

# CITIZEN ISIAS

In its 7th issue, the quarterly Eritrean magazine *Hwyet* interviewed President Isias Afwerki in his presidential office. In their introduction to the article which appeared under the heading of **Answers to UnExplored Questions**, the interviewers (4 individuals) provide a brief description of his spartan office, his jovial mood and then delve right into the interview.

While you read the following translation of the interview, please keep the following in mind:

A. The style of the conversation is classic "Eritrean field" and is, in many ways, unique to that culture. The sentences sound like imperatives: you come, you see, you conquer. Its aim is clarity, directedness and economy of words. If you are looking for rhetorical flourishes or if you are used to people who inject "I" in every sentence, or worse, refer to themselves in the third-person, you will be terribly disoriented.

B. To the extent possible, I have attempted to go for a literal translation. Words that appear in parenthesis ( ) are mine; words that appear in brackets [ ] were in the original *Hwyet* interview. It is said that you can tell a great deal by the words people choose and so my goal was accuracy. In this pursuit, I have, on occasion, mixed my metaphors. If you are a Tigrigna speaker, I wanted you to nod your head in recognition of what is being said; if you don't speak Tigrigna, my goal was to give you an accurate portrait of the president's choice of words, similes and expressions.

C. If you want to write *Hwyet*, their address is P.O. Box 5400, Asmara, Eritrea. If you like to encourage this kind of reporting, please call them at 161712. Or better yet, if you really want to encourage them, save that money and set it aside: I believe that they could be prevailed upon to accept donations.

*1 As fate would have it, you were forced to dedicate the greater part of your years to the (Eritrean) revolution and (the world of) politics. Are there other interests that bring you satisfaction and spiritual tranquillity?*

By nature, I dislike politics. Yes, people may be amazed by this. Why? To me, it is a duty: I don't engage in politics for the joy of it. There may be those

who do; (and) if you ask why (do I feel the way I do), perhaps it is a philosophical question. Perhaps it is the consequence of the nature or part of the nature of man. But if someone claims, "one engages in politics because one can always find pleasure in politics", I wouldn't agree with such a person. Nor do I have such a belief. (I believe that) there are things you do for the sake of ideology or the demands of a segment of your life.

Whenever Justice is missing in a society, it always grates on you. This is the case even in families.

While growing up, if you see many behaviors that conflict with your ideology or way of life, you will be forced to focus your attention on and deal with them at the expense of the activities and hobbies you are inclined towards. That is how I view politics. (But) if you ask me, "What is your interest?" I certainly haven't had the opportunity to do the things that stimulate my mind with anticipation.

I can't claim to have a talent for handicraft, scientific or artistic



activities. However, in the fields of literature, poetry, prose, drawing, sketches, although I cannot claim to be skilled, at least I would like to say I have an interest. (This is) because to develop a skill you must immerse yourself in the discipline. You must volunteer your time. Even if you are talented, you must be able to develop your talent. Since I never had the opportunity, I can't claim that given the opportunity, I have the talent. But I have an interest. This begs the question: have I balanced the obligation-driven politics and the interest-driven things I like to do? Is (the issue) settled? Have I satisfied both: the politics I am forced to engage in and my interests? If you ask such a question, since it (my time is consumed by) is all politics and I haven't satisfied my interests, I am always disappointed.

## 2 *Is there an interest that you have had the opportunity to develop?*

Well, now, that's the problem: like I said I wouldn't claim to have a talent for drawing but I dabble in it. To satisfy my urge and to escape the oppression of politics, I make an effort. What is always frustrating, though, is that you can't finish what you started. There are some incomplete works. There may even be some completed works. Occasionally, I try my hand in, for example, writing. But most of the time, it all depends on what mood I am in. For example, you are in a certain frame of emotion and you start writing. While in said frame of

emotion, you hit a well spring (of ideas) and substantial work pours out. On the other hand, there is your other life—of scheduled chores, politics, and struggle. A week later, you try to go back to finish what you started: you read it, you are absorbed in it but you are not in the same frame of emotion....therefore, since interests such as these are driven by mood, you can't finish what you started.

If, like a settling thunder, the situation calms down, maybe then can you reflect on it. But politics is so invasive you are never denied its intrusion and any opportunity for continuity is interrupted. If it was possible to go from one mood to another and to a third and then return back to the first mood, maybe then it would be a different matter. But the opportunity is never presented. Sometimes, I start writing poems; however, my (poetry-writing) skills vary with my moods. So, you assess the situation: you like the structure and the idea of the poem so much you say, "did I really do this? Or did I really conceive this?" Once you are in a different mood, although you still have the skill, you don't have the ability (to create). Because these kinds of hurdles proliferate high and low and create a sense of imbalance and predicament, I can't claim that I have generated or produced any known piece (of art).

It is disappointing that you can't do what you want to do. Take sketching for example: there is a piece I started working on while I was in the field. Because my work style is to juggle three to four tasks, I worked on it for four years; meanwhile, the

country was liberated and the piece was lost during the move. But believing that I shouldn't discard the idea (of the piece) and that I have to continue, I have, at the very least, tried to embark on the work but I have yet to finish it. If you ask me why, my political work hasn't afforded me the opportunity to do so. If you ask me what my plan is—had it not been for the increasingly demanding nature of politics—if I ever get any leisure time, I should be able to soothe the urges of the other (artistic) part of my life. My sense is: one day, it doesn't matter even if I get old, "I must soothe it." Perhaps this belief has endangered in me the attitude that (meanwhile) I can concentrate my strength by focusing on one thing (politics) and slighting the other (art).



