

**MY FATHER - Gudina Tumsa**

**A personal witness**

**By**

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### **FOREWORD**

Over the past many years many people have asked me to give interviews on, or write about the impression I have of my father, Gudina Tumsa. But, except for short interviews and talks, I was not in a position to write down my recollections in this manner for the last 25 years. What follows is a brief recollection of what I experienced in the short but memorable time I lived with my father and the rest of the family. Apart from the pleasure it gives me to write about my father, these memories are those of a greatly loved human being. On this conference I would try to limit myself to the time given. I write them down only because I want to celebrate him and continue to keep him in my heart where he would not be murdered.

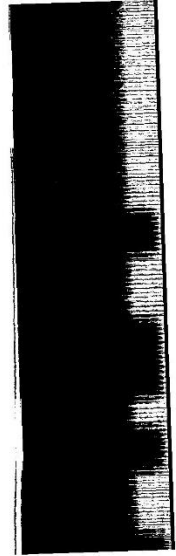
In these short recollections, I have described my Father, as I knew him during a short life we shared when he was alive. He was a model father, who loved us, reprimanded us, advised us and taught us many things, including social morality. I knew him also as a leader who worked all his life for the church and his people. He was a principal architect of the formation of an independent African church with a strong identity of its own. As readers will come to see, he was a true Christian in relation to his church, tolerant to fellow Christians of other denominations, and other believers as well as intellectuals and youth, just as he was a strong critique of the harsh social and economic conditions and human rights situation in Ethiopia.

He died for truth and his convictions and honoured by the people, because he worked all his life for the church and he made sure that the downtrodden and voiceless were heard internationally. He built a through thirteen years of tireless efforts and great sacrifice, he contributed in building a unique church, a democratic institution, in a country that did not practice democracy. In my father, the church itself was robbed of a great servant and leader. As we now know, he was abducted by agents of the Ethiopian regime of the time on July 28, 1979 and murdered in cold blood. Disguised by the darkness of the night because of fear of popular and international public opinion, he was snatched in a macabre manner from the side of my mother. For a long time, even the leadership of his church kept quite about him. I thank the new leadership of Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus (EECMY) for directing the church onto the road of truth, and for enabling to talk about, value and honour his legacy. I thank many dear friends, who, from the beginning did not doubt injustice was done to him because he stood for justice. It is only with the help of God and those friends that the family as well as the name and legacy of Gudina Tumsa could survive.

His persecution and that of his family began even before the regime began its moves and he knew it was time. As there was no tradition of democracy, free speech and criticism of authority in Ethiopia, many even within the church started plotting against his attempts to reform the church institutions.

Those whose personal interests were affected by these reforms, some used defamation as method of opposing his efforts. My father knew this, but it did not make the slightest impression on him or detract him from his principled stand. I knew and shall always remember my father as model parent and a far-sighted leader with a vision, determined to defend his principles, his church, family, his people and country as well the successes and victories achieved in building a truly national, democratic African church.

For me, my Father's journey has been short, and came to an abrupt and early end. His life had been full and rich with love. His friends have been many, and warm and kind; and are today enriched by the example he left behind. May he go with joy to a better place and a new beginning! Go in peace and know that he has made a difference along the way. Go in comfort, for all he has been, remains to stay.



## 'MY FATHER, Gudina Tumsa'

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I remember my father always making an effort to "teach" us. To teach us, he made himself an example, because he saw this as the only way. No matter whether we understood fully or not, he would talk to us about his work. He would ask us challenging questions about our activities, the books we read, our wishes and plans for the future. He sought and received reports from us, and our respective schools, on our progress and social activities. He would always include us in the discussions that always took place at home, encourage us to take part and express our views and opinion. We were never snubbed as other children were in presence of adults.

My father had a very little free time. He either travelled, worked at his office or at home. As we learned to fight for our place and rights, we also made sure he had enough time for us. Though he was busy with a number of commitments, he always spared time for us from his very busy schedule. We had family evenings together, where we told each other jokes, stories, read the bible together, sang and spent time talking and chatting, and he was comfortable and felt happy in having us around him. That feeling was reciprocal. Whenever he was at home, he woke us up very early in the mornings either by calling each one of us by nick names or by a song he sang loud, where upon we joined our parents in bed. Then we played, joked, wrangled with each other and laughed together. At the back of my mind I still hear his voice singing one of these songs "*Amma nan gammada, gammachu argadhera*"<sup>1</sup> or still love to sing them on one of my wonderful mornings.

