

I Am Endalk



I am an Ethiopian, an Amharan, a migrant, an asylum-seeker, a Christian, a son, a brother, a nephew. All of these are true of me. All of these are parts of Endalk Sisay.

My path to Sheffield started in Ethiopia in November, 2015, when protests against the Tigrean-dominated government began in Lower Amhara. Although they make up only 5% of the country's population, Tigreans are the dominant group in my country, led by the Tigra People's Liberation front. I was a student and I joined my fellow students in protest, particularly against the annexing of productive Amharan land by Tigreans. There was systematic oppression of my clan – there was imposed contraception in an attempt to limit population growth. I was imprisoned twice. My father, who was a farmer, was also arrested and imprisoned, on July 6th, 2016. He had gone to support the fight against the Tigreans I lost some friends at this time – I do not know what happened to them.

After he had spent three months in prison, we were told that my father had died. There was no explanation given, but he was a healthy man when he was arrested and thus I believe he did not die of natural causes. We were allowed to bury him, but not to mourn publicly, as to do so might

encourage people to be angry with the regime. I had to internalise my grief.

In September 2016, my mother persuaded me to go back to university, but this time in a safer area in the South of the country Sidamo. I was studying Construction Technology Management Science. There was actually a prison inside the university, run by the intelligence authorities. I spent 2 days in there with other Amharan students because we protested. I spent two days in there and then was given a final warning: 'Leave, or you will lose your life'. I was given one day to go.

I went back north to the region of Gondar to Abdurafi – my mother still lived there. My elder brother, Gebral was in prison outside Abdurafi. I continued to protest against the government, handing out leaflets in support of the Wolkayte Amhara Identity Committee which was led by Colonel Demke Zewdu and his deputy, Ataly Zafe. I slept in a different place each night, fearful that I would be re-arrested.

I was motivated by the desire to help the people attain freedom. I did not and still do not, hate anyone. I hated the government and a regime that wanted to silence people, particularly the young people like me.

My uncle and my mother's uncle – both in Israel, sent us money to bribe the prison authorities to release my brother. This is common practice in Ethiopia - they paid about £2k

When we went back to Abdurafi, the capital city of my region, we stayed at my uncle's house, where the soldiers caught me. They were the Red caps, a special unit. They beat my uncle, entered the house. I tried to ask them, 'Why?' - but they said nothing.

They took us to a military prison and beat me. When I came round, I had lost two teeth and had blood all over my body. They said this had been an 'easy' beating. They wanted to know what I'd been doing, where I had got my money from. They told me that however much I thought of myself, to them I was nothing. 'You have to tell us whatever we want to know.'

Six of us were put in a cell made of corrugated iron covering a hole dug in the ground. We were beaten at night. They would throw in bread like you'd throw scraps to a dog. I was there for a month, feeling increasingly hopeless. I would not get out – but I was determined not to betray anyone. I was defiant. I said: 'If you release me tomorrow, I will still support the Wolkayte Amhara Identity Committee.'

I was sent to Abdurafi general prison where my luck changed. I had the chance to speak with a policeman who was of the same ethnicity as me. He helped me write to my mother to let her know I was alive and in the prison. He brought me food and some pain relief. He called my uncle in Israel who sent £1.5k in order that this policeman would bribe others to let me leave the prison and then the country. I did so, reuniting with Gebral, who had been moving from city to city to avoid arrest.

I argued against going Uganda or Eritrea which Gebral wanted us to. We thought about moving from city to city but I said it would be difficult to avoid the intelligence services. Although Gebral is older than me, he was perhaps not as well educated as me in the ways of the regime.

Then we got the chance to go to the farm of one of my father's friends, Barambarus, in the west part of Abdurafi. He's a rich man with a large garden. We stayed three days and one of his friends helped us to cross the border into the Sudanese city of Asara where we were transferred to another agent who took us to Khartoum. This agent, with the cooperation of the corrupt Sudanese police, has a large camp inside Khartoum and after 8 days there a lorry took us to Libya, to Kufra. After 25 days there living on pasta and water. We were taken to a camp at Alsuwarif.

