



Book Review

Tigress in the Crossfire
A Memoir by Saba* Mitslal Desta Webb
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Once I started to read this book I found it hard to put down. It starts with the innocent story of a poor little girl growing up in Adwa in an average family with father, mother, sisters and brothers. It is written in the first person and she tells us of how she used to play with the neighborhood children, goes to school, but all of a sudden, loses her mother due to some unexplained fever while on the way to the hospital.

These were the late 70's when the Derg Regime of Mengistu Hailemariam had sent its murderous henchmen all over Ethiopia to control, imprison, and kill the young people it considered rebellious or suspected of being members of the various clandestine political organizations. Saba continued her education in spite of all the hardships in the country and at home and an aunt had temporarily taken over as a mother to raise Saba.

It is during these times that the newly formed guerrilla group, the TPLF (Tigray Peoples Liberation Front) distributed fliers in and around Adwa, calling on all young people to join the struggle of liberation against the tyrannical system. Saba and her school friend leave home and go to a distant village where the liberation group was known to have a strong hold, and find many young men and women like themselves, and ask to join. Unfortunately, they were told the TPLF did not have the wherewithal to take so many people and they could not take them. They were asked to go back home. That could mean imprisonment, torture, and possible death if Derg authorities find out about this.

Saba is separated from her friend and decides to hang around with acquaintances and some distant family members rather than go back and risk harm. After some time had passed, she is contacted by TPLF people who tell her they now can take her in for training. Saba joins them and is trained as a fighter. This was but the beginning of a fast paced adventure, intrigue, tragedy, and sometimes even the ultimate sacrifice by her many close friends and comrades. Saba is wounded and becomes a casualty of the struggle. She loses sight in one eye, has partial sight in the other, and cannot go back to join the fighters. That is a big blow, but she trains to be a nurse to take care of the wounded. She rises to the position of a matron, and finally a district nurse administrator.

It is then that the intrigues get worse. Saba decides to leave for the Sudan to get treatment for her eyes but meets more betrayal and deception until she finally decides to apply for a UN refugee status to move to one or other of the countries that welcome refugees. The desperate day to day existence, where blind in one eye and with failing sight in the other, she becomes a maid to take care of children, where abuse and deception by close friends and lovers continues, and even to the point of becoming the lover of a married man, who uses her just so he could bring his wife and children to the Sudan. All that and much more is revealed. Saba keeps fighting and struggling under many difficult circumstances until she succeeds to get accepted into Canada. But by that time she is married to another man who also beats and abuses her and dishes her more intrigue and more betrayal.

Saba makes it to Canada, where more troubles and difficulties follow her. She meets a young eye surgeon, who gives her 100% guaranty to take out the shrapnel from her eyes, but botches the surgery and renders her totally blind. But I feel I already told you too much, and it will only ruin the suspense of the story. You must read it for yourself and find out what this book is all about, as there is so much more to read and savor, and every page is packed with storm, turbulence, drama, and tragedy.

But as they say, all is well that ends well, and this story is the story of a tigress, a fighter and a die-hard. Saba emerges victorious through it all in that she survives through so much, and though has become blind, she learns the Braille and can read and write again, she finds love, is married and even succeeds to write and publish her story. The Tigress is in charge of her own destiny even when she is wounded, blinded, betrayed, and back stabbed so many times over, and she never gives up. This is a real life adventure.

Finally, I found asking myself: How so sad that people like Saba, (scattered all over the world) who contributed so much to the liberation struggle of their country, are discarded and forgotten today by those in power. At least, Saba and the few who made it out alive to become refugees in the West may write or talk of it. What about the thousands upon thousands that sustained physical, mental, and psychological damages and carry around wounds and live in poverty and squalor in the villages at home? What have they to show for their sacrifices? Who is taking care of them? Is there a system in place to look after the ageing parents of those who made the ultimate sacrifice and died in the battle fields? Many top officials in Ethiopian today have become millionaires many times over. Have they even thought of taking care of these people? But these are my own thoughts.

As for Saba, she still is a staunch supporter of the TPLF and does not voice a single word of grudge. She says she did her part in the struggle to liberate her country and her people from oppression. Her only wish is if only she was not wounded, so that she could stay and be a fighter to the end. Here we have a wonderful story of an indomitable soul - Saba.

This is a book that should be read by everyone who wants to know of the inside workings of the guerrilla movement that came to be known as TPLF. So far, I know of only this book that has come out to tell us boldly of how the TPLF attracted its followers, how it conducted its secret meetings in the villages, how it trained and organized its fighters, how when they got wounded it nursed and healed them in bunkers and makeshift hospitals, and how it finally discarded and scattered them into the winds after victory was achieved. This is a great story, and has so many raw materials for future historians and film and moviemakers. In fact, it should be made into a movie.

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