

## SAVED BY A KING

John Fry

If you were an elementary school student in Portland, Oregon, in 1936, as I was, you would know about Ethiopia and its leader Haile Selassie. At the onset of the second Italo-Abyssinian war, he became *Time* magazine's Man-of-the-Year, he appealed unsuccessfully for humanitarian relief to the League of Nations, newspapers across America evoked sympathy for the Ethiopian victims of Italian aggression, and schoolchildren, themselves only slowly recovering with their families from the debilitating effects of economic depression, contributed their pennies and nickels to the Ethiopian cause. This was not a war over resources, governance, or colonization, but instead, a fierce, brutal onslaught by Italy's Il Duce, Benito Mussolini, seeking punishing revenge for the devastating defeat of Italian forces by the Ethiopians, in 1896, at the battle of Adwa. This time, Haile Selassie's horse-mounted troops were no match for Italy's mechanized army, and open warfare soon ended.

Decades later, I recall 1972, Ethiopia again entered my life. At the time my responsibility in government was international development. On arrival in Addis Ababa on one occasion and after settling in at the Hilton Hotel, I proceeded to the U.S. embassy to confer with our ambassador. As I was leaving his office, he kindly invited me to join a small theater group his wife was arranging the following evening, which I accepted. Seated next to him at the theater that evening, I reported briefly on cordial meetings with Ethiopian officials and casually mentioned I would be leaving the following day. To this he exclaimed, "John, you can't leave then. I want you with me to meet Haile Selassie at a champagne reception in his honor at the Hilton tomorrow evening." He added, don't worry about your airline reservations, I'll change them to the next day. This I could hardly believe at the time, but couldn't refuse, and dutifully accepted.

On entering Hilton's ballroom that evening, there he stood, a short, slight, gray-headed man, stiffly erect in khaki, medaled, army uniform at the head of the receiving line, waiting for me, among perhaps thirty others, to shake his hand and accept his friendly smile. For me, this was one of my life's memorable moments, standing before the man crowned in 1930 as "King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God and Power of the Trinity." Without realizing it then, the excitement of that moment would continue.

With thanks and farewell to my host, I took a light dinner and was soon off to bed, only to be awakened shortly thereafter by a frantic phone call from my wife, Toni, whose first words were, "I can't believe you're alive." I don't remember my

response, but with stark incredulity, it must have been something like "What are you talking about?" Then Toni unfolded the story for me. She knew I had reservations on the Ethiopian Airlines flight leaving that day from Addis for Rome, but was unaware of their change to the following day. Meanwhile, U.S. television stations picked up breaking news; the flight on which I had been originally booked, after starting its powered takeoff run never became airborne. It continued at high speed off the end of the 7,874 foot-high runway, plunged down steep mountainous terrain, and exploded on impact, killing everyone aboard.

In Addis in those days, to my knowledge, news was not actively suppressed, but traveled slowly, so slowly in fact that news of this horrendous accident had not reached the American Embassy by nightfall, which left me uninformed. On the home front, the State Department's operation center was not what it is today. When Toni called there for information, there was not much the senior duty officer could offer of details, including the name of survivors, if any. No wonder she was frantic that evening, and in desperation, phoned the Addis Ababa Hilton directly to learn what she could. Fortunately, we talked with mutual relief that evening, to confirm all was well, even if completely exhausted by then. For me, more was to come.

On arrival in Rome the following day and registered at a favored hotel near its central railroad station, stomach twinges became worrisome. I immediately began the familiar treatment recommended by State Department experienced nurses, but by midnight I felt awful, becoming weaker by the hour, wondering whether the Hilton Hotel or Ethiopian Airlines was the culprit, and recalling inconsolably, Africa's bugs always seem worst. By morning, I was so weak, it was all I could do to get dressed, downstairs for checkout, and a taxi directed to the in-town airport departure lounge at Central Station.

The scene I found there was disorienting, reminding me of stories of Chicago's 1930s gangland shootings. We had no sooner stopped at the station entrance, than another car screeched to a halt nearly opposite us in the center of the street, men emerged with hand guns from both front doors, and began firing at gunmen near another car about one-half block farther down the street. My driver yelled, "Get down," and we both dropped to the floorboards, hearing continuing gunfire. After hesitating a long moment, I regained reality, and fearing a stray bullet our way, became determined to reach the door opposite to where we were parked. I thanked the driver, left lira for him, wished him well, and although extremely weak, successfully made a dash for the station and safety. ■