

All for the Greater Good

Narrator 1: *All for the Greater Good* is a story about education and resilience in times of conflict. Inspired by *This American Life*, this podcast presents the story of Tesfaye, a man born and raised during the Eritrean War of Independence against Ethiopia, who fled several years after the country's liberation, and eventually sought refuge in Israel. Listeners are encouraged to think broadly about the role of education, as seen through the lens of one individual's personal journey toward peace, and his continued quest for justice and equality.

Narrator 2: The following podcast is based on an Interview conducted with an asylum seeker. In order to protect his anonymity and well-being we have decided to use a third person to portray his voice.

Intro

Narrator 1: In 1991, Eritrea had a lot to celebrate. A tiny nation in the Horn of Africa, it had just emerged from a thirty-year liberation struggle against Ethiopia, a conflict known as Africa's longest continuous war. Two years later, Eritreans went to the polls and nearly everyone—literally, 99.8%—voted in favor of independence. Things looked pretty hopeful.

Tesfaye: We wanted to start building our country — I started rebuilding our country.

[Fade in sound of birds chirping]

Narrator 1: That's Tesfaye. He's wearing what appears to be a full-length boubou and sporting a white fedora with a black and red stripe, matched by a carefully trimmed beard. It's hard to tell from the screen, but over Zoom he appears to be a tall man in his late forties with a commanding presence. His towering demeanor is instantly fizzled by his big smile with perfectly white, straight teeth. At first glance, you would never imagine that his kind eyes have witnessed violent conflict firsthand.

[Bird sounds fade out.]

Narrator 2: He tells us that people were really happy in the years immediately following Eritrea's independence. Eritreans saw hope and new possibilities for the future. According to him, Isais Afwerki, former leader of Eritrea's main rebel group and now current president, was seen by many as the Messiah.

Narrator 1: But, Tesfaye explains, peacetime did not last long. The violence and brutality that once plagued his country was far from over. If anything, it only reminded him of his childhood.

Childhood

Narrator 1: Tesfaye was born in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea. At age six, he and his family left and moved to a village on the outskirts of town, where supposedly there was less control from the Ethiopian military government, known as the *derg*.

Tesfaye: We had a very difficult life, and our ability to move around was almost impossible.

Narrator 1: The *derg*, he explains, eventually placed barricades between villages, thus severely limiting his family's ability to move freely. But there were other, personal reasons for his family's move as well: Two of his brothers served in the Eritrean military.

Narrator 2: He doesn't specify exactly, but we assume he's talking about the Eritrean People's Liberation Front, or EPLF.

History

Narrator 1: Now before we get too far ahead in the story, let's go over a few things. Like, how did Eritrea even end up in a war in the first place?

Narrator 2: So, in the aftermath of WWII, the British reshaped the map of the Horn of Africa and brought Eritrean Muslims and Christians together for the first time to discuss their postcolonial future.

Narrator 1: That was after fifty years of Italian colonial rule, right?

Narrator 2: Yup, exactly. But because they were not able to unite, the United Nations decided to make Eritrea an externally tailored federation in 1952 and placed the territory under Ethiopian control.

Narrator 1: Now for Ethiopia, this was welcome news. It had always viewed Eritrea as part of its empire based on many shared cultural and religious traits, particularly along ethno-linguistic lines and affinity to the Orthodox Church. But things escalated pretty quickly. Ethiopia soon began imposing strict policies in an attempt to legitimize its own sovereignty and territorial claim.

Narrator 2: Right. Although Tigrinya and Arabic were the official languages in Eritrea's initial constitution, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia changed this policy a few years later and began deliberately dismantling Eritrea's educational and cultural institutions. He aggressively promoted Amharic in all Eritrean school domains by replacing Tigrinya and Arabic instructions and ordering the burning of textbooks in these languages.

Narrator 1: The emperor's quest for the complete reintegration of Eritrea into Ethiopia eventually led to the federation's collapse. It inspired rebel groups in Eritrea to act, and thus began the 30-year fight for liberation, better known today as "the Struggle".

