

Harsh Realities

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Note to Reader: The following memoir contains graphic accounts of encounters with the harsh legal system in the Ethiopia of the late 1960's. Anyone who does not wish to confront the kinds of harsh realities being described here should consider reading other memoirs to be found in the UMUC Memoirs Project.

Every so often one hears on the news stories about the practice of Sharia (Law) in countries under the control of Arab rulers. To most of us in the USA, those are just words that we hear and most likely think very little about as they are not part of our daily lives under our own present legal system. However, those of us who are former UMUC teachers, some of whom have been posted to assignments in countries where such laws are the standard practice, may have encountered several incidents where those laws have been brought to our attention as all-too-vivid and shocking reality. I count myself among those who have had the kind of punishments meted out under this strict system of laws in brutal moments that remain alive in my mind even after over fifty years have now passed. One of my outposts where I taught English for UMUC was at Kagnew Station in Asmara, Ethiopia. I was originally sent there as an enlisted man in the US Army. Within just a little over seventeen months following my arrival in June of 1967, I found myself beginning my professional paid teaching career at the university level working both as a part-time instructor by night, and with army duty by day as my full-time job. Asmara itself is a lovely city, given its Italian influences left over from Mussolini's invasion of the province of Eritrea in the 1930's. But sometimes that lovely facade of pizzerias, gelaterias, Roman Catholic churches, cinemas and the like can be quite deceptive. I am about to recount two incidents in which I was brought face-to-face with the kind of episodes that likely most American citizens have never had to confront. But then that was a part of the life of a vagabond Marylander in which the unexpected could jump out and catch one off guard.

When I lived and worked in Asmara from 1967 to 1973 (on and off after October of 1970, thanks to Dr. Robert Speckhard), I loved the climate, the culture, the people and the history of this fascinating city on the Horn of Africa. My military job was an intensely stressful one, so any scant chance to take a break and get away was truly welcome. The U.S. military maintained two R&R centers for the purpose of providing opportunities to "get away". The very hot one at Massawa on the Red Sea I have told about in a couple of previous memoirs. However, the second one at about 90 kilometers north and west of Asmara at Keren provided a different sort of relaxing atmosphere. There was no beach there, no deep-sea fishing opportunities, no fancy restaurants, and none of the night life that an exotic port city like Massawa promised. Instead, at Keren, one just laid back and enjoyed the warm sunshine while sipping Heineken or Tuborg beers under an umbrella next to the swimming pool. Keren did have other facilities, such as both pool and ping-pong tables, a decent restaurant serving American-style food, a small library, and even a chapel for those who were seeking another kind of mental and spiritual peace. (If one was even interested to do so, he could venture into the town itself and down in a dry riverbed he would find a herd of at least fifty camels resting there. By paying an Arab ten dollars in the local currency, equivalent to four dollars in US money back then, one could take a short ride on his humped beast.) The easiest way to get there was to drive, and I made that journey myself a time or two. But on this particular occasion, four of us off-duty GIs piled into my UMUC

student Marty Argo's Land Rover one Thursday morning in 1968. Little did we expect what a severe shock lay ahead of us on the road to Keren that morning.

