March 8, the International Women's Day was approaching. The State was busy with its own preparations and so were we. The young women and members of the local cell of the clandestine Women's Organization (Ethiopian Women's Organization for Struggle) were busy behind closed doors. They were doing their share preparing leaflets, posters, billets and other papers to be printed and distributed that day all over Addis Abeba. Since we kept the strictest discipline, I was not to know the the cell mates of the two young girls in the house who kept me and their mother in one room while the cell (whose members did not see me either) held its meeting in another. The mother knew what was going on: afraid, she passed the whole night praying.

On the eve of March 8, the EPRP, the party's youth league (the EPRYL which was declared a week earlier) and the Ethiopian Women's Organization for Struggle carried out their pasting and dissemination of agitational materials. Each of us participated in the most creative way we could. One could say every household, every inch of Addis Abeba was covered. It was a smashing success.

The next morning while some of the officials were forcing women to go to the State sponsored March 8 celebration (or face penalties!) others were trying to scrape off our painted slogans from the asphalt streets and walls of buildings. The whole town was amazed at our feat: how and when did they do it? most were wondering....

About fifteen days later on a Wednesday morning (the 24 th. of March) the fascist regime proclaimed that Addis Abeba, "the last bastion of the anti-people forces" was about to be taken. The declared "search and suppression campaign" was to cover every house and every vehicle in the city. The search party had photographs of no less than 700 political dissidents, the photos were posted at town centers, near banks, post offices and other government buildings. Though we didn't know the exact

date, we have had inside information from our infiltrators and we were more or less ready for the campaign. The more exposed of our members had left Addis Abeba, materials were cleared out and hidden more securely and identification papers prepared for other members who needed them.

Five days before the expected search date I went into hiding in a monastery on the periphery of the city. I stayed with a sympathetic nun who was very obliging but I was instantly bored to death. Not knowing what was going on in the city, I was itching to venture out. After spending two days and two nights in total blackout of news and light respectively, I decided to leave the monastery and to go back to my previous shelter.

The day I returned, the family started procuring for me some ID papers from the Kebele. I had to have a picture taken and my appearance had to look credible, credible enough to pass the impending search. A more soiled attire, worn out shoes and a change in skin tone could help, I thought, but how to get it "right"? We started experimenting... Taking the soot from the bottom of the earthenware pots I blended it over my face. The girls couldn't contain themselves and burst out laughing. A rush to the mirror told me why: I looked like the grotesque image of blacks in the Hollywood movies of the 1930s, where they had shoe polish make up on. It was really comical. By the way, despite the dimness all around we were never humourless, we found many joyous moments, we stole laughter from the bleak situation, we filled our hearts with hope and joy. The experiment continued and we finally mixed light brown roasted coffee powder and Nivea cream and I tried it. I looked like a person with a lifelong ailment, pallid, and it was what I needed. I started practicing how to walk and act like someone who had just barely recovered from a prolonged illness.

THREE

The searchers could not cover the whole of Addis Abeba in one day but they compensated their weakness in other ways. Playing on the fears of the people they claimed that they had a special machine which could detect metals hidden even hundreds of metres deep. Many gullible people flocked to the police stations and the kebele offices to hand over their buried arms and ammunition before the searchers and their 'devilish' machine found it all.

By the time the searchers came to our house, it was late in the afternoon of the second day of the city wide search. By then, some of the tension had waned. They seemed satisfied because they had expropriated huge quantities of armaments and one of our leaders, Dr. Tesfayte Debessai, had been fingered out by a "banda" (an intellectual serving the fascist regime, a traitor) and forced to commit suicide by jumping from the seventh storey of a building. The searchers were also bored and tired. Five of them came to our house where I was the only occupant at the time and I ushered them in and led them from room to room, answering their routine questions with the expected naivety. The whole search ended in five minutes. And after the third day, it was business as usual for us, reestablishing contacts, printing leaflets, slogans, posters, and continuing with our agitational and organizational work.

The government realized that the search and suppression campaign had not finished off or weakened our activities. And so, the repression got intensified. Abductions became rampant, murders and tortures became extensive and routine. The "trouble shooter" forces, the ones who were reputed to be "lightning fast" and ruthless were deployed all over the city. and they proved their bestiality on the eve of May Day 1976.

On the eve of May Day, the workers, youth, women and other sectors of the society were holding their own alternative May Day protest marches and meetings in the backstreets of Addis Abeba. The government thugs, soldiers and security personnel were let loose on these innocent protesters, killing all and sundry, sowing terror and trying to cow the whole population once and for all. On that fateful night, thousands were killed (a conservative figure of the dead was two thousand), their bodies thrown into sewer holes, under bridges, etc... On the heels of this murderous act came the second house to house search (May 6-7) which also caused the loss of lives from our midst.

