

Berhane

The Peace Messenger

The extraordinary life of Berhane Woldegabriel,
Eritrean teacher, journalist and bridge-builder

Edited by

Ali Hindi, Amanda Woolley, Amanuel Yemane,
Peter Riddell

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The editors request the understanding of contributors if their items have been separated into different parts of chapters, or different chapters, in order to observe the consistency of the narrative.

Editors' bios

Ali Hindi was born in Eritrea, but his family left almost immediately. He lived in Saudi Arabia until 1989 when he came to the UK as a refugee. Ali met Berhane in 2008 and became a member of the EEPT (Eritrean Education and Publication Trust), where he played a role in organising all the events the EEPT held in cooperation with IofC (Initiatives of Change). He also became a close friend of Berhane. Ali is a political analyst, specialising in African affairs. He is called on for interview by various television channels and media outlets. He is the Head of the African Study Unit in the Centre for Arab Progress.



Amanda Woolley worked in London for over three decades in adult education. At Kensington and Chelsea College in 1993, she met Berhane as a colleague and they became partners for many years. Amanda's interest in Eritrea led her to do an MA in Asian & African History at SOAS. Her work in education included literacy teaching, developing innovative programmes at the Workers Educational Association (WEA), running an inner-city centre at Morley College and organising IT training at the Refugee Council. Amanda was the first manager of the Quaker Centre at Friends House. She now lives in West Yorkshire. Having retrained, she works part-time as a bereavement counsellor in a Lancashire hospice.



Amanuel Yemane was born and brought up in Eritrea. He was a freedom fighter for the independence of Eritrea, and came to the UK in 1997 as a refugee. Amanuel met Berhane in the summer of 2000 through mutual friends and remained a close friend and colleague at the EEPT, a charity co-founded by Berhane in the mid-'90s. He is a chartered accountant and works as Head of Finance for a digital marketing company in the City of London. He is also treasurer for the EEPT in his spare time. He lives with his family in Greenwich, South-East London.

Peter Riddell's journey towards his two decades of close collaboration with Berhane started when he joined a student delegation to Egypt in the early 1970's. It led to a 40-year association with British-Arab Exchanges, hosting Arab students and young professionals in the UK, and accompanying the return visits of their British peers. This experience made him painfully aware of the British legacy of conflict and suffering in many countries. In response, he began to support outstanding peacemakers particularly in Africa and the Middle East. During the 1990s, Peter coordinated IofC's annual conferences on 'Agenda for Reconciliation' at Caux, Switzerland. Its weekly planning meetings took place in the IofC centre in London and it was there that his and Berhane's paths crossed...



Dedication

The editors would like to dedicate this book to
Berhane's children:

Yemane, Medhanie, Fewien, Hadish and Jonathan,
his grandchildren, Raphael and Abigail,
and his sister Haimanot and her family.

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Editors' Introduction

Berhane Woldegabriel (1946-2020) was an Eritrean who left his country as a refugee in the 1970s. He then worked for thirteen years in Sudan, for the magazine 'Sudanow' and for the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) resettlement programme for refugees. He had to leave his adopted country after his writing offended the Sudanese government, and as a refugee for the second time, he settled in the UK in 1990.

Already an experienced teacher and journalist, he worked for nearly thirty years in London, mainly as an educator, translator, and interpreter. He also became a dedicated peacemaker, using his great political understanding and interpersonal skills as a facilitator and conciliator amongst Eritreans in the diaspora and within wider refugee communities.

Berhane died in October 2020 following a diagnosis, four months earlier, of a brain tumour. Until his illness took hold, and despite the COVID lockdown, he continued the reconciliation work he had become renowned for. His death was a shock to all who knew and loved him. Many of his friends and associates from his decades of work in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan and the UK wrote and posted tributes and memories for Berhane.

The editors have linked many of these tributes with a description of Berhane's life and work. We hope in particular to show the unique skills that Berhane brought to his peace-making and to his work in general. As a person he is irreplaceable, but we have tried to describe his beliefs, approach and methods, which often went against the grain, in the hope it may encourage others to follow in his path. He was, in the words of his friend Mohamed Kheir Omer, 'a noble universal human being'.

This book provides a narrative of Berhane's life rather than being a biography. Although some recollections are intimate and heartfelt, it does not give a detailed account of his personal life. We have tried to avoid hagiography and give a rounded view of Berhane. Although he could be unpredictable in his approach to life and arrangements, we remember him as a lovable and modest man, noted for his warmth, erudition and wit. He had great insight, and the gift of being able to provide subtle encouragement to his many friends and to the groups he supported and developed. He loved people regardless of nationality and creed.

Eulogy

Dr Teame Mebrahtu

On behalf of all Berhane's friends in the UK

I have known Berhane for over a quarter of a century, as a displaced fellow Eritrean in the UK. Since then, we have had opportunities to know each other better and to deliberate on issues of national concern ranging from the politico-social to cultural and educational arenas.

