



The Lion Is Freed

Conquering Lion of Judah, King of Kings, Elect of God: in the end, the royal epithets had a hollow, mocking ring. Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, had wielded virtually absolute power for almost six decades-longer than any other contemporary head of state. But when he was finally deposed in September 1974 by the military leaders of the "creeping coup," which had been enveloping Ethiopia for seven months, the tiny (5 ft. 4 in.) ruler was whisked away from his palace in a Volkswagen and imprisoned in a three-room mud hut. Only later was he moved to more comfortable quarters at the Grand Palace. It was there that the aged Lion, still caged, died in his sleep last week, apparently from the aftereffects of recent prostate surgery. He was 83.

Certainly he had clung to power too long for his own good. Haile Selassie was a prisoner of his country's feudal system and backwardness long before he became a prisoner of his own army. His captors charged him with massive corruption and put out rumors — never confirmed — of a fortune totaling several billion dollars salted away in foreign banks. He was also accused of deliberately concealing-for reasons of misplaced national pride or merely personal pride-the extent of the drought and famine that killed 100,000 Ethiopians in 1973-74. Whatever the validity of the charges, they obscure the reputation of the man who in an earlier era tried desperately to bring Ethiopia into the modern world and who, toward the end of his life, became the grand old man of independent Africa. He was the primary force behind the founding of the Organization for African Unity in 1963, and his capital city, Addis Ababa, became its headquarters.

Throughout the Western world, he will perhaps be best remembered for his appearance before the League of Nations in Geneva on June 30, 1936. His country had been overrun by the Blackshirt battalions of Benito Mussolini, whose son-in-law, Count Ciano, ecstatically described the beauty of "bombs opening like red blossoms" upon the Ethiopian highlands. Hundreds of thousands of his barefoot soldiers had been killed by Fascist bombs and mustard gas. A small, bearded, hawk-faced figure with blazing black eyes, he stood at the lectern and declared: "I am here today to claim the justice that is due to my people ... God and history will remember your judgment." Then, as he stepped down, he murmured the words that were to serve as an epitaph not only for the impotent League but for the whole prewar world. "It is us today. It will be you tomorrow."

Some delegates were sympathetic, some embarrassed, but the League took no action against Mussolini. Haile Selassie returned to England, where he lived in a modest manor house outside Bath. Almost five years later, after the British army had driven the Italians from Addis Ababa, he returned to his mountain capital in triumph. His nation had lost several hundred thousand men in battle and in mass execution but the Emperor issued orders to his countrymen that the Italian civilians who chose to stay in Ethiopia should be allowed to do so undisturbed.

RAS TAFARI LIVES AND REIGNS!

Haile Selassie remained in power in long that few of his countrymen can remember the days when he was know as Ras (Duke) Tafari Makonne. The son of the governor of Harar province eastern Ethiopia, Tafari was distantly related to Emperor Menelik II and was educated at the court in Addis Ababa. After Menelik's death in 1913, the nobility decided that the Emperor's grand son, Lij (Count) Hasu, was too dissolute to take over the throne. They installed Hasu's mother Zauditu, as Empress, and chose Tafari to be her regent and heir to the throne.

In no time, Tafari brought the Empress under his control and imprisoned Lij Hasu, who was kept in chains for the next 19 years. In 1928, Tafari forced the Empress to crown him King, and two years later, when she died mysteriously, he became Emperor. It was then that he took the name Haile Selassie which in Amharic means Power of the Holy Trinity. According to Ethiopian legend, he was 225th in a line of Emperors that extends back almost 3,000 years to Menelik I, son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba.

Imperial Gestures. In his early years as Emperor, Haile Selassie launched a drive to build schools, highways and railways. He granted a new constitution in 1955 that promised Ethiopians equal rights under the law. In the 1960s, he turned Addis Ababa into a modern city. Yet Ethiopia remained a desperately poor land, whose 26 million people still have one of the world lowest per capita incomes: \$80. As discord grew in the land, the aging Emperor seemed incapable of dealing with it or even understanding it. In early 1974, when an army mutiny for higher pay led to a wave of disorders in the capital, the Emperor handed out wads of bank notes to beggars, seemingly unaware that such imperial gestures we no longer effective.

For a while after his overthrow there were rumors that the new, increasingly leftist military government intended to execute the old Emperor, or allow him to go into exile in exchange for the hoard he was said to have in numerous Swiss banks. Instead, he was permitted to spend his last days in Addis Ababa under an easy house arrest. Servants still addressed him as "Your Imperial Majesty." As recently as last December, he remarked to two foreign visitors, "I can convoke my ministers, generals and relatives whenever I like." After all the decades of absolute power, the old man apparently could not grasp that he had been rendered absolutely powerless.

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