There really was only one main road for driving to Keren, so that by necessity one was forced to pass through several small villages on the way there. The most picturesque one by far was the appropriately named Eden, with its vast agricultural plantation called Elabered. This true-life "Garden of Paradise" grew acres upon acres of vegetables such as tomatoes and peppers, as well as fruits such as oranges, lemons, grapefruit and especially bananas. One could even purchase some of that produce from stands that dotted the roadside for over two kilometers. However, on this particular occasion, before we even reached that blooming Biblical halfway point to Keren, we had to pass through a smaller village called Digdig. The only way to pass through it was by way of the village square. Unfortunately, that square was jammed with a crowd of people that seemed to be comprised of the entire village population, plus anyone who lived in the immediate environs, thus making our passage impossible. It was as if they had all been compelled to be there by the local authorities to witness what was about to happen in the center of that square: a frightened man, his right arm stripped bare, was being held fast by three men next to a large wooden block. One other man, dressed in a military uniform, held a nasty-looking blade at his side. I made the mistake of standing on the hood of the Land Rover to see what was preventing us from going on our merry way. I wish now that I had not done so. I was only about fifty yards away and so had an all-too-clear view of the brutal event about to unfold. At a signal, the man's bare right arm was forced down onto the wooden block, and the official with the blade swung it swiftly down, severing the hand from that arm at the wrist in one sharp blow. The man's scream pierced through the crowd's murmurs, followed by a collective loud gasp. His stump was then plunged into a tub of hot pitch in order to cauterize it and to stanch the flow of blood. The man screamed loudly once more. Within a few minutes, the crowd dispersed and we were able to negotiate our way through Digdig and to continue on to Keren. Had we left even twenty minutes later that morning, I would not have this incident still seared into my conscience. There would be no camel rides in Keren on this occasion, just lots of beer gulped down in a vain attempt to wash away the horrors of what I had witnessed.

The second incident came about once again through my own darn fault. One of my very good UMUC students, a bespectacled Kagnev Station MP named Jack Brunotte from Mitchell, South Dakota, ("Home of the Famous Corn Palace"), came up to me one Thursday evening after my English Comp. I class. He said, "I just read the essay by George Orwell in our Patterns of Exposition textbook." I told him that I was well familiar with the essay and asked what he was wanting from me, as I had not assigned that particular essay to the class. He replied, "Well, as an MP, I get access to privileged information about the legal proceedings taking place in Asmara. I have an inside tip if you are interested and are not doing anything tomorrow morning." Right then, I should have backed away. The only Orwell essay in that textbook was entitled "A Hanging". Perhaps if I had stared into his eyes just then, past his black, horn-rimmed, military-issued glasses, I might have caught an evil, conspiratorial glint in those eyes. It has been my experience that police, like morticians, coroners, firefighters, doctors and even nurses, all seem to have their own peculiar brand of "gallows humor" (pun intended here) which they use in an effort to cope with the often-grim realities of their jobs. But I let the moment pass, much to my now-everlasting regret, and told him that Friday was my regular day off in the Army. Maybe I even thought that at age 27 I could handle witnessing a single public execution. However, I was clearly ill-prepared for the harsh reality of what actually did transpire on that fateful Friday morning in 1969.

I only had to wait less than five somewhat-anxious minutes before the MP Jeep driven by my student pulled up in front of my B-Company barracks at 7:10 am. I got in and the twenty-minute ride

to downtown Asmara's local football (soccer) stadium passed in relative quiet. I should have guessed that something sinister was up, as I eventually discovered that Jack Brunotte knew well in advance the true and full nature of that morning's proceedings. Here was a case of the normal student-teacher relationship being reversed, in which the student knew more than his teacher did. At the stadium, we had to wait about fifteen minutes to be checked in. Once inside, I noticed that a small group of officials was already gathered and seated there to serve as mute witnesses to this scheduled series of events, along with what were perhaps some immediate family members and friends of those who were about to be executed. I soon discovered to my dismay that there were to be not one, not two, but three public hangings happening promptly that morning at eight o'clock.* Damn you, Jack Brunotte!

That trio about to be executed consisted of two teenage sisters and one very scrawny young man. The sisters, as I came to find out later, had conspired in a moment of anger to murder their own mother with a machete. That matricide had occurred only a little over a month before this Friday morning. In some foreign countries, punishment is indeed swift. The two of them were to be hung first and together. No band played, and there was not even an accompanying drum roll. The girls' skirts were first tied around their ankles, for reasons which soon became apparent to me. This last-minute effort to prevent one final obvious indignity from happening was about the only little kindness that these two teenage girls were extended before ropes were placed around both of their necks, pulled tight at the knots, and then the loose rope ends were just unceremoniously slung up and over the goalpost crossbar. I wanted not to watch, but my curiosity got the better of me and I too was witness to the ropes being pulled, taking the girls swinging into the air where they both strangled slowly, kicking and twisting in a hopeless screaming effort to get some air down into their dying lungs. The two rope pullers secured their loose ends to the respective sides of the goalpost. At that point, I did finally look away. It seemed like an eternity, but it may have been only a few agonizing minutes later when Jack nudged me in the ribs to tell me that it was finally over. I then watched as the ropes were cut and the two dead sisters fell beneath the crossbar. Their lifeless bodies were just loaded onto a cart and hauled away. I was thankful that I had not eaten my breakfast that morning.