I was there for about 10 months. Conditions were very bad. There were high walls topped with broken glass and no beds. It was very hot in the day and very cold at night. Some men were tortured, tied up and thrown onto the hot sand. Women were raped, particularly Christian women, even some Muslim women - there was no taboo about that. They treated human beings like animals. Some starved. Others were able to get money through family connections. The agents always wanted more money. If you make the mistake of paying more quickly they think you can pay more. We paid what they said for both me and my brother and then they said that was just for one – they wanted double.

On January 27th 2018, at 5am, lorries took us to the coast. I was separated from my brother. You cannot argue. You do as the agent says or you are beaten.

We were loaded into small boats which for an hour took us out to sea to a larger wooden boat – there were 2 of them, both with Egyptian captains. After about 5 hours the engines started to smell. The captain and crew said 'pray!'

We travelled for about 10 hours – it was windy, but not a storm. The captain lost direction and went towards Spain. A Spanish ship saved us and took us to Italy to Pozzallo, in Sicily, where many migrants land. On that day I thought: 'I have a new life!'

I was very sick. I asked to be taken to hospital and I was. It was clean and comfortable. I was very weak, I'd lost about 12kg in weight. After 7 days, they told me I had pulmonary tuberculosis and they gave me treatment. I began to be happier, although not when I thought about Gebral.

After 20 days there I was moved to Catania to recover. I was nursed for 3 months in an M.S.F. hospital. A man from the Italian home office came to take fingerprints. I was advised to give them. If you refuse they will think you have something to hide.

Once they decided I had recovered and needed no more medical care I was moved to a migrant camp where I would guess some 60% said they were Eritrean or Ethiopian. I was wary of telling anyone about myself. You just never know who you can trust in such circumstances

Some people said they'd been in this camp for 2 years. I decided I wasn't going to stay that long. Then a member of staff helped me. I told her everything of my story. She was sympathetic saying, 'I will be your mother.' I contacted my uncle and he sent her some money into her account and she gave I to me. For 8 days I stayed with others in Ventimiglia, 7km from the Italian/French border, with the Red Cross We tried, unsuccessfully, to stow away in lorries and then decided to travel by train to Paris. We sat separately. We tried to look relaxed, normal, with earphones on. At one point, I was asked to show my ticket. I answered in Ethiopian and the confused ticket inspector, perhaps thinking I was mentally disabled, left me alone.

In Paris, we slept on the street for a night and then with friends we got a taxi to Belgium.

In Belgium, 4 of us were taken in by a doctor and her family for about 2 weeks. An Ethiopian on the street introduced us to her. She was part of a volunteer support programme. She told me that despite my story Belgium did not give asylum to Ethiopians. I would have more chance if I said I was Eritrean. I said I couldn't- I couldn't change my identity.

So we went back to France to Calais and we tried to stow away in several lorries. We were caught repeatedly – 5 times- but then on the 9th August 2018, with the help of a particularly strong guy who didn't come with us, but who opened the back doors of a lorry, 4 of us managed to hide and get to England.

Once across there was a further 4 hour journey to what turned out to be somewhere in the Midlands. When the driver found us he was really scared and angry. He told us to stay where we were while he rang the police which we did. The two younger ones had wanted to run but I, and the other older, perhaps 40 yr-old guy, said, 'No stay. You've made it. You're here!'

The police took us to a police station for 1 night and then we were transferred to a detention centre, Urban House, Wakefield, in Aug 2018. In October the Home Office moved me to Sheffield. There were 4 of us – me, a Sudanese, a Pakistani and a Zimbabwean. We were given 3 days' notice that we were to be taken to a house in Highfield. A Sheffield target housing officer opened the door for us. Everything was supplied and the quality was really good. When friends from London see where I'm living they just say, 'Wow!'