## 3 *Do you envy the life of an ordinary citizen? And if so, what kind of citizen?*

That is where the problem lies. Because I don't like the life of the politician, I don't even like to live as a president. I view the life of the political man exactly like that of someone living in prison. You make excuses and you treat the excuses as justifiable reasons. This is because politics is a challenge. If I say, "Am I making a mistake or am I being forced into a situation (where I am making a mistake)? Am I speaking the truth or am I exaggerating?"—what is the answer? And the other part is: Can I engage in an excursion in an environment where I see vice



and things that make me sad? If you ask can I continue on this one journey to satisfy just this one need, (I will answer) it is my choice to go on this trek no matter how bitter. Perhaps over the years I have developed my endurance and my ability to continuously proceed on a journey to achieve an objective. If this were a world where justice reigned, (a world) without turmoil, (a world) without oppressors and (a world) where everybody behaved in a civilized manner, I would neither have wished nor contemplated the world of politics. I dare say that I would have gravitated towards my other interest. Perhaps the nature of its appeal is its impracticality; oh well, not all thoughts the occur to you are practical. Now, even if this ideal I described above is not achieved, if only society's condition were such that it did not nag your conscience, there would be no reason to endeavor in politics. Then you would pursue your other interests: whether you are an artist, a sculptor or an author; if that is your interest, you would try to satisfy or develop your sole individual need by allocating all your time to it and abandoning your role in the society. But, you start wondering, when all is said and done, is that how you savor life? If all you ate were sweet things that tasted like honey, would they continue to taste sweet? If you pursued only the things that interest you and you satisfied your urge, would you continue to enjoy the taste? Who knows; perhaps because you are on one part (of your life) and the other is missing and you cannot find it; so you just wish you could. If the other part (of your life) were placated, would

you still find satisfaction in everything? Maybe it can be explained emotionally or philosophically. But if you inquire about my current situation, because the political part dominates such a big share of me, I yearn for what I haven't found. And because I don't want to live this way, I would be happy to step out of my current circumstance. I don't think this is a matter of politics; it is a matter of conscience and philosophy.

#### 4 To what do you attribute your artistic inclinations?

It may vary with people but I would say most of it starts when you are young. If you ask why, there are some behaviors you show at an early age. If you take a retrospective view of your life, you will notice that the time you were inclined or disinclined towards particular interests is when you were young. If you had unlimited opportunities to pursue what you were interested in or (had the freedom) to not pursue what you were disinterested in, you would (naturally) pursue what you are inclined towards. In my environment, there were such influences. I cannot describe the influences in my household with any specificity because there were no influences that swayed me (in any direction.) But you have the opportunity to observe many things in your environment. In my case, ever since my childhood, I have always been attracted towards people's ability to create. When you see a device in front of you, you probe: "how did the designer put together this device? And how did he think

about it? And what is so unique about the inventor that made him think about and design it? Does this mean there is an inherent difference in people's abilities?" Then you develop an interest and conclude that inherent in you is not only a proclivity but also an inkling. You may try to develop this inkling but perhaps you don't succeed.

(Let's use this) as a point of departure: to evaluate these things, you can use the influences of the old educational system. For example, when we were in the fifth grade, there was carpentry (class). Back then you went downstream and gathered shrubbery; you pound it, you splice it, and then you braid it on your thighs until they turn red. Once braided, it turns to rope. This spurs the student's curiosity in a variety of things and it encourages his need to test and develop his ability.

There was also an agricultural discipline. Digging up greens kindles your curiosity. There was (also) a drawing class; while young, you engage in casual experiments. The educational system of the period encouraged the development and exploration of deeply buried interests in the things we have—and (things we) could talk about. I remember back then: you would bring a stone and you try with a pocket knife and as far as woodwork, you develop an interest as soon as instructions begin.

For some, because there is an element of repetition in the instructions, the subject may not be of interest. Perhaps it varies with different people. So, that was the environment under which I met and explored my



interests. Some people might attribute their artistic inclinations to (heredity): "because my father was a teacher—or because my father was an author or because my father was an artist—I inherited his talent." But that wasn't my experience; I attribute it to the environment of my childhood.

### 5 *Is there a time in your life you were so despondent you were driven to tears?*

Let me think about that. Since the discussion will revert back to politics, I can't recall a particular incident with any specificity. The reason is this: although I am multi-tasked, when it comes to emotions, there is one thing I am not skilled at: acting. In my political life, if something aggravates me, I cannot control it: I do not have the ability to control my emotions. (Whether it is) due to smarts or skills of self-restraint some people can do that (keep their emotions in check.) On many occasions when I speak with people, they tell me, "(now that) you are in the political world, you should present a more diplomatic image and act more diplomatically, etc." They tell me I should engage in more acting. (But) I don't do that. Now, it seems to me that my emotions have evolved with age. (By that) I mean things that used to sadden you when young, you get used to when jaded. But then when you look back and you know that you have changed. For example, the departure (death) of people with whom you were apparently inseparable prompts a certain feeling; but, what can you do? Considering our recent history,

(since) you cannot uncouple them you get used to them and a jaded emotional view is fostered. What is its benefit? It enables you to endure challenges and hardship but as it (endurance) is strengthened, normal human emotions fail. (And) you wonder, "what? Am I not human?"

