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## AAJS Member Essay

### Yiddish in Ethiopia, 1963

*Where is Yiddish spoken nowadays and where was it spoken in the past? What was its natural habitat where it was born and reached its maturity and what happened to the language once it was violently uprooted from its home area? These are standard questions which every introductory textbook to the Yiddish language or culture touches upon on its first pages. But none of these books delivers an answer as surprising as the one you are about to read. The story of a Yiddish-speaking Christian woman in Ethiopia.*

*What follows is a translation of an anonymous piece published in the newspaper לעצטע נייעס, on June 12th, 1963 on page 2. I came across this curiosity by accident while working on a research project about the history of German-Israeli relations and had to share it with my fellow Yiddish enthusiasts.*

*(Patrick Casiano, Tel Aviv, November 2019)*

### The Yiddish-speaking Abyssinian woman from Jerusalem – today she is an important clerk in the government in Addis Ababa

In Me'a She'arim<sup>i</sup> she studied the book Tze'ena u-R'ena<sup>ii</sup> and became friends with Hasidic children – now she is a government clerk of high standing in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of King Haile Selassie and was appointed over public relations during the last African Summit Conference in Addis Ababa. – The successor of the Queen of Sheba<sup>iii</sup> still longs for Jerusalem.

(From our correspondent)

It is a strange phenomenon that a "Jewish spark" enters into the soul of a non-Jew and when this occurs great things can happen.<sup>iv</sup> This Jewish spark accompanies him wherever he wanders on this planet and ignites Jewishness within him or at least a longing for a bit of Jewishness.

Five Israeli journalists who only recently returned from the African Summit Conference in Addis Ababa brought with them not only the emboldening news about the failure of Nasser's anti-Israeli intrigues, but also unusual greetings for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and especially for the Jews of Me'a She'arim. Namely greetings from the young and skinny Abyssinian woman Elizabeth Yemana Barhan-Eile,<sup>v</sup> a daughter of Jerusalem who was the Ethiopian liaison officer and the person in charge of public relations during the above-mentioned very important African Summit Conference.

The Israeli journalists were surprised to meet the beautiful and exotic Elizabeth with her dreamful Jewish-Hasidic eyes as a clerk in such a high position in Addis Ababa. Until recently she was an integral part of Jerusalem. What is she doing in Addis Ababa? How did she get there?

The story of Elizabeth Yemana Barhan-Eile is very typical for the cooperation and friendship between Israel and Ethiopia. Maybe this is the result of the connection which was once established by King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. A connection which brought King Haile Selassie to Israel to spend the years of his exile there during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. A connection which strengthened the determination of the Ethiopian king to resist Nasser's anti-Israeli intrigues and to

declare to the Israeli journalists during their welcoming reception that from now on the friendship and cooperation between Ethiopia and Israel will be increased even further.

### **A kinship as thick as blood**

By her close connection with Israel and Jerusalem, the young Elizabeth Yemana Barhan-Eile also entered into a kinship as thick as blood. Two of her brothers were killed here during the War of Independence. Her father's grave is located in Jerusalem. And her mother lives in Jerusalem still today, since so many years.

Elizabeth came with her family to Jerusalem together with King Haile Selassie and his entourage. The king came to Jerusalem in order to stay there during his forced exile after Mussolini's mob conquered his country. The people of the "Ethiopian Colony", which was located in the Dvora ha-Nvi'a-street and the ha-Habashim-street, became well integrated and established friendly relations with the inhabitants of the surrounding area and especially with the Jews of Me'a She'arim. Elizabeth, who was still a small child, became friends with the Hasidic children of Me'a She'arim. She used to visit them in their small apartments in the Batei ha-Hungarim-quarter and learned from them Jewish customs and the Yiddish language. Today – while longing for the years of her childhood in Jerusalem – the exotic Elizabeth retells that she was a Shabbat Goy<sup>vi</sup> in the Jewish neighborhood. But a Shabbat Goy who herself kept Jewish traditions. ... She recalls how she used to come to the women's section of the local synagogue. Her head was covered in a traditional garment and her dress was long and extended below the knee. She perpetually kept her eyes in the Tze'ena u-R'ena-book which the wife of rabbi Engelhart used to hand to Elizabeth, whom she called "Liesel".

Elizabeth's parents were Christians and when she grew up they sent her at first to a Russian monastery half the way to Jericho and after this to an English school and finally to the school for nurses at the Jewish Hadassa-hospital in Jerusalem. Meanwhile the year 1948 approached and with it the establishment of the State of Israel and the War of Independence in which Elizabeth's family paid a dear price. After the bridge of the Sheikh Jarrah-quarter was detonated and the connection between the new Jewish quarters outside the city walls and the Old City was interrupted, the family moved nearby an Ethiopian church. Meanwhile her father died and two of her brothers were killed by a shrapnel which landed in the courtyard of the church. The burden of providing for the family fell upon Elizabeth and her mother. Her mother was accepted as a cook in the Hadassa-hospital in Jerusalem and Elizabeth, who already completed nursing school, started to work in the Bikur Holim-hospital in Jerusalem. After the fighting ceased, Elizabeth was transferred to an infirmary in a camp for new immigrants near Petah Tikva.

