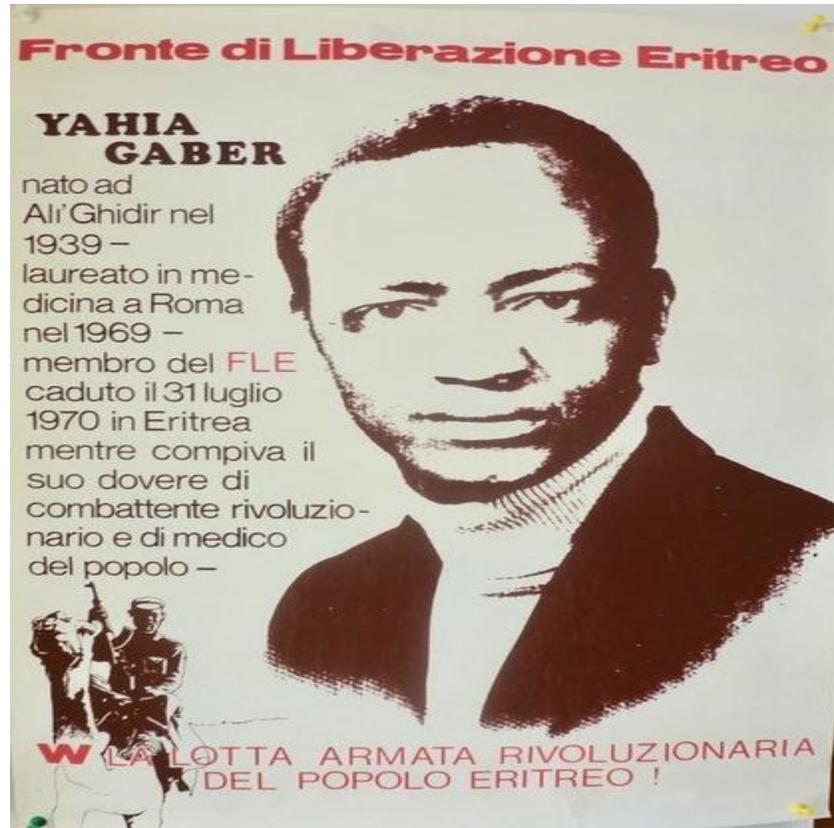


Dr. Yahia Jabir: An Eritrean saga



Friday 31 of July was Eid Al-Adha which also corresponded with the 50th anniversary of the fall of the first Eritrean doctor in the armed struggle. On the afternoon of a similar day in 1970, the young doctor Yahia Jabir Omer lost his life in a tragic and dubious incident. He had graduated from medical school in Bologna, Italy with distinction and was planning to pursue his higher studies in surgery. In the late 1960s, he had decided to visit the “Al-Medan”; or the field: the liberated and battlegrounds from which Eritrean Liberation Front (E.L.F) launched its struggle for national independence from Ethiopia. His visit came shortly after completing an internship in a hospital in Rome in the summer of 1969.

A year earlier, a French young woman who came to Rome to study the Italian language from Marseille met him. She had also met him before his departure to Eritrea in 1969. She did not know that she was seeing him for the last time. Both intimate friends posed for a photograph in front of the Italian Foreign Ministry building which was located next to the university dormitory. He looked tall, brown, and strikingly handsome, whereas she looked handsomely beautiful in her yellow summer dress.

Fifty-two years later, Madame Huguette Chapal-Ferrato called Radio Erena to introduce herself and the story of her friend, the falling Eritrean physician. She passionately, but persistently asked

that 31st of July should not pass without a special remembrance of this great Eritrean young man as she described him amid sobs and tears. In a legendary commitment to Yahia's memory, madame Ferrato recounted her impressions of him as being a democratic and open-minded character and she added that he embodied the aspirations and bright future of his country. "He had an unwavering devotion to his people and his country's cause" she added with perpetual affection. Reciting his story with the Ethiopian embassy in Rome, she said: "he did not yield to glamorous temptation." Eritrean sources have also confirmed that the Ethiopian embassy through a certain diplomat called Yohannes approached Jabir and offered him a high post in the Ethiopian ministry of health should he decide to leave for Ethiopia instead. He declined and was determined to Join his comrades instead of being an Ethiopian official in the Ethiopian capital. When the Ethiopian diplomat knew about his untimely death, he was stricken with sadness and said Yahia's death was a loss to Ethiopia.



Yahia Jabir Omer was born in Ali Ghedir a small but influential village in the Eritrean-Sudanese borders in 1938. He was born in a family wedded to the idea of free and independent Eritrea. His father was imprisoned for supporting the ELF. His brother Jaffer paid his life in the struggle, his brother Omer and his sister Zahra have both become iconic figures in the struggle movement. His extended family included national heavyweights such as Idris Osman Gelaydos a co-founder of ELF, ambassadors Musa Yassin and ambassador Mohamed Nur Ahmed, and many others. It was within this atmosphere of defiance and steadfastness that he opened his eyes. He completed his elementary school in the village and crossed the border to Sudan to study the Junior school in Kassala. For the secondary education, he joined Hantoub school, the Sudanese "Eton", where the influential elite graduated and played a leading role in the politics of the country. Former President Jaffar Numeiri, the Islamist political theorist and politician Hassan Al-Turabi, and

Mohamed Ibrahim Nugud the former secretary-general of the Sudanese Communist Party (S.C.P) and others graduated from Hantoub. Yahia graduated from Hantoub with flying colors and enrolled in the veterinary school of Khartoum University, which he soon deserted to study medicine in Italy.

In 1966, central and southern Italy were hardly hit with massive floods, along with tens of the medical students, Yahia worked as a volunteer to give medical care to the victims of the floods. As an ardent exponent of the national cause, he won abundant supporters for the Eritrean revolution, his efforts culminated in the establishment of the Italo-Eritrean Friendship Society which facilitated the visit of an Italian journalist to the liberated areas.

Doctor Yahia Jabir will always be remembered along with the legendary revolutionary doctors such as Steve Biko, the medical student activist who lost his life in the apartheid regime prisons in South Africa. Biko, who had been an active figure in the Black Consciousness Movement died at thirty-one, Jabir died at thirty-two and their celebrated mentor Che Guevara died at thirty-nine. His short life and glorious sacrifice had inspired madame Ferrato for so many years and no doubt will inspire many more in the future.

By Fathi Osman