What I am trying to get at is human behavior that used to instantaneously delight you or ignite your wrath does not generate the same degree of response with time. (Does that mean) you are getting wiser? Are you getting more cynical? You may be able to bring forth your own explanations but it varies.

Now, taken cumulatively (if I ask) "what is the period that most saddens me?" it is during the armed struggle (and specifically) at the time when I initially started thinking in a mature manner. Perhaps my peers have already expounded on this but when the eager illusion of our younger years about struggle and revolution (confronted reality)... [I don't want to discuss the politics of the Eritrean Liberation Front but we are headed that way]... it is sad, it is hopeless; it is disappointing. When you first come in you are stunned. Those of us who arrived from the city had not experienced (questions like): who is he? Where is he from? What is his place of origin? What is he? So-and-so is \_? When we were here— notwithstanding how passive or active our role—there were aspirations. But when you see the real situation of the struggle, disappointments were created. I can say that perhaps it had its benefits as well: because you are so stunned and shocked by the

behavior, you move in the direction of change and once in that stage you are obliged to work for change. That is what I think of: we were youngsters then and all youngsters have aspirations. I will tell you this; when I joined the armed struggle, when you ask questions—"Who is from where? Who was born where? Who is who? Who is whatever?"—what kind of world is that? If that was all there was to it, it wouldn't have mattered. (But) it led to bad things. You start contemplating this: "When we were in Asmara, we used to know one another, we had friends (and) we spent a lifetime without once asking, 'who is he? where is he from? where is his village? what is his whatever?'" But when you go there, you start ridiculing one another.

Is there a meaning to existence under these conditions? If you view people's emotions with this context in mind, some go the opposite direction and others try to find a way out. So, I recite this incident only because of its novelty; it doesn't mean it didn't happen again. With time it became more redundant and once (an incident is) commonplace, you don't notice it.



### 6 *When you first enlisted (in the revolution) what kind of vision did you have?*

That is something else; how would you define "Vision"? I venture to say that most of those who claim, "I had a vision" are just bragging. (As long as) you are human (and) you have a



mind and a conscience, there are certain things that put a demand on your conscience—no matter how mighty or feeble your mind is. And in society, just as I have been stating, there are certain things that please or displease you. Maybe you want to create equity between certain things. If you come to the issue of vision, there are some who make a claim akin to prophecy and holy books that, "The leader, so-and-so, had a vision when he was 10 or 12 years old." Personally, I can't logically claim that I had a vision. Perhaps throughout my life—my beliefs and acts—I had qualities that helped me discern right from wrong. But if you ask me, "how do you get vision?" (I would have to say) it develops with challenges. In my opinion, with the exception of God and Angels, there is no one who can create an extra-natural vision and those who say they can are vainglorious. If you relate it within the context of recent developments, it (vision) is something that can be developed over time; however, if you ask me what is the seed [ingredient] of vision I would say (you have a choice): as a human being you can lead a passive life tolerating everything in your environment. (On the other hand, there are) others rising up to the challenge and trying to change the environment. When people succeed in fashioning a character that complements the seed they are born with and learn from and apply them to their experiences, they can formulate a vision. But because it is hard to state that vision is perfect or categorical, if I were to claim that I had a vision in my younger years, I would be lying and not being truthful.

**7** If I can quote an article you wrote in January of 1967, you stated: "Mankind and Freedom are two inseparable gifts in the world. I would like to see freedom: if (it happens while I am) conscious, (I prefer that it be) in my country; if (it happens while I am) unconscious, I prefer that it be in the hereafter. I will pave the way that will enable me to see freedom in this life." Now, isn't this a vision?

As an example, I will mention something I had never spoken about. Back then, there was a great deal of construction of churches and mosques. I don't remember why I would notice this. I wrote a column where I asked, "why is money being collected to build or beautify churches and mosques? Why can't schools be built? Or why not create enterprises that develop man's intellect and abilities?"

Wondering that may be I was being a smart-aleck, I presented it to my older brother to critique it. When he told me it was fine, I gave it to the editors of *Hibret* who tossed it aside without even giving it a glance.

**8** When was this? Maybe late '62 or early '63. So now, what is the meaning of freedom? I can't claim that my comprehension of freedom was the same as the currently accepted political meaning. Just like the example I gave above, there are certain things you would rather see or not see in your lifetime. Was the building of the institutions (that I mentioned in the column)

any of my business? To herd people like that is, even in childhood, a matter of predisposition.

Why doesn't mankind choose a simple life? Why do other inter-related and complex things affect your way of thinking? What does it mean to live a simple life? At a certain age, man wants "bigger things": a fancy house, a fancy car — perhaps at this stage, he had basic things he held in high esteem. So you get puzzled and wonder: why isn't life simple? Why are there all these obstacles in life? Why do you constantly encounter only things that trouble you? If you see it in this manner, since the problems of the spiritual life are different from those of the material life, to be unfettered (from these burdens)—perhaps you need political freedom to be free—but to live as a liberated man, it seems to me, it is not only a matter of overcoming the social, political and economic burdens but also the other factors that clutter our world and thus must be sorted out. Hence, what you see as freedom in this life or, if there is such a thing as an after-life and you seek freedom there, I feel that you must tie up these loose ends.