Narrator 2: The main rebel movement, EPLF, sought to build unity among Eritrean people. It claimed Eritrea's right to self-determination and denied any connection to Ethiopia and refused to declare a national language.

Narrator 1: It also embraced linguistic diversity in all schools—it even wrote a new curriculum in Tigrinya, Tigre, and Arabic with the ultimate aim of offering primary school instruction in all nine Eritrean languages, thereby emphasizing the value of education for all.

Narrator2: That's a great point. In this way, even though the EPLF sought to instill among Eritreans a larger social vision based on revolutionary goals, we can see how education became integral to the liberation movement vis-à-vis political ideology and national identity.

Language vs. Revolutionary Aims

Narrator 1: Tesfaye spoke Tigrinya as a child. And like many Eritreans, he spoke Tigrinya at home, but in the classroom, he was forced to speak Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia. He tells us that, in fact, school always felt forced upon him.

Tesfaye: Studying under the rule of another government and occupation was extremely hard, having to study about a culture that is not yours.

Narrator 2: By the mid-70s, the EPLF began propagating its image through a series of political education campaigns that sought to instill in Eritreans a sense of civic duty to fight against imperial forces, including Ethiopia, and streamline development efforts. But this was not so easy given the political climate and violent control over the population.

Tesfaye: It was very hard studying because you are supposed to be Ethiopian. They tell you you're Ethiopian, but it's not your culture or your style.

Narrator 1: Part of the problem was that schools in Eritrea were controlled by Ethiopia. Even though teachers told Tesfaye and his peers that they were all Ethiopians, they were still treated differently in the classroom.

Tesfaye: You were studying for the government. You can never imagine that it's for your own good or to make your own dreams come true. It was all for the greater good [of Ethiopia].

Narrator 2: Things were made more difficult by the fact that his family members were directly involved in the military fight against the *derg*. He was being told two completely different things. At home his family believed in sovereignty and freedom—but at school he was constantly being told that there was no such thing as Eritrea. It was very difficult for him to wrap his head around that idea.

Narrator 1: To make matters worse, Ethiopian soldiers would actually come to his house to do random searches, claiming that his father was killed, just to threaten his family.

Narrator 2: This fear manifested in language and speech as well. He tells us that people were not even allowed to say the word ‘Eritrea’, and were treated differently in school.

Tesfaye: Until I was about 15 years old the word ‘Eritrea’ did not come out of my mouth.

Narrator 2: Most of his teachers were Ethiopian and spoke Amharic – a legacy of Selassie’s policy. While there were some Eritrean teachers, Tesfaye tells us that they were usually collaborators with the government.

Narrator 1: Even as kids, he and his peers were always wondering about each other’s loyalty, which made things more difficult for him as a young student, especially given his family’s involvement.

Tesfaye: Everyone around you can be enemies. You don’t know who to trust.

Violence in school & everyday life

Narrator 1: According to Tesfaye, life back then was pretty violent, and he witnessed it firsthand from a very young age.

Tesfaye: There was so much brutality, the way people were killed was especially brutal. I remember I was in a barricade and I saw the Ethiopian police tie a person’s leg to one tank, and his other leg to another tank, and then he was torn apart.

Narrator 2: I can’t even imagine witnessing something like that.

Narrator 1: I know... He also witnessed and experienced violence in school. In fact, the village where Tesfaye lived did not even have a school, so he had to walk 4 kilometers every day, starting at the age of six. He often faced obstacles on his way, too, such as difficult terrain and wild animals.

Tesfaye: It was hard on the way to school, but it was even harder in school.

Narrator 2: We ask him whether he can recall one good experience at school. His face changes, frowning as he searches for an answer.

Tesfaye: I can’t forget this experience, this part of my life. I always keep coming back to it.

Tesfaye (cont.) : I remember how hard it was to study in these conditions. It was very hard to concentrate and understand why we were doing it. But we had to get good grades because otherwise there were harsh punishments if you didn’t get good grades. School was a violent place.

Narrator 2: Violence was practiced by teachers, too.