My life in the underground became more hard and more challenging by the day. There were ten or twelve appointments to keep each day and each activity required precision, discipline, caution and creativity. The underground tests one's limits while at the same time expanding one's capacities. I participated in many study groups and lots of daring practical activities. Such tasks as screen printing became very easy for me. I found out that I can use almost anything with a smooth surface, stencil and ink to print any material in any number. No clumsy and hard to hide instruments were necessary. An 8" by 11" mirror, a picture frame, a buffet table or a headboard made from formica panels etc.. did the trick. The presence of such items in any household was not also suspect or out of the ordinary.

As the repression intensified, the danger of arrest or being identified came within the bounds of probability. Each day, the chances of being endangered became more glaring? Each day, a close associate or someone I knew got driven to the underground or was arrested, abducted, wounded or martyred. The resistance to the repression also grew; after all we were pushed to the underground and to the resistance by the repression of the fascist State. Often, there were shootouts; the heroic and agitational last stands made by our outgunned and outnumbered comrades stirred the people. They instilled in us the strength and the will to continue the struggle. The martyrdom wrote new chapters in the history of our people, it was a victory that would endure and

A FIGHTING WOMAN'S TALE

last in the hearts of the people long after the blood of the martyred had dried.

Most comrades showed exemplary courage and steadfastness. They proved what dedication to and love for the people and the country meant. They were disciplined and their love for the people was accompanied by an intense hatred for the rotten and inhuman system. Their belief gave them the courage to withstand brutal tortures, many committed suicide rather than betray their organization and its secrets. Heroes were made, heroes were seen and the country did take notice. This was another victory: to pass the lesson of courage, of dying for a cause, martyrdom for a country.

But, as our ancestors say: a mother's womb is multicolored. There are cowards and heroes, traitors and their opposites. Some also broke under the horrible torture as we are all of human flesh and therefore weak, and they exposed the organization to danger. A broken comrade or democrat caused a string of arrests. To avoid such a fate one had to be skilful in disguise and to limit contacts to the strictest necessary level. One had to make a habit of not making anything a habit. Approaches to rendezvous points, appointment sites themselves, public telephones used, bars, public places, meeting places, codes, passwords, had all to be changed, varied, sometimes dissimulated to the maximum as to be considered no longer in use even by one's own comrades.

Regarding meeting places we had to be particularly cautious, observant, creative, well informed and alert so as to avoid falling into traps, to avoid being shadowed. One had to be able, to learn by hard practice, how to spot and lose shadows, how to never be spotted in the first place, to blend with the surrounding.

I remember once how not paying due attention to minute details, everyday occurrences and customs almost got me in trouble. I held with other women a usual meeting in a particular church. Everytime I got to the church, I used to notice that there were a lot of women on one side

Surviving the Red Terror

of the church. So, me and my comrades would do our genuflections at the less crowded side of the church and go right on to discuss our agenda for the day and to exchange leaflets or others materials from each others baskets. I never gave it a thought as to why one side of the church was crowded and the other not until one day a woman came over to me from the crowded side and asked me why I and my companions prayed on the side reserved for the menfolk. She also noticed that I was not wearing the piece of thread believers wear around their necks and she got suspicious. "You don't look modern enough not to wear the thread," she commented, adding: "and yet you do not know where women pray and that they use the other entrance. Neither do you understand the various chimes of the bells during the kidase (Mass)". I turned a deaf ear to her comments, pretending to be hard of hearing and somewhat retarded. Which did not convince her much since she had observed me conversing with my companions at other times.

The woman wanted to alert the church officials about us "suspicious women" but we managed to leave the church before she was able to do so and we never went back to that church. After this incident I stopped using churches as places of rendezvous as often as I used to. Later, I learnt that the Churches have been given instructions to construct gates where and if they didn't have them, and they were supposed to lock these gates every day with the exception of Sundays and the particular Saint's Day. Anyway, from that day on, I became even more conscious of paying attention to what may seem a small detail.

FOUR

The underground is survival of the fittest. It is one's versatility, efficiency, vigilance, courage and adaptability to the changing situations which determine one's longevity in the underground. One has to be a good learner and a good observer, direct experience or that which is learnt from others (be it a success or a failure) counts a lot.