I don't think it is correct to say that my way of thinking back then was political. Because, as I stated earlier, since you continually strengthen, refine and develop your philosophy, viewpoint and dispositions, how can I relate what was said back then with the current situation? How do I compare my perception of freedom at that age with the veritable freedom now? If you ask me, "does a speech from that era have any meaning to me now?" even if I



can't categorically say, "it doesn't", I can't claim that it has the same meaning.



**9** So far, the history of Eritrea has just been skimmed at the surface. But the deepest and most profound parts of our history are buried deep in our hearts. Considering that our history is a glorious example of patriotism and sacrifice and given that life has no guarantees, why is it that Eritreans, including yourself, haven't embarked in writing our history? And what are the plans for the future?

Again, we are going back to politics. I have a reason for hating politics. Certainly, (politics) is an obligatory means to a desired end. Now, I want to speak to you about history. There are those who claim to be historians—writers and translators. Especially with respect to our struggle, a great many things can be written. One of the things that frequently makes me laugh is the writing of some Ethiopians who claim to be historians. I see it as if they are mocking our people and playing with our minds. For example, there is this so-called author whose name is Misgina...

*Mehari Misgina..*

Yes, Mehari Misgina squandered his time in Khartoum (Translator's Note: the translation here is especially inadequate. This sentence is said with an air of irony: How can someone write the history of Eritrea based in Khartoum, Sudan. In Tigriña: Mehari

Misgina Khartoum Kerteme). Adolescence! A Chinese (historian) uses words that you could—after considerable effort—decipher but what would be the point? One could say that this (historian) is on the furthest extreme. There are other

authors [whose names I do not wish to mention] who have written about the struggle and political conditions. You read their books to enhance your knowledge of our neighboring countries: the existing Iranian situation, the recent Afghanistan situation or for an explanation of the changes that occurred; (And then) you try to relate it to your situation. At times, these people write about the history of the Eritrean struggle and when you read what they have written it is based on a two-week expedition. It is hard to understand who or what their sources are. Even if you look at the books cited as references, who encouraged them to be the authorities of our history? What did the author rely on when writing our history? Because they are seen as sages and experts, their work enjoys (broad) distribution. The net effect is that they undermine your confidence in all their work: if this is how they write, then what they wrote about any other country is meaningless, too. When authors like these say we would like to write about your situation, you just enjoy a concealed smile. But, what are we lacking? Is it because we don't have the ability? Or is it because they (the non Eritrean historians) have a more lofty opinion of their ability? Is it because we are so immersed in our condition 24 hours a day that we are unable to notice it and thus we were and we are unable to write it—and so they have to write it for us? It is one

of those things that you say, "one of these days, when we have the time..." you just smile, and you let it pass. It is one of those frustrating things.

In politics, you can't write the whole truth; you can't explain all your views. If you are an author, you have unlimited freedom. If you write about things unrelated to politics—because you are not treading on things we spent a lifetime on—there are no reins: you can gallop all you want. You can widen your horizons and you can let your creativity spill over. And the writing doesn't rein you in. But if you want to enter the domain of political history or write about politics, well, perhaps the heroic account is not very controversial and you can write about it. But you don't want to say much about the web-like path and tangle of politics because what would be the conclusion? There are concessions [compromises] you have made as a means to help you achieve your goal but, without that context, (if you judged) the means alone, they would not please your conscience and, truth be told, they may telegraph messages that you should not reveal. If you are to speak about ordinary people candidly and truthfully, since it prolongs an issue and the harm outweighs its benefits, after a while, you choose to not even talk about it. So, no harm will be done if that issue is left unexplored.

Perhaps your conscience will not be completely mollified. But left unexplored, no harm is done. If, for my own self-interest or my desire of authorship, I write down everything, ultimately, what is the gain? And because you don't see any, you leave it



alone. Besides, there is the hardship (of writing).

I always think about that. Leaving aside the things I said we should let be or shouldn't disclose, (if you ask the question) compared to our other trials and tribulations how much have we pinched off?

The answer is so insignificant as to be meaningless. If you ask me, "what can you do about it? what is your role?" maybe you will think I am trying to hoodwink you but there is a thing I like to fool myself with. Perhaps you would (understand this) if you can see it in an artistic context: Let's say Michael Adonay does what I cannot do: he designs a beautiful drawing. (In this case,) I would feel that he had just helped me in wholly satisfying my artistic yearning. Compensation is what I would feel.

I know that I will not satisfy my interests for writing and my artistic inclinations due to insufficient skill, lack of experience and dearth of time; but I still feel satisfied when I see other people's work. So, instead of seeking a performing role for myself I am leaning towards a nurturing role towards other people. Let's talk about historical novels...for example, there is a book out on the commando attack in *Senbel*. What is the gist of its content...etc? I wouldn't say it is perfect. But it satisfies our emotional need: it has taken a parcel of our history and told it. It would be nice if more of those kinds of efforts would be put forth. For my part, I was around and I, as well as others, know a great deal (about the struggle). (But then) there are others who know even more than I do; I

can't fault them for not writing. There now are young, artistically-talented reality-based writers who have a real aptitude and who want to dig up (our history). The doors should be wide open for these youngsters.

