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The Long Walk

Asfaw Yemiru, teacher of Ethiopia's poor, died May 8th, 2021,
aged 78 or 79



It would take a long time, Asfaw Yemiru reckoned, to walk the 75 miles from his village in Bulga to Addis Ababa. The family had last gone by donkey, so that he and his 11 brothers could be made deacons in the cathedral. That trip had taken two days. He was going barefoot now, and he was only nine. He had 50 cents in his pocket, and had not told his parents he was leaving. But the village offered him nothing except priest-school, where he would learn to read religious books and, very probably, become a Coptic priest like his father. Addis jumped with possibilities, so away he went.

It was not quite as good as he imagined. He found work as a bearer, toting loads on a pole over his small shoulder. But much of the time, like the other swarming street children, he begged and slept in the churchyard of St George's cathedral. His lucky break came when, one day, a rich Turkish lady dropped cheeses from her basket and he raced to pick them up. She took him on as her general skivvy and, between fetching water and chopping wood, he could go to proper primary school.

That made the difference. Life opened up. He sailed through all his tests, and won a scholarship to the General Wingate boarding school. At first, being a street child, his place was given to a rich boy. But he presented himself to the headmaster, barefoot, dusty and wrapped in a blanket, and recited the English words he had carefully rehearsed: "My name is Asfaw Yemiru. I am here to learn." Immediately, the head took to him.

From those chance seeds grew one of the best and most famous schools in Ethiopia, the Asra Hawariat School for the poor. Its name meant "Footsteps of the Apostles". By 2020 more than 120,000 boys and girls, saved from the street, had passed through it. They learned the three Rs, English, history and geography, as well as how to grow vegetables, raise chickens, make pots and weave on looms Asfaw had made himself—in short, to make a living. His deacon-training had been brief, but one firm strand remained: to give what he had received back to others.

Wingate school made him well aware of that command. There he was horrified to see that dining-room leftovers were buried or burned by the staff. He began to distribute them instead to the children who stood outside to beg. But it was not simply food they needed. They wanted him to teach them, and so he started, under the trees in the churchyard of Petros and Paulos, when his own lessons were over. He was only 14 himself, not much taller than the crowd of pupils who sat eagerly in front of him and watched the board on which he chalked up letters. In the long and short rains they had to huddle under the church's lower canopy or in the niches of big people's tombs. At night, many children slept there.

Word of his lessons spread. They were open to all the poor, and free. By 1960 there were almost 300 in his classes, from all over the city and even beyond it, and the church administrators began to complain. In 1961 the emperor, Haile Selassie, gave him land, just beside Wingate and thick with eucalyptus trees. There he built a school with the children's help. It took root and flourished.

The first buildings were not much to look at. Their walls were made of broken brick and eucalyptus laths, and everything was flimsy. Inside, the ten classrooms were divided from each other only by waist-high partitions, in case one teacher had charge of three classes. (Good teachers were hard to find.) The shelves and cupboards in the classrooms doubled as bunks. If you opened a latch, you might find a crumpled blanket and a small girl reading. Or a boy might suddenly drop from near the ceiling like a cat, broadly smiling. Some people, shocked, said Asra Hawariat was just a set of shacks. But it became 64 classrooms, with a library wing and proper dormitories. Whatever it looked like, he didn't care; his only point was education.

Not all his pupils were orphans. Many were simply part of the huge child-population in Ethiopia, still a third of it, whose parents could not afford to send them to school. After lessons they would still go off to carry loads, as he had done, or shine shoes. To make sure they stayed at school, he made house calls and gave the parents cash, milk and school-grown vegetables. It seemed to work.

That eager spirit marked him. When he needed to expand his school he raised money by walking to Harar and back, 620 miles across desert. He had gained the original site in the dangerous, time-honoured way of throwing himself in front of the emperor's limousine as he visited Wingate, shouting "Give us land!"—and the emperor agreed. When the mayor of Addis held things up, he loitered by his office every day to pester him. Friends would remind him of the tale of the frog and the lion: when the frog did too much croaking, the lion ate it. He laughed that off, since education was worth making a noise about.

He also felt touched by luck—or the blessing of God. Whenever he was desperate for money, which was often, something turned up. Once he was given the unclaimed prize money from the national lottery. Another time, Winchester College sent him money, and the headmaster of Wingate wiped out his debts. The emperor himself suddenly gave him a prize of \$10,000, as well as a piece of forest land for a second campus. In 2001 he was awarded the World's Children's Prize.

He was pleased, but success also bothered him. Year after year his school achieved one of the highest pass-rates in the Standard 8 graduating exams. Yet no good lay in certificates and university if pupils then forgot where they had come from. They had to be socially useful, perhaps teaching illiterate adults they knew, or instructing their own parents. They had to work to narrow the vast gap between the rich and the poor.

Those worlds came together when, on two occasions, Haile Selassie visited his school. Guards attended in smart pith helmets, and little girls in white dresses gave the emperor flowers. But he, the principal, went barefoot, as he usually did; as he had done on his long, long walk from Bulga to Addis Ababa.