I recall the lesson I drew from a young lady I had once worked with. Even though her profession was that of a clandestine revolutionary, she was living a legal life with proper ID and other papers. She would dress fashionably and go about her business in the daintiest manner. Somehow she was identified and was shadowed by the political police though she was not aware of the fact. Overconfident and convinced that her attire and manners would not attract attention, she continued to do her work without vigilance, without changing her routine, without diversifying her methods. The police shadowed her at length, photographed all her contacts, bugged her own private telephone and the public one she often used, identified her contact points and rendezvous places, etc... She became like a bird in a very large cage who imagined itself free. The organization was saved from a big disaster because a mole within the security apparatus was able to inform us in time and we had the time to move away all the identified comrades and dissolve the compromised cells. Only the lady and one of her contacts were nabbed by the police because we were not able to contact them in time.

The lesson I drew from this experience was that one of the crucial things for a person in the underground is to be a good and vigilant observer and never to be self satisfied and amateurish. One must know how to blend, how not to attract attention and be able to smell out the impending danger. Often in life and more so in the struggle, it is not only one's strength that counts though it is for sure very important. The

enemy's weakness has its own role to play. An unjust and repressive regime has very many weak points and flaws which can be exploited. The fact that most of the security personnel were not dedicated to the regime they served was to our advantage. We were able to recruit from within the apparatus of the regime itself, we were able to plant moles and faceless infiltrators even in high places.

The situation, though not decisive, played its part in facilitating our activities. In fact, the State had to purge and make a show of force within its ranks before it embarked on its most draconian act--- the wholesale detention of massive sectors of the population (students, office workers, factory workers, civil servants, etc...) for months. The apathy within its ranks which had some of its bases on an overestimation of our military strength (they were clear about the popular support we had) invariably bordered on fear and this gave us a lot of leeway to manoeuvre.

I recall once when the cell I belonged to had the task of preparing a banner (with our party's name and emblem) which the armed propaganda teams would put up in a public square. In those days anyone who was buying red or yellow pieces of cloth, paper or paint was suspect and we had to use ingenious methods to acquire the necessary items. It took us three nights to complete sewing the two metres by three metres nylon banner. After completion, I was assigned the task of handing over our work (with weights attached to the nylon cords) to the armed propaganda team. I made my rendezvous, put the banner in my basket and set out to meet the team.

It was not as simple a task as it seems since in those days the security police were prowling the streets and the situation quite tense and dangerous. They were supposedly on full alert prior to the coming second anniversary of the declaration of our party. They expected us to hang our banner and posters all over the city on Nehru 26 (August 31 or September 1).

We had decided to surprise them by staging selective displays in the most dramatic mode feasible. The armed propaganda team I was as-

signed to meet had in the meantime hijacked a government van along with the chauffeur from a gas station in another part of the city (the driver was taken to a bar and kept there). On my part, at the appointed time, I took my basket to the particular kiosk and set my basket down near a fellow who had the designated code item in his hand. I went through my part of the designated code and the man picked up the basket and moved away.

From a vantage point, I observed the surroundings (no one seemed to have noticed us) and waited for the action to take place. At exactly 2.30 pm, at the peak of the rush hour in the afternoon, with packed buses and cars rushing streaming through the four lane Churchill Road, our armed propaganda team launched the operation. The target was the Theodros Circle, one of the most prominent roundabouts of the city, which adjoined four kebelles of two Higher Associations or Keftegnas- (Keftegna 2 : Kebelles 15&16, Keftegna 3 : Kebelles 14&33). At the most opportune moment, when the red traffic light stopped the main traffic, the van swerved onto the pavement around the circle, the backtires on the pavement and the front blocking the lane halfway.

Suddenly, the masked armed propaganda team members jumped out of the van taking their positions and blocking all the traffic on all sides. The cover units were also in position. It was in fact a daredevil act. From where I stood, I could faintly hear the comrades' taperecorder playing the catchy tune of our "Yetiglu new hiywete" ("My Life is for the Struggle"). Two of the team members put up our banner on part of the structure that the State had set up for displaying its own banners during its own upcoming anniversary. It was all very convenient. The nylon cord with weights which they used to propel the banner onto the wire structure had a little tag warning those who might tamper with the flag with dire consequences.

The activity was carried out swiftly, efficiently and cleanly in full view of hundreds of curious and amazed pedestrians, occupants of private cars and buses, etc. Those few minutes seemed like hours to me. The Kebele guards were around but most were sympathizers or too dazed to

act. We learnt later on that the Kebele guards of the area brushed off responsibility from themselves by claiming that the Circle was not clearly under their jurisdiction. Anyway, twenty minutes after the banner had been hoisted and hung, some committed members of the Higher Associations came around to pull down the offending banner. As they approached it, however, they noticed the tag warning them of tampering with the flag. It was fun to watch them retreat in a hurry, determined to call the Bomb Squad. The hoax had worked and the banner fluttered in the air for some more time.