One way or another, their (story) should be presented. My role and the role of people like me is no more than to cooperate—but you can't expect more than that because it is frustrating. (Yes,) I can recall some episodes of our history; and I must say, if you ask me, "what (qualities) do I admire most in people or what am I most grateful for?" it is when people do things better than I can do them or when they can do things I cannot do. You truly feel satisfied.

Therefore, the telling of history must be possible. Most of the time, the problem is those who make history are not good at explaining it. This is my experience. (This is due to the following:) Either they are not in a (mental) mode to explain it or they have no ability to explain it. So the history that they made must be reflected on another mirror, recorded by another camera or explained by another mind. For my part, it wouldn't be hard...you know...I would try my best...but there are more talented writers than me. So, we lean towards encouraging other people. Encouragement should not be an individual task: it is a collective duty. It is not going to stay buried for long.

If you reflect on our years of experience, it is, without any exaggeration, more profound than any other people's history. It makes you wonder: "What did so-and-so's country ever accomplish? What did that country ever do?" This is

because you know the content (of our history) thoroughly and, with time, you learn of the history of others. Although unspoken and unwritten, our history is peerless. So, is it going to remain buried? Maybe because people come and people go and the interest varies with time but in the end just as the unmourned death is twice as painful, I believe there should be closure on this issue. But perhaps in the past few years [and I am not trying to institutionalize it] but if the money, the time and the supportive service could be found, it would be very helpful if we could encourage those who have an interest in writing history. They could assemble and divide their labor—or even on an individual basis [it doesn't necessarily mean they should organize]—they could help one another in telling what haven't been told and explaining what hasn't been written. Sometimes I wonder: "if all our history was written and prepared, would the new generation find time to read it? And once they read it, what kind of imprint would it leave on them?" Because I view this (the writing of history) as a precondition in maintaining the continuity of our country and because I view it as the responsibility of our youth, every citizen and society in general, it is one of the frustrations of my life. But you can live with it. You should give thought to this subject.



**10** *You weren't married until 8 years after the ban on marriages during the struggle was lifted. Why did you wait so long? How about now: do you have the opportunity to spend time with your family? If so, how?*

Is it hard to know what is sweet about life? It is not hard. But to taste the sweetness of life, you must have the ability to be pragmatic. It seems to me, if you do that, you can lead a balanced life.

If we come to my private life, over the years I have developed a knack for concessions; thus, what is 'perfect' has been personalized. Since I don't believe that I can find what is 'ideal', and because our lifestyle is replete with commotion and because huge concessions are a normal part of our life, which one should be my ideal: what I want in a dream-like fantasy or what I can actually find in this life? If you choose the pragmatic, what you actually find is what satisfies you. If you really meditate on this, that is what brings you the most satisfaction. So, because I accept this as my standard for satisfaction and because I don't long for anything more, I can (more easily) endure the burden (of not having what I want). Let me give you an easy example: When rest-time is available on weekends or annual vacations, I say that there should be an opportunity where you can have time-off for yourself and your family—a time-off that is without telephones, without chores, without reading and worry-free. Perhaps that is one of the things you yearn for

during the armed struggle—and if you made it through the (armed) struggle. Instead of worrying about one issue for 24 hours, you want to allocate some time for your personal and individual needs. But I don't think that there was an environment conducive to that in the last four years. And because this denial from pursuing your individual and personal goals is continuously reinforced, you get frustrated. Eventually, however, you end up where I mentioned previously.

You live with constant concessions. If you ask me, "Is there anything in your private life that brings you extreme satisfaction?" I wouldn't even think of expecting that in the future. But that is a good measure. Going home after having worked all day and (let's say) I have some (home)work to do, why don't I say this time is for me to spend with my children and family even if it is just for a moment - 2 to 3 minutes, an hour or two: it that is all I have, I should settle for that.

But that's not all. Maybe there are many other issues outside this subject. For example, I want to read a great deal; I want to read about topics outside of politics but cumulated chores await. A book that should take you 6 to 7 hours to complete takes you a week to two weeks. Sometimes you toss it aside before you are done. (Comparing) the time you spend for your personal and family life with the time-dominating issues, you grow dissatisfied and since there is no perfectionist who can claim to be a perfectionist, perfectionism becomes perfectionist. But eventually you

end up making concessions and compromises.

I would say that in my private life, so far, I haven't had many difficulties. It is a matter of training. With practice, you can learn to get used to and endure it. I am a strong believer in meditation. I mean, for example, (if) it is commonly accepted that something cannot be done, I must believe that it can be done. Even if I have a little doubt, I must convince myself that it can be done. (And then) I must scrape off the source of this tiny doubt and discard it. (If you do that) you will accept (as fact) whatever you are meditating on. I would say that I have developed pragmatism into an art form. And so, I can say that I have found harmony between my personal life and the obstacles of my life.

**11** *What, do you believe, is behind the power that has enabled you to become an able leader?*

As I said before, I'd say that it could be having the (right)ingredient. Another cause, perhaps, is the ability to learn and, it seems to me—a skill learned over a period of time—the ability to quickly adapt to changing circumstances. As I stated before, there are many vain people who would say, "I am gifted naturally" or whatever. Maybe there is a kernel of truth in that. But the truth, it seems to me, is this: it is a skill developed over time. I don't believe that the capability to be in my current position of responsibility was ingrained in



me. It is attributable to one thing: learning. Do people, in their own way and with their relative ability, try to forge a relationship (between motivation and learning)? And will you try to combine motivation with it (learning) and work on it? In my view, there is nothing that can't be known. Mystification is the confusion of knowledge. If someone tries to mystify what is knowable, he is a coward. (Just) like what the Italians used to do: they would hire a trainee and, anxious that he would learn their trade, they would be vague (with their instructions).