During the last 25 years, many of his friends and colleagues have talked and written about Gudina Tumsa<sup>2</sup>. But, it is only in recent years that a small part of his writings and speeches have been published by the Gudina Tumsa Foundation. Many of his writings and sermons were lost during the time my mother was in prison or during the process the security forces of the government were searching our home, as well as his offices. Through out all these years, many people have asked me to tell them or write about his private life. I thought he was a public figure and people knew enough about him. He had very little private life and even our home was often a public domain, always full of people who came to see him and speak to him about church affairs, social issues and their own private problems. Everything my father did, preached or wrote in public were based on his basic principles, which he also practiced in his private life. Some of the few points that were not made public are only some of his plans for the future. I will come to that later:

I read and heard many people saying that my father was a controversial person. I take these as a compliment to him, because a controversial person is a person who is not a conformist, who comes up with innovative ideas and who is not afraid of risks involved in new and innovative ideas. If he were a person who was trying to be everybody's darling, a conformist or a populist, he wouldn't have contributed to the growth, developments, ideas and visions for the church and his people. His ideas, actions and stand caused people to discuss with each other, on topics, which were of vital importance to the church and to the people and the country. The topics he raised, the debates he generated in the church, on International Conferences, everywhere in the World or with people with whom he worked or met were challenging. He criticised where others felt it dangerous, and spoke on issues that others felt were not safe to speak. Albert Einstein once said, "*The world is a dangerous place to live; not because of the people who do EVIL, but because of the people who look on and don't do anything about it.*"<sup>3</sup> My father tried to do something in his own way, to speak against evil and a system that condemned people to servitude and was eating the very social fabric and the best of Ethiopia, i.e. it's peoples, because this evil became dangerous every passing day.

Please allow me to tell you a little bit regarding the underlying principles of his life, which are based on his strong belief in Christ. The best quotation I could find that reflects my father's deep felt convictions is from Dr. Martin Luther King: "*Cowardice asks the question, 'Is it safe?'* Expediency asks the question, '*Is it politic?'*' Vanity asks the question, '*Is it popular?'*' But, conscience asks the question, '*Is it right?'*' And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because one's conscience tells one that it is right."<sup>4</sup> My father always asked himself the question on whatever action he took, "Is this right", right before the people and even more whether it is right

before God? He had some very deeply held convictions and conventions, which he unscrupulously adhered to.

**Love** was the foundation of my father's approach to people. He loved his children, each in a special way. Each of us were given an equal amount of love and care, and still each one of us believe that he or she is the most loved one. The Rev. Taressa Qanno said that, "As the Rev. Gudina Tumsa was a person of diverse quality, every one at his day and even today wants to relate him to his/her interests."<sup>3</sup> My father could discuss on any given topic with people who raise questions, but he admitted if he knew very little or nothing at all or apologized if he made mistakes. He would listen, ask questions, argue until he was convinced and thanked if people came up with new and bright ideas. I have observed that he talked to people with full attention, utmost care and respect. To us, his children, he talked to us directly without any mincing his words, but with unreserved love. He showed everybody a practical love, and shared what he had with people. He listened to them, and served them.

One unique custom in our home had been sharing food and ideas with the household staff (servants), which has not been common in Ethiopia. My parents wanted everybody in our home to eat together at the same table. Even though the domestic staff never felt at ease, my father insisted that they join him. He asked them about their villages, families, worries, the attitude of the people in their villages or surroundings on social and economic issues, as well as various developments in the country. Friends and observers warned my father that these people would "shame" him, and that he should never put himself in the position of talking with such people on an equal basis, but he strongly believed that all of us are equal before our God. These people who served in our household came from several backgrounds, and they were not only Oromo, but people from different ethnic groups like Amhara, Gurage, and others. After living with us for a while those people raised their heads and felt at home and just like other family members. Their human dignity was fully recognized and respected. After they left us for whatever reason (be it because they got a better job or they married and moved away) they regularly visited us. It was these people who were working for us in the household, who regularly visited and remained dear friends to my mother in prison and to the whole family throughout the difficult years and continue to be so.

**Have no fear** was another foundation of his life. As any little child, I used to believe that my father was the most strong, wise and courageous man. In his way, he taught us, his children, not to be fearful. I also watched my father on various occasions helping people who were full of worries. I would like to mention one occasion, which might be of interest. In 1974, when the Ethiopian revolution broke out and the military regime started to show its ugly side, a lot of people (aristocrats, poor people, land owners, mothers, fathers, youth and others) were coming to my father to get his opinion and advise on what was going to happen to them and their beloved ones, how to cope with the new situation, confusion and fast changing events. There were those who just asked him to pray for and with them because they had great (Angst) fear. These matters demanded a lot of his attention and as he realised that many people in the country were gripped with fear, he prepared a sermon and preached for five consecutive days on the theme "Do not be afraid!" on Radio Voice of the Gospel (RVOG) with quotations and examples from the Bible. After these sermons were heard through out the country, many people called and thanked him. I hope that the texts of these sermons have survived and could be found somewhere, at least for the records. In his optimistic approach, he got out the message that God is always with them. Again and again his actions proved to me that he was wise, strong and courageous.