The eulogy in Tigrinya highlights that Berhane was a man of diverse talents and abilities. These included being or becoming a consummate journalist, a committed educator, a conflict-resolver, a mouthpiece for the hapless Eritrean youth who perished in the sea at Lampedusa, a good listener and debater, a bridge-builder between and within communities (e.g. the Eritreans and the Sudanese in the diaspora as well as the ethnic minorities and the host society in the UK) and an empowerer of the voiceless and dispossessed diaspora youth.

When closely examined, these attributes and qualities reflect and demonstrate the underlying principles Berhane upheld as an individual and a professional. Some of these inherent values, as identified in the eulogy include justice, fairness, dedication, diligence, service to others, patience, empathy, listening without judgement and peace-making.

On the other hand, despite extolling his virtues, the poem gently chastises Berhane for not hanging on long enough to see the re-birth of Eritrea, for being easily fooled by the perpetual liar and arch-enemy Mr Mort, and for his haste to depart from the midst of his family and friends without saying good-bye!

May His Soul Rest in Peace. Amen.

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Dr Teame Mebrahtu is a former lecturer in Education and an author.

Chapter One

'This is why I am here, to help my people'

Berhane's service in the Mediterranean, 2017

In 2017, in response to the crisis of refugees crossing the Mediterranean in small boats to reach Europe, Berhane gave up his work as a sessional lecturer at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) and left his busy life in London to take on the role of cultural mediator for Save the Children.

For this role, aged 70, he trained at Dover in marine firefighting and learnt to roll off rafts into the sea. He made two tours in the Mediterranean on the SS Vos Hestia and was involved in the rescue of hundreds of refugees who were moved from small craft on the sea and transported to safety in Sicily.

Following Berhane's death, Gillian Moyes, Save the Children Team Leader on the Vos Hestia, posted this tribute on Facebook (20 November 2020):

Gillian Moyes

The Save the Children Search & Rescue team and the crew of the Vos Hestia would like to share our deepest condolences with Berhane Woldegabriel's family and many friends. We were shocked and so sad to hear of his passing. Berhane was a unique and highly valued member of our team in 2017, rescuing people attempting the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean Sea in unseaworthy boats.

Berhane's role was as a cultural mediator – he would go out in the rescue dinghy to make first contact with the boats and assure the terrified occupants they were now safe. Once on board ship he used his language skills in Arabic and Tigrinya to

support the medical team and protection experts to deal with critical cases. Many rescued people had been through unimaginable horrors, both in their countries of origin and on their journeys. He looked after their needs, listened to them, reassured them.

Berhane was by far the oldest member of our team, but he left most of us for dust when it came to energy! He kept fit by doing step-ups and pull-ups on deck and he was always willing to take the least popular 2am to 4am watch. When we had our first big rescue of people from Eritrea and Ethiopia he came into his own: 'This is why I am here, to help my people'. Berhane was warm, wise, and patient, a true gentleman. His humble demeanour betrayed his incredible life experience and achievements which emerged as he shared stories of his life with us. He was also a lot of fun and was not fazed at all to be hanging out with people less than half his age!

It may have been a small slice of his remarkable life, but Berhane's few months on board the *Vos Hestia* impacted many people including us, his teammates. We were truly privileged to know him. Rest in peace our dear Berhane.

Two other team mates on the *SS Vos Hestia* have shared their recollections of Berhane. Dimi Tomova is a nurse who has served on many Search and Rescue missions:

Dimi Tomova

I met Berhane in Catania at a casual meal for the team about two months before the expeditions. He arrived late and sat opposite me. I was very impressed that he decided to participate at 70. He was very enthusiastic, full of boyish energy. We found that we had the same Eastern Orthodox religion – he was only eating vegetables as he was fasting. We liked each other instantly.

On the missions, he did just about anything, as we all did. As well as his translation role, he helped me in the clinic. Sometimes when we had an influx of refugees, he would go amongst them, organise them and find out what they needed. He loved that and helping in the clinic.

He had this really relaxed laid back attitude. Some of my colleagues didn't like that as there was often a frantic pace going on. He was very efficient, nevertheless. He was respected by the team. He would go by himself and take his laptop, sitting quietly in the corner.

We had some really hard rescues, heart-breaking. He wasn't afraid of anything, pushing his limits. He was bold and experienced. We had great times. You have intense friendships on a mission. We had no opportunity to meet afterwards although we meant to. We used to chat on WhatsApp. I heard from Gillian that he had died. Because I couldn't say goodbye to him, I wrote to him on WhatsApp.

Louis Leeson, who joined the rescue ship as a photographer, recalls that on one such rescue, there were 800 refugees to bring to safety, and it took about twelve hours. On another, tragically, as he relates, the inflatable collapsed before the rescue party could save all those on board, and many drowned. The final act of the rescue divers from the *Vos Hestia* on each occasion was to sink the emptied inflatable boat that carried the refugees, or what remained of it, so that it could not be used again.

Louis Leeson

We first met when I came aboard the *Vos Hestia* in May or June 2017. I thought it was striking that somebody who would have been quite an old man at that point would undertake very physically and emotionally demanding work. I found that to be quite brave.