Tesfaye: It's hard to forget the force of the Ethiopian government or the force of the teachers. I can't forget it because of the scar on my back.

Narrator 1: Though he excelled in school, he tells us a story about how he once got a mark of 89 and, out of frustration, threw his notebook on the floor. Suddenly, the teacher started beating him with a stick, accusing Tesfaye of cooperating with the Eritrean military and being a traitor.

Tesfaye: I will never forget this teacher. I can't understand it. I was a child and had nothing to do with it. The use of force was so prevalent.

Narrator 2: According to him, things were made worse because of his family's military involvement. Both his father and his brothers had gone to train with the EPLF in a Sudanese military camp, which he explains is why he was so harassed and treated poorly by teachers at school.

Tesfaye: If I was 2 minutes late to school, even if I was six or seven [years old] and had to walk all this way to school, the teacher would beat me up and curse.

Tesfaye (cont.): I couldn't imagine back then thinking about peace or human rights. It was so hard to see into the future.

Determination

Narrator 1: He compares his childhood experience to current events and mentions Syria. He knows what it's like to study under a different ruling, he explains, and not knowing whether one will be safe or not.

Tesfaye: It's very easy to hate on the other side because you know what they are doing. It is hard to remember that there is freedom, that you can be free.

Narrator 1: And yet, he persisted. Tesfaye found the personal motivation to continue in his studies, part of which was inspired by his parents.

Mika: What made you excel in school? Was there someone around you that inspired you to study?

Tesfaye: I saw the dead, and the famine, and my mom struggling so much to feed my family. So, I wanted a different future. If students failed a few times in school, it was easier to recruit us into the Ethiopian military. If they were to take me, I would [be forced] to do crimes against my own people.

Tesfaye (cont.): Regardless, my dad was a doctor and my family really believed in education.

Narrator 2: Even still, it was very hard for him to think of his future. There was, as he puts it, always a cloud of uncertainty.

Tesfaye I kept thinking to myself, ‘I survived this day, I hope to survive the next one, too.

Liberation of Eritrea

Narrator 1: The Ethiopian army eventually collapsed in 1991, weakened by internal turmoil following an officers’ mutiny and attempted *coup d’etat*. This paved the way for EPLF victory and officially ended the conflict.

Narrator 2: After the war Tesfaye and his family members who survived went back to Asmara. He says he had to start school all over again, but that he was able to skip a few grades, which he didn’t mind.

Tesfaye: It was a lot nicer to study and more comfortable. I lived much closer to school. The teachers thought I was very smart.

Mika: Did you feel the regime change in school?

Tesfaye: Definitely. You are reborn. You feel completely free and you can feel the independence and talk about anything, and also your people. Your government is actually talking to your people.

[Sound - crowds of people]

Narrator 1: Two years later, Eritreans went to the polls under a UN-supervised referendum and cast their ballots in favor of independence. After three decades of fighting, Eritrea finally emerged a sovereign nation.

Second wave of brutality

Narrator 2: After the revolution, Tesfaye tells us that people were very happy. Even in school, things were beginning to look pretty good. The provisional government at the time declared that mother tongues were to be used as the medium of instruction in primary schools. They even set up schools, clinics, and other programs in the liberated areas and rapidly expanded formal education into the remote parts of the country.

Narrator 1: But many Eritreans his age started looking outside, reading and studying about Europe and other places, and comparing how they lived. Even though it was better than the past regime, people still struggled.

Tesfaye: People thought, ‘You could still be more free’. And, ‘why can’t it be the same here’?

Narrator 1: Tesfaye eventually graduated from secondary school and started studying at the University of Asmara. He explains that he and some of his peers and professors wrote an article demanding change from the government.

Tesfaye: We demanded democracy. We didn't mind [Afwerki] being re-elected, but we wanted elections.

Narrator 2: Unfortunately, after this article was published, Tesfaye and some of those who wrote it with him were sent to prison. According to him, Afwerki became afraid of people becoming too educated and decided to shut down the university and transform it into another military base. The law was changed so that after 11th grade students would become recruited for military service.