**Be sensitive to injustice** was yet one guiding principle of Gudina's life. He believed that if he did not speak against injustice, it would be like condoning it. As a pastor he took it as his duty to do so, and there should be somebody to speak for the voiceless. Let me quote Martin Niemoeller, a German Lutheran Pastor, arrested in 1937<sup>6</sup>,

*In Germany, they (the Nazis) came first for the Communists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Communist.  
Then they came for the Jews,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a Jew.  
Then they came for the trade unionists,  
and I didn't speak up because I wasn't a trade unionist.  
Then they came for the Catholics,  
and I didn't speak up because I was a Protestant.*

*Then they came for me, and by that time no one was left to speak up.*

As a small child I used to observe how much my father detested violence against the weak. He, as a pastor considered himself as a friend of the people, and was very often involved in resolving domestic violence. For him, the poverty that people experienced was the main source of violence (see also the Memorandum to the President of EECMY, 1975). Having come from a humble origin of a peasant family, and as an ordinary man from the Oromo, he personally experienced poverty and understood the suffering of the people. He talked about the unjust system in the country, where the landowners took not only the produce of the peasants, but even their children to work for them as slaves. He disliked not only the economic inequality that existed among the different classes, but also the fact that most of the ethnic groups were dehumanised and subjugated. He felt that it was not acceptable that they were not allowed to learn and use their mother tongues and resources to develop, but were instead forced to speak the language that was foreign to them and imposed upon them. Our uncles who were also brought up by my parents, and later on all the children were imbued with this sympathy for the downtrodden and the weak, and intolerant to the injustice that was eating the whole society as a cancer. It was an evil that we thought is our duty to fight against, each in his/her own way.<sup>7</sup> If politics decides who should live or die, we chose to be on the side of those who are in need.

My uncle, the youngest brother of my father, Baro, chose to participate actively, first in social and church activities, then in student movement, and later in political organisations. I remember an incident when, once in 1974, a few months after he got married, and just on the eve of the revolution, he was arrested by the security forces of the imperial government. He was kept in what became the notorious Central Investigation Department, at that time called the just the Security, or commonly the Third Police Station. After my parents, his pregnant wife, our friends and myself tried to visit him, but in vain, we went back home. During the evening some elders came to talk to my father about Baro. They told my father that he should advise Baro to behave like a "good citizen", and avoid involving himself in political activities. My father then asked them what wrongs they thought Baro had done, whether he had committed any crime? He asked them, did he kill any body, or did he steal, or did he do commit any other dishonourable thing?" They said "No". He then told them that, "Baro only demanded justice on behalf of the oppressed poor, and if that is wrong, I am proud of him." The elders then changed their topic and left probably disappointed.

My father lost first his father, at an early age, followed by his mother a few years later. As a result, as the eldest son, he took responsibility for his two younger brothers Negasa and Baro, and his younger sister, Rahel at a very early age. Baro was particularly very young when he lost his mother. My father and Baro were very close, and they were like father and son, or acted as if they were twins with similar minds, but also different approaches. By age my father and Baro were about 15 years apart. They respected each other, shared ideas, argued with each other and supported each other in many ways. I understand, the incident in which Baro was murdered affected my father deeply, and it appears that he never talked about it to any body, not even to my mother. He mourned the loss of his youngest and beloved brother silently. I recall and remember how much he changed when I looked at a picture that I received with a letter from home in 1978, but did not realize what changed him so much then.

**How to be a true follower of Christ** was always the role for which my father strived and worked. I was very fortunate enough, because my father was one of those who taught me during my confirmation classes at the Addis Abeba Mekane Yesus Church. During one of the lessons, we came to talk about what it means to be a Christian. He told us where the word came from, and whether Christ was a Christian. He told us to be a Christian is to be just like Jesus; to try to live as he lived, talk as he talked; think and judge as he did. He told us that Christ was free from all forms of prejudices, as prejudice is one of the primary forms of sin. I remember vividly the lessons he gave us. I can witness my father made tremendous efforts to live like Christ, tried to do his best as he did, and gave his life for his convictions as Christ did.

That is the way to be loyal to your God, family, friends, your country and people. He gave his life for God, for his church, family, friends and his people. For me, when I used to hear that Jesus suffered, died and gave his life for us, it was always a distant thing, and a history, not a contemporary phenomenon. Now I witnessed that some one I know and dear to me, my father, died not for himself<sup>8</sup> but for me and for us!

**Communicate with and talk to people**, discuss with them on various topics, ask their problems, share their worries, engage them in dialogue, demonstrate to them that you are interested in them, in their problems, issues, was a fundamental basis of my father's relations with people of all backgrounds.

My mother is a quite person and a very good listener, but she talked, joked and laughed with my father always. My parents talked quite a lot, joked, laughed with and teased each other. They would start talking very early in the morning while still in bed and continue at night. Their murmur was always my clock to wake me up in the morning and lulling me to sleep during the night. They not only talked about the family matters and their children, but also about my father's job; what he experienced during the day; on his travels and meetings and also about his plans and wishes. Whenever time allowed he read his writings, be it sermons or documents he wrote to her and asked for her comments. He valued her opinion, admired her energy and the way she managed the household and us all, and he appreciated her efforts and keeping him free from family responsibilities. She has been very loving, caring and loyal to him and to us.