I really wished that we could leave at that moment, my morbid curiosity having been more than grimly satisfied, but there was one more hanging scheduled to take place and no one else dared to make a move toward the exits. It was already well past 8:15, but this third execution was duty-bound to take place. An emaciated man, who had been forced to watch the previous two hangings, was now placed under that same crossbar and a new knotted rope was secured around his neck. At a signal, the rope end was tossed over the crossbar and the man was suddenly yanked into the air. He swung there gagging for air, but his own slight body weight was not enough to strangle him mercifully. The man who had pulled him up tied the loose end to the side of the goalpost. The victim hung there for a couple minutes, swaying back and forth, at which point the confused crowd of spectators began yelling for someone to do something. Finally, the man who had yanked him up signaled for another man to come and assist. The second man came over and began pulling on the legs of the scrawny body that was dangling in the air. Even that effort took a full minute, at which point whatever bodily fluids that were still in his bowel and bladder found release all over the leg puller's arms and chest. Screams echoed from the small group of spectators. I found myself joining them. Once again, I now forced myself to look away for several minutes until I felt Jack Brunotte, my MP student, begin to stand up next to me. It had been, all in all, the absolute most horrifying half-hour of my life. Even just writing and remembering about it now for the first time in over fifty years still makes me have unnerving flashbacks. I hope that I can sleep tonight.

I came to find out later that the reason this young man was so emaciated was that he had been on a very prolonged hunger strike in order to protest his innocence over a crime that he said he did not commit. Obviously, that effort was ultimately all in vain. When the heavy hands of justice rule against someone living under these kinds of laws, nothing can stop the clock from ticking the last few seconds of one's life away. It ultimately took me many years to forgive my MP student in my mind for what I had been invited to witness, even if it was my fault for joining him. I am forever grateful to be living under a different and more just set of rules than the ones to which I was exposed so long ago. Life as a UMUC instructor could sometimes expose one to the harsh realities of foreign cultures. On these two occasions, the truth of that observation became all-too-real to me.

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ENDNOTES:

*One salient feature of Orwell's essay is the several references to the time of execution. To anyone raised in a British culture, the mere mention of "eight o'clock" can send shudders coursing through his mind. That was the system in play at the time of Orwell's writing his essay about life in Burma in the 1920's. Further, because the British had then defeated the Italians in Eritrea in WWII, they took over administering the country from the late 1940's well into the 1950's. Their tradition of scheduling executions at that specific eight o'clock hour apparently took hold in Asmara as well.

As a side note, I used to teach an Introduction to Literature course using a textbook edited by X. J. Kennedy which contained a poem that always completely mystified my American students. I simply encouraged them to do a little research on their own and then the poem's grim meaning would become quite clear. Because it is germane to this memoir in that context, I cite it here below:

Eight O'Clock

*He stood, and heard the steeple
Sprinkle the quarters on the morning town.
One, two, three, four, to market-place and people
It tossed them down.*

*Strapped, noosed, nighing his hour,
He stood and counted them and cursed his luck;
And then the clock collected in the tower
Its strength, and struck.*

A.E. Housman

Obviously, that poem had much more meaning to me after my own experience in Asmara, even though I was not personally raised under a British system. It remains as one of my very favorite poems, even in spite of the grim memories of the harsh realities it brings back to haunt me each time that I read it. I can also appreciate its several puns in ways that I never could otherwise.