And so my life in the underground was spiced with hundreds of such activities and experiences. As I stated earlier, there were thousands of my type of militants who were like burning coal embers underneath the sole of the regime's feet. We were thoroughly befriended and embraced by the people from all walks of life and more so by the downtrodden ones. This is a fact that not even the enemies of the EPRP were able to deny: the party was loved and supported by the majority of the people. The people sheltered us in more ways than one, they cared for us, gave us encouragement, joined the struggle, and they valued our sacrifice for the cause which was mainly theirs.

This symbolic relationship between the people and the organization was what worried most the State. All its attempts were to break up this relationship by resorting to indiscriminate and rampant murder, suppression and all round repression by force of arms. The "Red Terror" campaign and its various antecedents were designed to achieve this overriding objective.

To get back to the mainstream of my story, I will try to give an eyewitness report on how the fascist regime went about its wholesale suppression campaign.

The assault on the Mercato, though not unexpected, was indeed a surprise when considering the magnitude and ferocity of the assault force. They sealed off with tanks all the main avenues leading towards the market center and they drew full circle fencing in everything and

everyone. All activities/movements were forced to gradually cease. Unless a person wanted to be searched umpteen times and take a gamble on one's life at every roadblock one chose to stay put or to minimize one's movement.

As the search parties advanced inch by inch through the maze that the Mercato was, their armored cars trampled all over the thousands of little shanty shops and platforms made of cardboard, tar barrel, tin and plastic. Destroying the life savings of a petty trader or the abodes and properties of beggars did not concern them a hoot. Visibly unarmed undercover agents swarmed all over the place acting as scouts, sniffing into the allegedly dangerous areas. They were followed by the heavily armed search teams who, within a short period, started firing left and right. The shots that were heard were at times short bursts and at other times sustained, shots from Colt .45s and revolver .38s accompanied by rifle shots from AK47s, etc... It was mayhem all throughout the day. Even the tanks were used at least twice to blast what were termed "strong hideouts".

It was a bloody day. Hundreds were summarily shot to death, many more arrested or wounded. The casualty was not, of course, from one side alone: scores of search party members were also killed and wounded, some with their own rifles captured and used on them by their enemies.

I was in the periphery of the market near the Teklehaimanot church when the first shots rang out. I immediately disposed off my basket which contained some agitational papers and some wrapped in newsprint. I chewed the little pieces of paper containing random codes and spit them out. Instead of returning back I thought I should get closer to the action. I wanted to get first-hand information, not rely on hearsay. I entered the search area through a small alleyway near the Cinema Ras. Right away, I saw the enemy swarming all over the area and I realized it was a rash and risky decision that I had made. And so I withdrew to the less notoriously "Demo" areas of the market where displaying watches and cassette tapes predominated.

squatted by one of the crowded bus stops to observe what was going on.

In comparison to the shots heard in other areas, where I was seemed peaceful. There was little action till mid-afternoon on the two main roads nearby which intersected at a 'T'. Then, streams of Mercedes and IFA trucks loaded with detainees started passing by in threes and fours. Some of the trucks carried visibly wounded and bandaged individuals. By late afternoon, the to and fro flow of the trucks had increased. A lorryload of jubilant security personnel, shouting slogans praising the "Great Leader" (none other than the dictator Mengistu) passed by singing war songs and displaying a "captured" Uzi. As dusk approached (it got dark early at this time of the year), I saw a gang of armed men jumping out of a slow moving truck. They went into an Oris watch dealer's shop wielding their guns ominously. The owner, with his moslem keffiyeh, and a young boy whom I assumed to be his son, were pushed out with their hands above their heads. The armed men robbed the store clean and after one of them had kicked the owner of the shop to the ground they jumped back on the truck and drove off. Other shop keepers, who had closed their stores and left, were not spared such robberies since the search teams broke also into closed shops and stores.

When it became clear that the security forces had more or less evacuated from the area, the crowd started slowly and hesitantly trickling through temporary blockades. For a while, I also did the same. Once back in my snouter I witnessed some of the most horrendous events of the day from different angles.

Next day was Friday, Christmas day. The security forces repeated their search operation. This time it was more of a general looting exercise. The security forces were sweeping up operation "to clean out the anarchists" as they claimed. The day was not much of a holiday for most people. For one thing, there were no opportunities to do some shopping. Moreover, there was practically no family that was not affected by the arrests, killings, the harassments, etc... Heavy armor and the feeling of siege did not kindle the holiday spirit. The truckload of soldiers since their