I hate mystification. Perhaps (their behavior) was for economic reasons: maybe their view was if someone learns my trade, he will displace me. But the worst aspect of that is its effect on the human spirit. In my view, there is no knowledge in this world that should be hidden from even the so called "below-average person." If you want to learn something, (three things are a must): desire, concentration and discipline. If you say, "how did someone know this", I would say, "it is due to the serenity of his mind or the advanced stage of his consciousness." Some people may try telling you, "this one is bright; the other one is not bright." For example, take two individuals who are equally bright, equally eloquent, and of equally developed brain. (Stipulate further that) they are all focused on one thing. Now, perhaps one has a divided interest or is not engaged in single-minded concentration or, relatively speaking, he doesn't have the desire for it. So, their ability to observe, enjoy or understand...

concentrate. You must consider all variables involved.

The point I am trying to make is that education is limitless. Unless there are worries and harassment that pester your mind, (and) if you practice regardless of whether you like the subject or not, there is no reason why you can't master the skill that you want in an hour, in a day, in a month or in a year. The way I see it, political work is the easiest work. There is nothing easier than it. People may think that it is hard work which can be performed only by a select few. But the easiest work is that of politics. Perhaps trying to understand the concept of me squared is hard. Maybe that requires intellectual effort, concentration and pre-requisites. And you don't easily acquire that. The knowledge you are expected to acquire in physics (and) in mathematics and other physical sciences is extensive. It is a ladder that requires a step-by-step knowledge accumulation. But politics, in my opinion, is the easiest exercise. If you say, "But how did you get there? Was there some force that pushed you forward?" Like I said earlier, what causes the need for politics? To some, maybe it is like art: an artist is content when he draws, and, thus, he is attracted to his work. And even before he gets started on a piece of paper, on a canvass, on a rock or a piece of wood, there is something that has originated in his mind. Maybe it is an abstract work and he makes the transition to a sketch; then he makes some corrections—but it is still a draft. Once he gets started he continues to work

make further adjustments. I don't think that you can find that kind of satisfaction in politics and the skill required is minimal. I wouldn't say it (politics) requires any thinking and so I don't consider my work as a big deal. I can't say there is any force that is pushing me forward or motivating me. Maybe I can be pragmatic. I ask myself, "do I have political ambition?" -- I don't know, but I don't believe so. Maybe it is not realistic to expect an accurate self-assessment. But if you say, "does it require ambition to do this kind of political work and to be in this position of responsibility? Does it require charisma? Is it driven by necessity?" I would say, "perhaps it is necessity...." My view is this: it is necessity that shoves you until you bounce, ricochet and rebound to a certain stage. (If you believe the alternative view, it means that) you enjoy going against the storm and that you revel in pursuing a winding road; I view that as insatiability. I don't even think that that is normal. (But) the ability to bounce and rebound from many challenges and arrive at a certain stage requires very little art. And because conditions force you, conditions shape you as well. And, at long last, you accept reality. But those who dream of politics since childhood and strategize and plot ways—by becoming a lawyer or studying law and then, it is said, arriving at a certain (political) stage—I don't think that is how most people get there and, besides, I'd say that that is not terribly healthy.





## 12 *How did you feel when you visited your home and neighborhood in Asmara after so many years of absence?*

I would have to say that maybe as a gauge of happiness, by comparing it—to the best of my ability—with the moment of other people's happiness, I dare say that that was the apex of my happiness. Of course, you have to set aside the question of what are the gradations (of happiness)? But one of the things that I understood back then was that there are challenges; what I am saying is this: because, along with the intense feelings, I noticed unrealistic and exaggerated expectations, maybe initially my hesitations paralleled my happiness. (But) just like anybody else, there are many individual things (that you see); sights you could not find but could only long for (or) dream about during the struggle. For example, your childhood neighborhood, your family, relatives and friends; incidents that have grown hazy with time—nonetheless remembered for no apparent reason; the people and the surroundings you remember... seeing (all of that) comforts you. In my opinion, happiness is related to that (comfort). The dream became reality and freedom was achieved. (Generally speaking) recalling the feeling of going back to your family and the people you know and the surrounding that left an indelible print in your mind is

not easy; however, because the experience was so recent, it is not hard (to recall the feeling). On the other hand, when I think back I have to, for the most part, conclude that the mind is a riddle and a mystery. Maybe it is a matter of perspective but objects that you used to think as big... images, after years of idleness in your mind, had assumed a certain proportion; then, after a prolonged period, you go back to see these objects and there is a big gap. For example, streets that I used to think of as wide, when I see them now I wonder is the discrepancy a matter of relative proportion or is physical size relative to brain capacity or is it something that has changed recently or are the two images completely different. You can't comprehend it; and likewise with people's emotions: the feeling you experience while eagerly anticipating something cannot be compared with the sensation of actually experiencing it. Hence, at times you feel that living in an ideal world is sweet. If you add a few spices to the ecstasy of the moment, you get reality. That is the feeling I had then.