Within a month of arriving in Sheffield I began volunteering. I used to be a volunteer with the Red Cross in Ethiopia. Here it keeps me busy, occupies my mind and distracts me from thinking too much of Gebrail, my brother. So I volunteer as an interpreter with Assist and City of Sanctuary and sometimes I can be called on to interpret in an emergency.

I applied for refugee status when I first arrived. I have been interviewed twice. The first time was by an immigration official in person. The second time I had to go to Bradford where I sat in a room on my own and was interviewed by Skype.

At the first interview there was an interpreter there in the room but I realised that it was better to speak myself as the interpreter didn't speak exactly my language and if you were talking a lot to the interpreter it looked as though he might be telling you what to say and you weren't telling the truth.

At the second interview, the young man on Skype was about my age. He did not want me to say too much. If I tried to give a longer answer to explain more information, he kept saying, 'No, that's alright you've told me enough.'

I am determined to retain my identity. I have often been told it would be better to say I am Eritrean rather than Ethiopian as Eritreans seem to have applications dealt with and accepted more quickly but I will not – I cannot -do that. I am here *because* I am Wolkayte Amharan, Ethiopian, so I cannot say I am not. I love my country – I hate its government but I love my country.

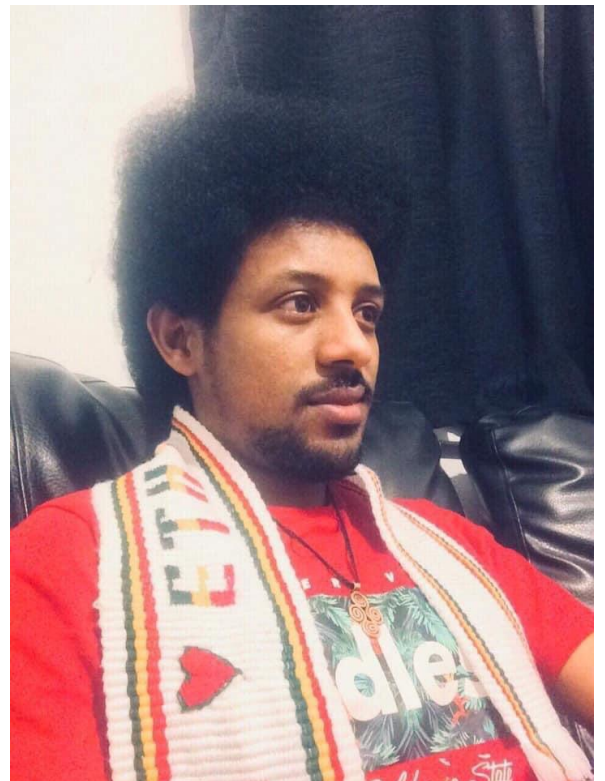
It is not easy to think about home. My mum is living in a very rural place, outside Abdurafi, on the Sudanese border, with my sister and my 12 year- old brother. The place of the woman in my culture means she is safe from revenge attacks but the police will still be watching my family from a distance and my brother will be old enough to be persecuted in 6 years' time.

The unpredictability of the future is very hard to live with. You apply for refugee status and you hear nothing. There is no explanation for the silence and no one tells you what stage the process has reached.

I know my brother is still in Libya and I have spoken to him once on the phone. For money, guards in his camp would allow him to speak on the phone. My brother said he was pleased it was me and not him who escaped as he wouldn't have been able to live with himself, being the older brother if he'd escaped leaving me behind.

When I arrived in Sheffield I didn't know anyone from my community. The four of us were from different countries, a Zimbabwean, a Pakistani, a Sudanese and an Ethiopian - but it helped all of us to improve and communicate in English as we had no choice, I was a bit confused at first especially when I remembered about my elder brother who is still in Binewolide/ Libya and all about my family especially my Mum's worry about us. At first I cried sometimes when it overwhelmed me, but then one of my housemates took me to Sheffield City of Sanctuary Victoria Hall migrant help centre. From there every Wednesday I have been getting practical help. There are free things available there like bicycles, solicitors contact, food bank referrals, haircut. Then after a couple of weeks I asked Mr. Craig B, who is the Sheffield Assist volunteers interpreting team co-ordinator, if I could be a volunteer as Ethiopian and Eritrean Language interpreter. Fortunately he said, "Yes why not!" very politely. He asked me to improve my English speaking and gave me a leaflet to go to "Learn For Life Enterprise". The receptionist there welcomed me and gave me an assessment to identify my level. I started the next day in a mixed class for level 1 and 2 Functional Skills English students.