When I left my family for studies abroad, one of the things I missed most was the exchange of ideas, the critical discussions and debates on various issues and topics we had at home. My family used to discuss things in the mornings, during lunchtime and in the evenings. Guests were always present in our home. My father and my two uncles, who used to live with us until they got married, also brought people along for lunch. They continued to do so and join us even after their marriage just to participate in the exchange of ideas that continuously took place. My mother was never consulted whether there was enough food for everybody and most of the time it was enough to say you have something in your mouth, but not enough to be satisfied. Our home was also a public place. Whenever she complained that they didn't tell her to prepare food for more, they just said the food is only symbolic and there are many more things to share. The person invited or brought along was always the focus of attention. They knew how and what questions to put, they debated with him, asked him and laughed with him. We grew up listening to these discussions and such encounters were of tremendous experience for us. The discussions continued after lunch on their way back to work and in the evenings. Yes, people were happy to be heard. They told their experiences, their stories; described the situation in a given area or talked on a given subject and we learned quite a lot from them. My father always related the subject, be it of political, social, economic nature to the church and the services it provided. My uncle, Baro was always sharp in the political developments. We were always updated on the situation in the country, or around the world through the media and through people. We listened to the news together, and often discussed about the issues and implications.

People of various religious backgrounds, including evangelical, orthodox, and catholic Christians as well as Moslems, as well as persons of various political persuasions, social and ethnic backgrounds came to our house. People also came to talk to my father for various private social problems. I remember an Archbishop of the Orthodox Church coming to our house to talk with my father raising theological issues and social problems and dinning with us. Many Dergue (the military council that came to power in 1974) members came at night and held private discussions on points that were worrying them and sought advice and prayers. Many persecuted and endangered individuals sought refuge in our home. Each trusted and respected my father on leaving our home. One of the leaders of the EPRP (Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party), who I met in Europe once told me that even though my father didn't share his ideology and the cause of his organisation, he was the only person he could trust with his problems for an honest advice. Yes, my father was open to talk to any one, but he also made his principles, a Christian and as a church leader, very clear to them.

Talking with people, I can say today, was more than a hobby for my father. I learned it was his tool for doing away with prejudice. It was also an instrument of gathering information, finding out the problems of society and the potentials of people for the church. Those who had great potentials were asked to help the church or were helped by him to get a bigger opportunity, or to get a higher education at home or abroad so that they could serve the EECMY after their studies. I know that he personally visited people who were finishing their studies abroad, and requested them to go back and serve the Church and the people. That is also what he advised us, his own children.

My father had a special interest in **the youth** and he loved discussing with them. As a result, he was seen very often with students from the university in Addis Ababa. Since his office was close to the university campuses, they went to his offices or visited him at home. It is to be recalled that one of the

very few youth hostels in Addis Ababa and run by the EECMY was adjacent to his office and catered for university students. People in the countryside were attracted to him not only because of his interest in them, his understanding, warmth and because he talked with them with respect. Later, after he was abducted, many people who met him told me quite often that they never saw an open-minded and passionate "qes"(pastor) like him. Some of these people had their own biases about the church and religious people. They were quite amazed as to how brilliantly my father could communicate with them and challenge some of their misconceived notions. Many of those people who met him also developed a different and friendly attitude towards the EECMY.

My father loved reading considerably. Reading was not just a hobby, but also a ritual for him. He would read every morning and in the evenings. As a small child I always remember sitting on his lap while he read. I remember him always reading in his study room and taking notes or underlining important paragraphs or sentences, and reflecting on what he read. He judged any body on his/her ability to read and grasp. My mother took care of his material and personal well being, because he cared least for that. He spent his pocket money on books. Whenever he travelled abroad, his luggage was always loaded with books. The whole family, including my uncles, followed his example.

My father valued **education** very much. Education was what he set as a priority for himself and for us. He insisted each of us should get at least his/her first degree. For him age didn't matter as far as education was concerned and even my uncles, who had already their degrees, were advised to study further in various fields. For every youth or for any intelligent person he wished a chance of education. He would often tell us, his children that he and my mother will not have any material wealth to bequeath to us, but for that reason they will enable us at whatever cost to provide us with a good education. Every letter he wrote to each of us when he was in the USA for his studies, or later when we went abroad for our own studies, stressed the importance of our education. He wrote that his and my mother's efforts and greatest desire was that we were educated and became not only self-reliant for ourselves, but also became able to serve our people. Following his wishes, my mother who was not able to regularly go to the evening school, because of the heavy family responsibility she shouldered, also completed high school in prison during her imprisonment. She said, she did this in spite of the torture and difficulties in the prison, partly as a gift to him because she knew that he had such a profound belief in education. She did not know what had happened to him and believed that he was alive somewhere in prison and would meet one day. Yes, we were all able to complete our education, in those difficult and trying years, and we are able to serve our people, in accordance with his wishes.

Being with one's father, especially when he is a public figure, all the time and at all places would not be possible. I also learnt many things about my father from other people who have known him. Many people who met, worked and talked with him told me about their encounters with him. I have tried to write down some of these and would like to share a few of them here. Through their stories I could get to know my father from different angles.