13 *Next question: I would like you to compare two stages of your life. Would President Isias recognize Isias the student? And, what would you tell him?*

He is an absolutely different person. Maybe it is schizophrenia; it happens. What was the 25-year-old Isias like? If you had a camera—not a still picture but a moving one—and it was possible to record

every minute and every hour of the mind of the then-Isias and you were to ask me now, "Is this a part of you? Is it you? Is a part of your life?" I would say, "It is different. That is a different kind of person; that is not me." If you ask me how would you associate the Isias of the time with the current Isias, it is very fascinating, indeed, very captivating. At times, I try to do that. Just like the metamorphosis of a butterfly: from an egg to a caterpillar and then to a butterfly; my transition is such that if you ask me what connects the Isias of then with the Isias of now, perhaps there is a shared trait and experiences or even biological link (created by the) the continuity inherent in the restoration of the flesh and spirit. But, if you approach it from a philosophical and scientific perspective, the Isias of the time is completely different; I mean, I feel like they are two detached entities.

Certainly, (since) there should be freedom of expression, someone may have a view that differs from mine and another one may have yet another viewpoint; but that is how I see it.

14 *What do you miss about the 20-year-old Isias?*

The thing I hate about politics is one of its least important aspects—it is that you have to be talkative. I used to not like to talk. Now, it is true: I do talk—but that is only because I have to.

But I used to be a very quiet person. (Even) when people



conversed, I didn't like lengthy speeches. Besides, I didn't want to speak; I just wanted to listen. And, it seems to me, I had a very keen sense of observation. If only one can revert back to that... (but) these days, when someone, stretching his hands hither and yonder rambles on with no inhibition, is it possible to be quiet? You speak because you are forced to. And because your speech is a duty-bound and not a matter of choice, you may not regret your speech but you will say, "I wish I had not been forced to speak." So now when you ask, "how was the Isias of then", I'd say (he was) quiet, reserved and someone who did not like chatting—not even an interest towards it. I've always viewed silence as wealth. But now, someone brings a newspaper, another brings a speech and since it is all speech, (and) because it is (all) politics what can you say? It teaches you what you don't want to be taught. If you ask me who did I want to converse with back then, (I'd say) with books. Maybe that is what everyone was doing: but because I enjoyed silence so much, (I did) what sustained my goal of silence: You go to *Kagnew* (American military station). There they had discarded books you could buy for 15 to 20 cents; you choose 3 to 4 of the better ones and you read (them). It (reading these books) may not help you in extracting any knowledge but at least it diverts you from having to speak with people. There is nothing to talk about. Maybe some will interpret this as negative but I feel it (reading) is like an illusive or irrevokable wealth.



## 15 Those who know you say that you were a city boy.

This city? [Laughs...] It is like this: people's interpretation of being a "city boy" varies. Many of our peers and the generation before us and the generation after us—each one has his own conceited view of the city. When someone is reputed to be "*Wedismera*" (son of Asmara), he doesn't want to give anybody else any credit. He will say, "Who else is *Wedismera*? Who but me knows its nooks and crannies and its culture and what-not? Who knows it as I do?" However, the truth is, every youth has his own neighborhood—his very own territories; surroundings he frequents and surroundings he avoids; people he knows and people he visits. If you are an attentive person, you can learn of many things—even from a distance. So, what does it mean to know Asmara?

Do you have to be *Wedismera*? Since those from *Debozito*, *Bashawil*, *Arballe Asmera*, *Akhria*, *Gezabanda Tilyan*, *Combishtato* (Asmara neighborhoods) had their own agenda [laughs], one can't brag to the other. If you ask me which was my favorite, there was one area where the youth congregated that used to appeal to me. I attribute this to the fact that practically everyone had his own turf wherever he grew up at; we had our turf. There is some nostalgia to it. Maybe there were some places I didn't get to when I was young that I

visited after Independence. Is it a must that to maintain my credentials as *Asmarino* (a term of endearment for people raised in Asmara) I must caress every wall, every street and every hideaway so I can brag about it? First of all, I don't see the point in that. Secondly, it can't be done—there is a limit to it. For example, it is possible that someone who was born and spent a limited—ut not his entire—time in Asmara may have visited places you didn't, was presented with opportunities you weren't; and so, what is so admirable about being able to associate these disparate components? Someone who says, "back then I used to dance (visit dance clubs) and I used to do this and that..." may have the belief that he had Asmara in the palm of his hands...

Let me tell you a thing:

One of our friends who left Asmara a long time ago has been living in America for 28 to 29 years. Although born and raised in Asmara, he doesn't know Asmara all that much because all he knew were the streets and surroundings between his home and his school. When he was abroad, one of the braggarts asked him, "Do you know of *Bar Portico*?" So when my friend responded, "Where is *Bar Portico*? I don't know." The man replied, "How can you claim to have been in Asmara if you don't know *Bar Portico*...". What does it mean to be an Asmaran? Must you know *Bar Portico* to be Asmaran? [laughter]. I guess you can view it that way. Personally, I know some areas (in Asmara.) But I can't claim that I know (Asmara) more than anyone.



