

## Who was Bashai Awalom?

*by G. E. Gorfu*

For most people of this and even the previous generation the name Bashai Awalom might not be one readily recognized, but the man was a key figure in Ethiopian history during the war against the Italian Invasion of Ethiopia of 1896. The role Bashai Awalom played at that time was so critical and decisive to the outcome that secured Ethiopia's victory over the Italian invaders. So, who was Bashai Awalom? What role did he play? And what was his contribution?

Long before James Bond 007 made spying glamorous and the author, Ian Fleming, was even conceived, Awalom was an Ethiopian spy, even more so, a double agent. He was a trusted lieutenant of Ras Alula who had taken part in the Kuartit and Metema campaigns. When Atse Menelik was preparing to fight the Italians, Awalom was hand picked by Ras Alula for this crucial role and sent into the enemy camp to gain their trust and overtly spy for them, but covertly, spy for his country, Ethiopia. This was a very dangerous mission, but if anyone can do it at all, Awalom had the right temperament, and might just do it.

Regularly, Awalom would go into the Italian camp and report on what he observed about troop movement and anything that could appear interesting to the Italian occupiers. He did this so well that he gained the trust of General Baratieri and became an informant. He would however, regularly come back to the Ethiopian camp and report of all the activities and preparations inside the Italian camp to Ras Alula, and through him to Atse Menelik.

This went on for several months while Atse Menelik and the Ethiopian troops were camped in Adua and its environs, waiting for the Italians to come out and fight. The Italians, who had suffered a serious setback in the battle of Mekelle some three months earlier, had regrouped in Adua, but they were still leaking their wounds and not in any hurry to come out of their fortified burrow and fight. So the cat and mouse game of watching and waiting went on until a new plan had to be devised to draw them out.

That is where Awalom's role became critical to the whole operation. The first assignment of Awalom was to go into the Italian camp and secretly convince two famous deserters to reconsider, renounce the Italians and come back to the Ethiopian fold. The two were Ras Sebhat and Dejach Hagos Tefferi. The mission was accomplished successfully, and the two, along with many of their followers escaped from the Italian camp and returned into the Ethiopian fold, bringing along a quantity of new weapons and ammunitions from the enemy. That was a great victory in itself. But that was not all that Awalom accomplished.

For the next task Menelik invited Awalom into his royal tent and asked him for one more favor. He asked him to report to the Italians that Menelik had ran out of provisions, and was going to take down his tent and return with all his troops, and head back to Addis Ababa within a couple of days. (By the way, even though Menelik and the Ethiopian army was low in provisions, and not in the best of shape, this myth fabricated to get the Italians out of their burrow, is still recounted as fact by many ill informed historians. This, however, was a ruse to get the Italians out from their fortified position.)

Awalom was more than happy to do that. So, he went and told the story and the Italians, who had come to trust him, soon started to prepare an attack on the retreating Menelik from the rear. The plan was to chase him all the way and enter Addis Ababa in victory.

The retreat however, was a carefully laid out plan to entrap the Italians, and it worked. By about the third day General Baratieri saw on his binoculars Menelik's tent being pulled down and the army filing out and "retreating" south west. That was exactly what he was waiting for. He immediately gave orders for the Italian army to chase and attack Menelik from the rear. That became his fatal mistake, and he never lived to tell about it.

What Baratieri did not know as he was dug in his burrows was that in reality, he was totally encircled. There were two Ethiopian detachments hidden on either side of the so called, "retreating army" waiting to pounce on him from the right and the left. And the army that pretended to be retreating made a quick about turn and got on the attack. A horse mounted division was also hiding and came into the attack from behind the Italians. Too late, General Baratieri realized that he was totally boxed in from every side, and had no way to escape. He was killed with thousands of his soldiers, but General Albertoni and thousands more Italians surrendered and were captured alive.

So ended the Battle of Adwa. Awalom was made Bashai, the highest title of honor passed to him from Ras Alula who had first been made Turk Pasha by Atse Yohannes. The contributions of Awalom's were recognized by the late Emperor Haileselassie, who had erected a stone in his honor in Adwa over sixty years ago with the words:

***Awalom Haregot***  
***You may die, but your name will***  
***live***  
***H. E. M. King of Kings of***  
***Ethiopia,***  
***Yekatit 2<sup>nd</sup>. 1942***

That stone has since fallen and crumbled, but a new monument was recently erected in its place.