My father liked **travelling and preaching in the countryside**. In 1962 my father was working as a pastor in Naqamte and the vicinities. To reach the target people, sometimes he travelled for days on foot. This was also a time when he had some differences with some of the elders in the Naqamte congregation. One day, after preaching in a new church in the countryside, he started to walk back home. But, before he could reach home he became sick and couldn't go further and lay down under a tree to rest. The sun, set in and it became dark. Just before mid-night, one of our neighbours, Jallata Dima, who took part in a wedding party was riding back home on a mule, and suddenly saw a person lying under a tree by the road side. Not knowing that the person was dead or alive, he approached to help. When he found out that Gudina was lying there with a high fever and alone, as he didn't want him to be eaten by wild animals, he helped him onto his mule and brought him back home. On that same day, just before my father came and slept under the tree, two persons who were hired by some of the elders to punish Gudina were waiting for him. The father of the bride, where Jallata Dima was, was for some reason riding on his horse to get to Naqamte. These two persons who were waiting for my father thought that this person was Gudina and attacked the father of the bride. They did not realise that they were attacking the person on whose feast they were eating and drinking during the day. When they recognised that he was actually their host and not the wanted person, they helped him go back home. They later came and asked my father to forgive them saying that, though they were hired to harm him, his God protected him because he was an innocent man.

My father was an optimist, but he also had his worries. What was his greatest worry?



In 1979 after being imprisoned for the second time, my father started really worrying about the safety and welfare of my mother and my youngest sister Lensa. This was evident from some of his communications to me as well as friends. It is possible that, after the second round of his imprisonment, he feared for the worst, and was a result worried that the security services of the regime would harm them. Approaching personally one of the missionaries of the Norwegian Lutheran Mission (NLM) he mentioned about them and asked for help. He told him that he loved his wife and children so much and he would not like to imagine them to be harmed. He told him how the regime's security services tried to put pressure on him to cooperate, and to torture his youngest daughter, Lensa, in front of him if he didn't comply. When he was in prison at the time Lensa visited him everyday to deliver food. She had to pass through a corridor where he couldn't watch her. He said he was shaking until she safely left the prison compound. Then he asked the missionary to help him get an invitation Letter for Lensa to leave the country. When I heard this story, I remembered how my father always took the safety of his family, his unreserved love and loyalty to us, his suffering, worrying and doing every thing to help us to safely, helping us to recover as fast as possible whenever we were ill, or whenever we faced other problems on many occasions.

My father's wishes were not different from that of any body else. He wished a better life for his family. Above all he wished a young and able leadership for the EECMY, and tried to educate, cultivate and groom younger, and educated people.

On our last meeting was in September 1978 in Germany, at the home of a friend of ours, Johannes Hasselhorn. That gave us an opportunity for a few days, and that was the last opportunity for me to have a private time together with him. My husband, Dima, was with us during this last time we had together, and we raised many issues in the course of our discussions. Among these issues I recall the following.

- ◆ He knew already that his time was short, and he wanted my mother to be taken care of. He said that his greatest concern and worry was her safety and welfare, because she would suffer considerably as she never lived for herself and never prepared for the worst of situations.
- ◆ He advised me to continue with my education and advise my sisters and brother to do the same.
- ◆ He indirectly indicated to Dima, and me about Baro's death, and indicated to us that Baro's wife and children should be supported in whatever way possible.
- ◆ He knew that this was most likely his last trip abroad, because the government was becoming more restrictive. He would not go into exile leaving behind his church and his family, for this would be a temptation, and running away from duty and sacrifice, which would only bring shame to his heart and the church he was leading. He said he could not abandon and leave his people alone.
- ◆ He predicted that whatever happened to him, the freedom of the church would be limited and she will not have a room to work independently. He was working on and wished a multiethnic leadership to take up his task. He predicted that a difficult period was coming ahead.
- ◆ He was optimistic that the military government would not last long, but the period after that would also be difficult and uncertain as no body could tell what its replacement would look like.
- ◆ When I asked him what he would do if things developed positively, he told me that though it was unlikely, he would implement what he had always told us, that he would pass the responsibility of EECMY to a capable leadership, and go abroad for further education, and finish writing the papers he had collected and was preparing, as well as develop the ideas he had been thinking about over the years, write and publish them. He dreamed of doing his PhD in Philosophy as well as Theology, and complete writing some of the articles he has written and collected over the years and publish them into books.

Dima told me later that during their private discussions he tried to persuade my father, not to return to Ethiopia at that critical stage, and that he would serve the church, his family and his people better, if he survived and remained abroad than in prison in Ethiopia, at the very least. He was arrested by the regime fifteen days after he returned home from Germany. That was his first arrest. As the result of internal and external pressure, he was released some time later. He was again picked up a few months later for the second time, and again released. When he was abducted again in July 1979, many people