In mid February, I witnessed that many Ethiopians are facing heartbreaking and very regrettable problems in the UK, but it's worse in some other European Union countries in terms of "Asylum rejection". They are left outside without shelter, the countries covering their ears. They are not ready to listen to the problems that we faced in Ethiopia. We are leaving our country because of local and federal government dictators' mistreatments and inhumane torturers; sometimes imprisoned with dangerous animals inside the prison; the raping of all genders inside the prison; systematic discrimination; dismissal from educational institutions when you oppose them; internal displacing - there are 3 million internally displaced Ethiopians according to



Amnesty international's and ICG's update. However, despite this terrible situation, when we come to Europe the governments say you are not telling the truth. I don't know why they refuse to listen.

Because of all this discrimination and application rejection, probably nearly 70% of Ethiopians are changing their identity and saying they are from Eritrea. This is heartbreaking & leaves them with deep regret and negative emotions. Although they are more likely to be granted asylum as Eritreans, they cannot celebrate Ethiopian new year, they cannot meet with large groups, cannot protest Ethiopia's government. They have taken this false Identity just for survival and to stay protected.

On the other hand I am happy to find myself in the UK and in Sheffield, a city of sanctuary. I am confident enough in terms of social interaction, understanding humanity, planning my future, living with different people. Since I started my class I have experienced diversity in Learn for Life. I have achieved Level 1 English Functional Skills qualifications and am hoping to achieve Level 2. The exam has been postponed because of the covid pandemic. I have improved my computer skills more than ever before. This will no doubt continue as I have got an 'Offer' from the University of Bristol. I am not sure of the Conditions yet but, I felt like I have been re-born.



For my city, Sheffield, I am contributing by using my English skills to help many Ethiopians and Eritreans, as I am one of the Sheffield Assist volunteers interpreting team for dual languages. They have helped me to join the community interpreting level 1 and 2 course. I have completed the course, I have got my level 1 qualification from WEA, I am waiting for level 2.

I have been getting more volunteer experience at Learn for Life Enterprise as a receptionist with the help of other volunteers there, until the Covid outbreak. When I keep my mind busy, I forget my stress, it almost evaporates from my mind.

In terms of living Income – honestly, it's not enough, especially in this Covid era. This is because we cannot get free internet, to improve our skills, to talk with our close families in case they lose hope about us when we keep silent.

It's not enough to buy some nutritional foods. I had to stop my Skype online class with my IELTS tutor because of lack of internet. This is frustrating because it prevents me from improving my skills and becoming more independent.

In terms of Asylum Application, I had to wait more than a year to get my big interview invitation from the Home Office even though I applied for Refugee status as soon as I arrived in the UK in August 2018. The Home Office invited me for the Substantive interview in November 2019 but as yet I have heard nothing from the government. I can understand this may be because of the effects of the global Pandemic, but I want to let

you know how, regarding Ethiopians Asylum application, human rights protection is sadly unanswerable and, while it remains in the office, it might be forgotten as the time goes on. I know many Ethiopians who have experienced the same. Ultimately, despite having a lot of evidence to support their application, they have changed their identity because of fear of rejection.

In terms of my accommodation, everything is fully supplied, and the quality is fantastic. If everyone had accommodation like mine, they would be lucky. I have my own living room and smart office!

In terms of knowing the British culture I have learnt a lot of things now from my teacher at Learn for Life. Whilst I feel safe here, I miss all of my family and hope we will see each other again.

Thank you so much for your help and understanding.