Narrator 1: These events began to remind Tesfaye of the violent past he had witnessed a child. After he got into jail, his brother, who was a pretty highly ranked officer, disappeared. Up until today, his family still doesn't know what exactly happened to him.

Decision to leave

Narrator 2: Things changed after his incarceration and his brother's disappearance.

Tesfaye After that I started realizing that I don't have anything to look for here in Eritrea. The government started persecuting more and more groups of people. For example, there were lots of journalists, but they were all persecuted and sent to jail. The government started using jail as a way of getting rid of people.

Narrator 1: More years passed, and things did not change. Eventually Tesfaye couldn't take the regime's brutality any longer. And so, in 2006, he decided to run away and make his journey to Europe.

Narrator 1: But...things didn't go exactly as planned. He faced many dangers and struggles along the way: he was held prisoner and then abducted and was close to losing his life several times. Eventually, though, he found his way to Israel.

Israel

Narrator 2: He describes his reception in Israel to be an especially warm welcome. He was taken to a hospital, where he was given food and a shower. He was later visited by Ehud Olmeret, then Israel's prime minister, who came to visit the African asylum seekers.

Narrator 2: More and more people soon came, and eventually around 50,000 asylum seekers, mainly from Eritrea and Sudan, got to Israel. Things changed after the 2009 elections, however, when Benjamin Netanyahu entered office, and the policy shifted dramatically. Some of the newly-appointed ministers were anti-asylum seekers. While Tesfaye received good treatment, many others did not.

Tesfaye: In Israel there was a lot of talk about sending us [Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers] back, so it was hard to plan ahead.

Narrator 1: Although he had finally left Eritrea, it seemed as though Eritrea could not leave him. At one point, Tesfaye met an Israeli-Ethiopian, who turned out to be a former soldier serving in Asmara.

Narrator 2: We asked him how he felt about this encounter — after all, he and his family, and his people, went through so much under Ethiopian control. And he had witnessed so much brutality, and even experienced it. Did he harbor any animosity?

Narrator 1: Here's what he had to say:

Tesfaye: Amhara people are not bad people. They also suffered a lot from their own regime. They didn't want to do it, but they said they were afraid of being killed otherwise ... If I would judge people for where they come from, then I would do exactly as they did. I don't want to be this way. I want to move forward.

Tesfaye (cont.): The regime was bad and brutal, but it doesn't mean that the people are. If there is a bad regime we should fight it, and that's what we did. But that doesn't mean the language or the people are bad.

Moving Forward & Conclusion

Narrator 2: I think that this is a really strong message. Tesfaye has been through so many struggles and suffering, but at the end of the day, he believes in human beings, no matter what language they speak or where they come from.

Narrator 1: That's so true. And after everything he's been through, Tesfaye tells us that more than 20 years after he was forced to stop his university studies in Eritrea, he was finally able to pursue higher education in Israel.

Narrator 2: It seems that this same drive to become further educated has made him more resolute in seeking equality for all.

Narrator 1: You're right - and while Eritrea is still suffering under Afwerki's regime, and his family is back in the country, he knows that his fight for justice is far from over.

Narrator 1: I'm Dagan Rossini -

Narrator 2: and I'm Mika Bak.

Narrator 1: Thanks for listening.

Narrator 2: This podcast was produced as part of a class project at Harvard Graduate School of Education. Special thanks to Professor Sarah Dryden-Peterson and her teaching team for

guidance and feedback. Thanks also to BBC Sound Effects, and special shout out to Ariel Oseran for technical assistance and production. And, of course, thank you to Tesfaye. This one's for you.

Narrator 1: For more stories and research focusing on refugee education and learning in settings of migration and displacement, check out the REACH initiative at Harvard Graduation School of Education. Type "REACH GSE" into your search engine or enter reach.gse.harvard.edu. Listeners can also check out the Jerusalem African Community Center, a volunteer-run initiative that has assisted hundreds of asylum-seekers in Israel. Visit jacc.org.il to support their work and learn more.

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