thought that it was a routine arrest just like the previous ones. Just after my father was taken, people started speculating the reason for his disappearance. Except for a few friends, many distanced themselves. Some said he was politically involved as if his political involvement, i.e. speaking against injustice and for the human rights of the oppressed was a sin or a crime. Others even speculated that he went underground, as if he didn't have a chance to go abroad, while still some others said his being the brother of Baro made him a potential danger to the regime, even though the government knew well that Baro was no longer alive by that time. A few speculated that the government just wanted to get rid of religious leaders, as it was also around the same time that the Patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Abuna Tewflos disappeared from prison, obviously also murdered by the regime. People were so confused that many believed and repeated the propaganda of those who were in power. Whatever were the reasons of the government, they knew very well that what they did could never be justified, the reason why they silently abducted and murdered him in secret. Regarding his alleged political involvement, or the speculation about the reasons why the Ethiopian Government was after him, my father told his former teacher that, "*Mengistu wanted me to go on a tour of Europe. he wanted me to appear in media and confirm that there was religious freedom and no persecution in Ethiopia... I have never done anything wrong as to political involvement. I have never taken active part in OLF, but I follow developments. They (security) keep an eye on me. An agent watches me at the Central Office to see who visits me.*"<sup>9</sup> The only reason they had was that he spoke and wrote against their human rights records, against the terror campaign, particularly the "Red Terror," and refused on the grounds of his belief in Christ, and his principles to be a political instrument for the regime and to cooperate with them in improving their image abroad. This principle of his is reflected in his Report in Hanover in 1973, when he was defending the integrity of the EECMY. "*The Church of Jesus Christ can never be used as an agent by anyone, except for the one who has died for her.*"<sup>10</sup> Knowing my father, he could only be an agent for Jesus Christ and his church. He was warned through different channels and persons close to the government; and he heard in detail from the in-laws of my uncle Baro<sup>11</sup> and from others sympathetic to him that the highest officials of the country were discussing about him, setting up plans and were coming for him.

On July 28, 1979 at 19:30 hrs. he was holding a church service, when an unusual group of people came into the church, and sat at different places. He observed that they were not ordinary people who just came in to attend the service. He continued his teaching with calm, but watched their movements and signs to each other. My mother told me in 1990, after she left prison that she became aware that he was looking at the direction of strange men. My father continued his sermon, answered questions the congregation put to him, talked with them as long as they wished and when all left he got into the car driven by my mother. Once he was in the car, he told her that the regime's security squad had come for him and that they were following them with many cars. When my parents reached the junction of the main road, they were crossed by several cars and stopped. While one group took my father, others ordered my mother to get out of the car. My mother asked them what they wanted to do to my father, and begged them to be allowed to be with him, they tried to calm her by saying that nothing would happen to him. My father advised her to follow their orders, not wanting her to be mistreated. One of the men took the car key from my mother, didn't even allow her to take her handbag, and drove my father away in a different car. She was taken in the second car to the outskirts of the city and left alone on a dark street without any thing. Since she left her bag in her car, she had no money even to look for a taxi, to be able to go back home. She walked a long distance and found a fuel station, begged for some money, which she promised to return on the following day, and drove home in a taxi to look for the whereabouts of my father. She still tells me that even though he knew that it was the last moments of his life, he was fearless and calm and that state of his deceived her very much.

#### **The search for my father: Searching for him in the prisons all over the country**

The people who seized my father were armed but in plain clothes. They searched both my parents with their metal and weapon detectors, before they put them into different cars. My father was put into a military-type vehicle. It was the last time my mother saw him. After the security squad threw my mother out of their car in a dark spot in the outskirts of Addis Ababa, as I noted above, she walked for a long distance and arrived at a petrol station, where she begged and got some coins to get into a taxi home. This was near the Norwegian church.

Coming home, she notified the police and the *kebele*, but received no response. She also notified the church officials and later a lawyer from the church, and a church leader went with her to the police, who telephoned *Maikalawi* (the Central Investigation Department), but received no reply. She could not herself go there as people who go there are often arrested. They also tried to inquire with the senior *Dergue* member in charge of security, Colonel Teka Tulu, who knew my father personally, and who also said he didn't know any thing about what had happened to my father. It is in the nature of the police and the security services that even if they knew they would never tell the truth. At the same time it was also possible that they did not know, owing to the fact that there were a myriad of interlocking and competing security organs and death squads operated by the *Dergue* regime at the time. Three days later my mother collected her car at the police station, but knew nothing the whereabouts of my father.

Then my mother started the endless and hopeless task of looking for her husband. She hired some people to travel around the country's many prisons to look for him. Friends and relatives tried to locate him in all sorts of odd places, including various military barracks, and army hospitals. Even after she was imprisoned in 1980, she kept on looking and waiting for him. Some people told her that they have located him here and there, that he needed clothing, food, and medicine just to get money from her. In her letters from prison she wrote heart-breaking letters asking how a person with such a mental and physical stature could be lost missing. She wrote us that she was prepared and ready to sacrifice herself to get him freed. She was sad and devastated, but she put all her hope in Christ. My brother, my sisters and I could not comfort her by being with her, because we were all in exile; still we were in the same boot, but wrote her regularly sharing her hopes.


#### **Appeals of the Amnesty International – Prisoner of Conscience**

As of 1980, I started to contact Amnesty International, and my father was soon adopted as a "Prisoner of Conscience", and his case was also referred to those working on involuntary disappearances. The International Secretariat of Amnesty International in London, and the United Kingdom Branch as well as the various groups in many countries were involved in the case, and hoping that he was somewhere in prison, were working for a possible release of my father. They wrote to the Head of the Ethiopian Government and different ministries and responsible authorities of Ethiopia on a regular basis, asking for information about him, and assurance about his safety, fair treatment, to bring him before a court of law if they were accusing him of any wrong doing, or to get him released eventually. Amnesty International repeatedly wrote on their campaign papers that, "*Gudina Tumsa and the Mekane Yesus Church have never opposed the Revolution – ... He spoke fearlessly against the persecution of his fellow Christians by the Ethiopian authorities. They have sought a role for Christians within the socialist Revolution .. asking for information about him and assurance about his safety.*" (Amnesty International, 1980)<sup>12</sup>. The regime and its representatives, however, did not provide any clues to Amnesty International or a host of church organisations and governments who inquired about him.