**16** *The question of what is behind your strength generated a response of a solely political nature. Your other talents are more important and more poignant than your political ones. Could you answer the question from a different perspective? You have spent your whole life in the (revolutionary) field: to experience the hardship; to step over a blaze; to develop a social work ethic; to take a firm stand against what is wrong... all of that requires strength, where did you get the strength to do that?*

I think, as I mentioned previously, it is my disposition for or habit of reading. For example, when the issue of Economics is brought up, there are challenges we now encounter we hadn't foreseen before we arrived at this stage. I don't accept the proposition that that there is a limit to knowledge or that there are any impediments that would limit anyone—even a below-average person—from having a deep and detailed comprehension (of any subject). Maybe just because someone has studied various disciplines at school, he might feel that he has a thorough understanding of a subject...but, for my part, one of the traits I have developed is the belief that casually browsing through magazines or acquiring superficial knowledge serves only to confuse you. So you know what I do? If I want to study a subject [and it doesn't mean I like the subject], but whether I like the subject or not, if I decide to study a subject, I must know even the most minute portion of the study. I apply the same process when

attempting to answer questions posed in other fields. For example, when we first came here 4 years ago, what were the challenges we encountered? Maybe I can enumerate them and if I ask myself, "what have I done to overcome these challenges and enhance my knowledge?" (the answer is) I have been bouncing from one book to another in an attempt to explore what can be explored—that is my nature. You try to widen your horizon; settling for half-baked ideas bothers your conscience. Likewise with other subjects: to master my vocations, if an issue is brought up, I must be able to have an exhaustive knowledge about it. If not, I shouldn't even (feel qualified to) talk about or work on it. I have no illusions about being an expert but at least I should know enough to communicate about it. Whenever someone talks about a subject, I have a belief that I ought to know the (particular) subject. Let me give you a simple example: the word 'management' is frequently bandied about. Because those who claim to know the subject are prone to mystification and because, on the other hand, my knowledge of the subject is very little, I ask myself, "what should I do?"

Well, I must explore, read and venture into the related literature, books and experiments on the subject. I have no teacher; there is nobody available to tutor me. Most of the time, the problem associated with this (self-directed study) is vocabulary and terminology. For example, what is the now-fashionable concept of 'total quality management'? What is the mystery behind *total quality management*? So I read, perused

and pored over the subject and, ultimately, to my amazement I found out that it is exactly the management technique we had been using in the field. But because the concept of '*total quality management*' is something that uprooted the previous method of management and was developed over the last 10 years, I (was able to) read about it in great detail.

What could be easier than this? Not only can anyone read and understand it, he can make it relevant to his experience and even add to it. If you ask me, "So, what is the relevance of management to our life?" I can't claim to be an expert or a sage but, without exaggeration, I can state that I know enough to communicate with people. Some phrases and expressions may mystify people—and I do hate mystification a whole lot. My question is: what is the big deal about such a simple concept? Isn't this (total quality management) what was being practiced by every line leader, team leader, crew leader and every small branch leader? He may not be able to explain the theory but, in practice, it is something he has been accustomed to and capable of. He does have the ability. Ultimately, because there is redeemable experience and underpinning of management, you conclude, "Why can't everybody else—whether in government or outside—learn this?" I can cite economy as an example.

What is economics? What is *macro-economics*? *Micro economics*? The laws of economics are very challenging. (But) you have to know something about them—and by that I don't mean the shallow



type of information you find at magazine stand—you have to try and seek deep knowledge. So whatever the subject, if you have an interest the solution is to read and read and read. If I had a plea it would be "If you have the time, read. And when you read, (read as) if you are trying to explore a subject to its core; knowledge is bottomless and you cannot exhaust it in your lifetime. Reading is highly beneficial."

So, perhaps, this is the motivating power behind me. And if you ask me, "what is the power that guided you into arriving at this stage?" or how did I acquire my diverse skills, it is the way I have described. There are different books for different stages; there are books you read although they have nothing to do with your job. If you have the freedom to swim wherever you want with no one to restrict you and if you can have a library at your home, there is no reason why you can't explore it. Especially now that technology is highly advanced, reading books is on the decline and this (technology) is making learning and acquiring

knowledge fairly easy. Instead of going to the library, you can read at home; instead of carrying and flipping the pages of your book, you can sit back and browse a computer—it even expedites your work. Because the environment is getting more user-friendly, there is no one who is incapable of learning. If you have the desire, the concentration (and) the discipline—and, as always, the time—it is best to continuously read because knowledge is infinite. Ultimately, the question is not whether you have the ability or not; the question is: "how were you able to meet the demands of the position of responsibility you have assumed or why is the quality of your work up to the desired standard". It seems to me, the strength is (derived from) education or reading.

[Laughter] I'd say that if someone doesn't go through that stage, he is either carved of stone or is lethargic. (But) do you ever find the radiant things you dream of? As I said earlier, dreaming of things you can't realize is sweeter than achieving them. [Laughter] But, think about it, I am human—I can't lie and claim that I will try to be an angel or whatever; it is natural. Once you are of a certain age, the thought crosses your mind but, for a number of reasons, you can't get it. So, it is not just one; I have many images in my mind. And if you ask what does it all mean, it is just a part of our life.

(It is) part of our journey; it is natural. And once you treat it as something natural, you make room for it in accordance with the norms of society. But, as human beings are apt to, when you converse with yourself, they (these memories) are part of your life. It is not just one; I have many images in my mind. [Laughter. Thank you].

17 Last question: In your teenage years, prior to your enlistment, did you have a "glowing girl" friend that you had a crush on?

## The Evolution of The ELF.