In this camp for new immigrants, which held thousands of new immigrants from Eastern Europe and particularly many from Jemen, the exotic Liesel established good relations and became friends with the Jewish nurses from Germany, Poland, Hungary, Jugoslavia, Morocco and America. From them and from the new immigrants she learned new languages – German, Hungarian, Serbian, French – all this in addition to Hebrew, English and Arabic, which she learned in school, and Russian, which she learned in the monastery, and Yiddish, which she learned in Me'a She'arim.

### **She did not forget Yiddish**

Today Elizabeth relates proudly that she has never forsaken or forgotten the Yiddish language. In the evenings she uses to listen to the Yiddish radio broadcastings of "Kol Israel Ia-Ole" and "Kol Israel Ia-Gola" and through her good ear and her gift for languages she even picked up the different dialects of the Yiddish language. Also today she tunes in with great interest to the Yiddish radio broadcastings from Jerusalem.

At the eve of the Sinai Campaign Elizabeth returned to her mother in Jerusalem and started to work as a clerk in the Ethiopian Consulate. She made many friends among Jewish students and government employees. "I have even had a close Jewish friend, but our romance was interrupted without my fault." – Elizabeth retells with a sound of deep sorrow.

The radical change in the life of Elizabeth Yemana Barhan occurred in the year 1958 when King Haile Selassie invited her to Addis Ababa where she was accepted as a stewardess in the Ethiopian airline. One year later she was accepted as a clerk with an area of responsibility in the Ethiopian Ministry of Foreign Affairs where she is making professional progress. Her intelligence (a Jewish head ...), responsibility and knowledge of a few languages impresses her superiors deeply. She is being sent to missions to Egypt, Sudan and the countries of North Africa.

### **The honeymoon in Jerusalem**

Meanwhile Elizabeth married a high official in the Ethiopian airline, a graduate of a university in California. The young couple spent their honeymoon in Jerusalem where Elizabeth's mother is.

Besides the life in Me'a She'arim Elizabeth also saw the modern lifestyle in Israel and told her husband that she wants to live like a European woman, with an opinion of her own. And her husband, who studied in America, has accepted this. It is a demand which Elizabeth – an active member in the local women's organization – also tries to familiarize the Abyssinian women with.

Elizabeth Yemana Barhan Eile had a conversation with Israeli journalists in the big press room of the African Summit Conference where she served as a liaison officer. She talked with the Israeli journalists in a native Israeli "Sabra"–Hebrew, mixed with juicy Yiddish and interspersed with Arabic proverbs. While she talked a strong longing was discernable for Israel and Jerusalem which she left five years ago, without having cut off her emotional connection. During the conversation she kept on exchanging greetings with different African politicians who passed by. Mahmud Fawzi, the Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who recognized her from afar, politely drew her aside and asked her: "Miss Elizabeth, when will you honor us again with a visit to Cairo?" "Soon, soon", Elizabeth responded with kindness to the Egyptian politician and continued the conversation with her Israeli friends.

Suddenly a Christian priest with a long beard, and in the company of a beautiful young Ethiopian woman, appeared in the press room. Elizabeth shortly scrutinizes them and then she jokingly says to her Israeli friends in Yiddish:

"Look, a rabbi with a shikse<sup>vii</sup> ...". And within this exotic Christian woman from Ethiopia – just like a Jewish girl which was cut off from her roots – there arises a longing for her friends from Me'a She'arim in Jerusalem. And she starts to sing "kala, kala" and "ve-taher libeinu" and other Hasidic songs in the press room of the African Summit Conference.

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<sup>i</sup> Note by the translator: A quarter in Jerusalem. The epitome of ultra-ultra-orthodoxy in the Eastern European fashion.

<sup>ii</sup> Note by the translator: A classic of old Yiddish literature. Written around 1590 it explains the weekly Torah readings and intersperses materials from Rabbinical sources in order to achieve this. It was read especially by Jewish women because for the most part they didn't understand Hebrew. There are different translations into

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English. One has been published under the title: "Tz'edah ur'edah: the classic anthology of Torah lore and midrashic commentary".

<sup>iii</sup> Note by the translator: A queen from Ethiopia who traveled to King Solomon in Jerusalem in the tenth century BC because she heard about his famous wisdom. This common understanding is based on the plain text of the First Book of Kings chapter 10 verses 1-13 and the Second Book of Chronicles chapter 9 verses 1-12. The meticulous reading in the Rabbinical literature disputes some aspects of the common understanding, see for example Bava Batra 15b.

<sup>iv</sup> Note by the translator: This is rather mere rhetoric than an in-depth teaching about the Jewish sole.

<sup>v</sup> Note by the translator: The name of the lady in question is spelled as עלִיזָבֶט יַעֲמָנָא בְּאַרְהָאן-אַיִלַע. And as it is known the letter Aleph can either be an "a" or an "o". So the second name could read Yemana, Yemona, Yemano or Yemona. The same holds true for the third name.

<sup>vi</sup> Note by the translator: A non-Jew who is asked by a Jew to perform a deed which according to Jewish law the Jew is forbidden to do on Shabbat. There is no contradiction in this because Judaism (unlike other religions) does not consider its laws to be universally obligatory for all of humanity, but only for the Jewish nation, the people of Israel. According to Jewish law the same act may be permissible for a non-Jew to perform but forbidden for a Jew. Nevertheless: Using a Shabbat Goy is not a panacea to circumvent all seemingly unpleasant Shabbat restrictions and unfortunately in everyday practice this concept is often employed in halachically unpermissible ways.

<sup>vii</sup> Note by the translator: A term for a non-Jewish woman (in the context of criticizing intermarriage).

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