#### **Enquiry through the UN Human Rights Commission**

In 1981, I wrote to the United Nations Human Rights Commission – Division of Human Rights – Working Group on Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances, which was established in 1980, and I appealed to them to take up the case and clarify the enforced disappearance of my father. I filed a long and detailed form and submitted to them. The working Group transmitted a review of the report and requested the Ethiopian Government to give it information. The Ethiopian government replied by a letter dated 4. December 1981 that my father "*is believed to have joined the so-called Oromo Liberation Movement*"<sup>13</sup>.

As I thought that this was a challenge to me to give further substantive evidence to enable the UN Group to take the matter further with the Ethiopian Government, I wrote a letter to the Oromo Liberation Front - Foreign Relations Committee, in Khartoum to confirm the claim of the Ethiopian Government if that was the case, or give me any information they knew about his whereabouts. The OLF replied that they "*...were very much surprised and disappointed at the response of the Ethiopian regime...*" and advised me to "*continue to campaign internationally.*"<sup>14</sup>

  
In the mean time, unconfirmed reports about the fate of my father were circulating. The United Nations Office at Geneva-dated 10 July 1984 signed by Human Rights Officer, Centre for Human Rights wrote to me "...We have received further unconfirmed reports about the fate of your father...We therefore suggest to you that you address yourself directly to Amnesty International"<sup>15</sup>. I again submitted the facts I knew and the information I gathered to the UN Working Group. On 13 November 1984 the Working Group wrote to me, "In re-transmitting the information to the Government the Working Group expressed the hope that investigations would be carried out and stated its interest to receive any information the Government might wish to send. You will be informed of any reply provided by the Government about the fate of your relative"<sup>16</sup> and again they advised me to contact Amnesty International!

### **Appeals of the Churches, Governments, and other bodies**

Churches in Germany, Scandinavia, USA, Africa and the Lutheran World Federation sent several appeals to the Ethiopian Government, to release my father. Diplomats and Church officials who had meetings with Ethiopian officials got nothing substantial. At one time the Ethiopians were reported to have unashamedly asked for a ransom of about 36 million US Dollars as a reward for his release. Because Church officials and government representatives and diplomats preferred to be secretive, I don't have enough information as to who did what and when.

During the agonizing period of the search for what happened to my father, many organisations also contacted us as well as his friends, and everybody tried to help in their own ways<sup>17</sup>. For thirteen years, all his family, friends, and colleagues continued searching and waiting for news about him, longing, wishing and hoping in vain that we would see him alive again.

### **MY MOTHER IN PRISON**

Six months after her husband was snatched away from her side, my mother herself was taken and imprisoned in 1980. She was severely tortured for many months, and after being kept in the dungeons of the underground cellars of the Grand Palace, she was later transferred to the Central Investigation Department, *Maekelawi*, and then to the Central Prison, the *Karchalle*. She was kept without trial or any reason, until she was released in 1989. "My children: my only concern was not to discredit my husband and your father, and this was achieved. It was really we who won it. I embrace you." These were some of the words she uttered to us, her children, when we rejoined in 1990.


Torture and whatever methods the regime employed never broke my mother and her spirit. In response to repeated tortures of the regime's torturers, she told them, "I will not ask for any favours. Take me back to my cell." She spent almost ten years in prison, but now she is free and living with her children. Despite her advanced age, her ordeal in prison neither demoralised her, nor weakened her spirit. She faced it with strong convictions and high morale, because it was an unjust and purely vindictive punishment.



## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let me now briefly conclude with the legacies of my father. Gudina Tumsa was a towering figure, not just physically, which he was, but also intellectually. His unflinching determination to seek the truth, his strength of character, faith, and spirit, his vitality, love and respect are all noble legacies he has bequeathed us. He was a true Christian, who feared no earthly authority in pursuit of truth and speaking against injustice. He spoke for the voiceless and he became strength for the weak. He stood for justice and fairness. To those who hated him, he showed love. In the face of danger, instead of fear, he demonstrated strength.

The forces of evil that took him in darkness and murdered him have already been relegated to the dustbin of history. But, the memory and legacy of Gudina Tumsa is towering, and the cause for which he died lives on and thrives. His loss, and the fact that we knew nothing about his fate was a terrible ordeal for his wife and children in particular. We suffered one traumatic experience after the other in a couple of a few years, which was not easy to bear. I lost my younger brother in 1976, and my beloved uncle, Baro, in 1978, the news of which we learnt only years later. My father was abducted and murdered the following year, and my mother was arrested and incarcerated in less than six months. These tragedies were too much for us to bear, and Gudina's family suffered tremendously from these repeated tragedies in a span of a few years one after the other. Yet, despite the immense sacrifices and difficulties, we survived, struggled to fulfil the wishes and plans he had for us. Those friends of my father, who stood by us and helped during those trying years, are true friends indeed. His church, the EECMY, for the institutionalisation, growth, and wellbeing of which he made tireless efforts and tremendous contributions also suffered, with several churches closed and pastors and lay members imprisoned and tortured. Yet it survived and is thriving today, already distinguishing itself as the fastest growing church in the world. The Foundation (Gudina Tumsa Foundation) established in his memory by his family and friends is already an established institution, contributing towards fighting ignorance, disease and poverty, helping thousands of people out of these. He has not died in vain, and his legacy, memory, and the ideals for which he stood lives on among us and many more, inspiring us to pursue the course of truth and justice. I am proud of my father, for he left us honourable name and legacy. We shall continue to hold high and promote his spirits and ideals.



**Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Onesimos Nesib in 1919; edited by Martin Nordfeldt 1927 - Song No.70 (S.T.8); in an Oromo Language song book - Printed by Commercial Publishers Addis Ababa 1952.
- <sup>2</sup> See also among others writings of Christian Krause, Gunnar Hasselblatt, Martin Kruse, Olyvind Eide and different News Papers and Letters since 1980
- <sup>3</sup> Albert Einstein (03/14189-1955)
- <sup>4</sup> King, Dr. Martin Luther Jr.: A PROPER SENSE OF PRIORITIES February 6, 1968, Washington, D.C.- Beyond Vietnam and Casualties of the War in Vietnam. New York: Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam, 1986.
- <sup>5</sup> Qanno, Tarressa, Pastor: The Legacy of Rev. Gudina Tumsa in the Spiritual Charismatic Movement of EECMY, Lutherstadt Wittenberg, 2004
- <sup>6</sup> Niemoeller, Martin (1892-1984): in a speech at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur GA in 1959
- <sup>7</sup> Gudina Tumsa Foundation: Witness and Discipleship, Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution; The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa, Addis Ababa, 2003. "Memorandum §10" July 1975: "Apolitical life is not worthy of existence, uninvolvedness is a denial of the goodness of creation and of the reality on incarnation... In our continent what is prevalent is the basis to define economic policy, agricultural development, foreign relations... 'politics decides who should die and who should live' ..."
- <sup>8</sup> Krause, C.: 1980 Gudina Tumsa: Not just for himself- in LWI, 32
- <sup>9</sup> Eide, Oeyvind M.: Revolution and Religion in Ethiopia. A study of Church and Politics with special reference to the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, 1974 -1985. Stavanger: Misjonshogskolens Forlag; Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet.- Printed by Impress, Stavanger, 1996
- <sup>10</sup> Gudina Tumsa Foundation: in Witness and Discipleship - Leadership of the Church in Multi-Ethnic Ethiopia in a Time of Revolution; The Essential Writings of Gudina Tumsa, Addis Ababa, 2003  
Gudina Tumsa Foundation: The Life and Ministry of Rev. Gudina Tumsa: Report Volume and lectures, Addis Ababa 2003
- <sup>11</sup> General Kebebewu Bulto sent his younger Brother Dr. Tesfaye to strongly warn my father, since Mengistu and few of his closest Officials were consulting on how to get rid of him and some others.
- <sup>12</sup> Personal Correspondence with Amnesty International -International Secretariat and different Branches between 1980 and 1990
- <sup>13</sup> Correspondence : In a letter by United nations Office at Geneva-dated 29 July 1982 signed by Acting director Division of Human Rights;"...By a letter dated 4 December 1981 the Government of Ethiopia informed the Working Group that your father "is believed to have joined the so-called Oromo Liberation Movement. ..."
- <sup>14</sup> Oromo Liberation Front-Foreign Relations Committee - dated September 15,1984, signed "Ahmed Buna"
- <sup>15</sup> In a letter by United nations Office at Geneva-dated 10 July 1984 signed by Human Rights Officer, Centre for Human Rights "...We have received further unconfirmed reports about the fate of your father....We therefore suggest to you that you address yourself directly to Amnesty International...!"
- <sup>16</sup> In a letter by United nations Office at Geneva-dated 10 November 1984 signed by Secretary - working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances:"
- <sup>17</sup> Hasselblatt, G: Gespräch mit Gudina, Stuttgart 1980

From Gudina.Sarbo@t-online.de (Kulani Sarbo)

Sent Monday, March 13, 2006 9:56 am

To Paul Hoffman <PLHoffman@aol.com>

Cc Gudina Tumsa Foundation GTF <gtf@ethionet.et>

Subject FW: International consultation on GT in Wittenberg 2004 (fwd)

Attachments MY FATHER0805.doc

85K

Dear Paul,

attached please find my Paper presented in Wittenberg. I sent this article on 02. February 2005 to Gerd Decke with a copy to GTF and your Email adress. I also asked my sisters to comment it. Unfortunately I didn't get a reply. At the moment I am trying to recover from Pneumonia and I am afraid I can not spend much time on it. Therefore, I just send it to you as it is. I hope correcting and adjusting it will not take much of your time.

Warm greetings from cold Germany.  
Yours Kulani