

Transcript for Oral History Interview

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Interviewee's name: Tegest Kebede

Interviewee's Country of Origin: Ethiopia

Introduction: This is an interview with Tegest Kebede conducted by Abel Dereje. In this interview, Tegest describes living in Ethiopia as a child and her personal experiences with the Derg, the military junta that ruled the country from 1974 to 1991. Tegest also speaks about her education in Ethiopia, the ways that her family helped her move to the United States, and how she learned English.

Key Words: Ethiopia, Derg, school, politics, religion, language, family, visa

Abel: Hi, I'm Abel Dereje and this is my mother, Tegest Kebede.

Tegest: Hi.

Abel: Um so, mom, I'm going to be interviewing you on uh your experiences of coming from Ethiopia to America.

Tegest: Okay.

Abel: Uh, so first of all, what kinds of things did you hear about America growing up?

Tegest: Oh yeah, um I heard a lot of good things. Um, so um, my two—my aunt—my aunt's two daughters and one of her son lived here, and they live a good life. Um I'm seeing picture but, uh you know, it was nice and I really wanted to come here after I finish my school.

Abel: Okay. Uh, did you already—oh, well so you already had family in America, uh and did uh they help you out when you were here?

Tegest: Yes, they help me. Uh, even to come [to the US] they help me.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: Yeah, they pay my ticket, they—they help me with the process to come here. Yeah.

Abel: Okay. Um and were you allowed to practice your religion when you were in Ethiopia without any problems?

Tegest: Yes.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: But the—the only problem is um we can't—um, we don't have to be in trouble like in the politics [tried not to get in trouble for political reasons]. Other than that, all Ethiopian people, most of them, are Christian. We can practice our religion.

Abel: Okay. Well, that's good. Ah, well, so um going more about the Derg, did they take away anything from your family while, uh, while you were there?

Tegest: Yes, they did. So, um my—my father was uh working. He used to work in the bank. Uh, the—the bank director was, uh, he was—I was a kid, I don't know what's going on, but um he was in jail. Because of that, my father was out of the job, and then the Derg took uh my, um, my grandparents' land, um. And um they took my father's house too because he's out of the job. So, so much—so much change happened to me especially.

Abel: Wow.

Tegest: Yeah.

Abel: Okay um. And uh so when—how was your family doing more like financially when the Derg were around? Like, you know, how were you guys?

Tegest: So, um, so what uh—after the—the everything gone, my father lost job and um we were devastated. So, we don't have any support, and because of all that my dad has left, left the town, and we don't know where he was. So, we was—my mom was struggling a lot. I was the only kid at the time, and um. So, uh my dad's family uh was [doing] better. They have uh, you know, they were rich, I mean not rich-rich, but they have that better than my mom, so um my mom asked for help. So, what she can do, maybe if they can help me and my aunt said, you know, "If you don't mind, uh can she stay with me." So, she have her own like one—three kids, so I was went there and I was the fourth kid and um it was okay for a moment, but at the time, until I get to middle school, so. It was okay, sometimes I go visit my mom, my mom was always struggling, and in the middle uh she marry—she marry to my, um, my stepdad, so she have—she started *another* family after that.

Abel: Okay. Wow. Um, well, so, when you were uh—while you were growing up and, you know, aside from what the Derg were doing to you, were you witnessing other bad things that were happening to people while you were there?

Tegest: Yeah, just so many things happening. Um my aunt, always um she's like, uh, she's so afraid and everything, so she was always telling us, "If anybody go to jail, I'm not going to bring

you anything. You're going to be starving to death and I don't want any kids to be in trouble in this house!" (Abel laughing sounding shocked)

Uh, you know, I don't know much but—but outside it's happening, there's teenager, kids, and this—this like under-twenty-years-old kids they get to jail and they [the Derg] just get to somebody's house in the middle of the night, grabbing them, put them in jail, and by—by two days, after three days, they kill them. And then it was too much trouble. And then even one time um me and my aunt's family, all of us, we try—we went to go—it was a holiday, we trying to go out of—out of town. It was like around four o'clock in the morning, and we saw someone is dead on the ground and my aunt get out of the car and start crying and screaming and her husband is like trying to pull her to back to the car. But (sighs) it was traumatize life. And I'll never forget. So, I—I was sick of that. But, I mean, I know it's passed now.

Abel: I'm sorry to hear that. Um, okay. So obviously there was no lack—or there was no um free speech um when you were growing up there. Uh so how did this affect, Ethiopia or, you know, even just people from your experiences?

Tegest: Yes. Um, it effect um Ethiopian people still—I think still now. There is [was] no freedom of speech. If someone said something about Derg, about, uh, about anything about the economy, you can't ask any kind of question, anything, even uh sometimes uh people are jail if you, you know, ask any kind of question in front of police anything. You know, you got to jail yourself. After that, nobody can see you. I don't know what they do to them sometimes. So, what I remember, um, it was like too much.

Abel: Okay. Okay. Um so, on a different note how was your education, you know, while you were growing up when the Derg were there? Uh, would you send us to school in Ethiopia? Your children.

Tegest: Uh, no, not at that time, I don't think there's nobody to go to Ethiopian school. Um, to know the culture, yes. But to educate, uh even for myself, um I had a poor education, you know? There is no—right now there is computer and everything, but back—back then, no, there is no help. You just someone—you know? It's not good in general.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: It wasn't good.

Abel: So, uh what like there was—how was the teachers, like did they—were they helping you even inside and outside of the classroom? Or, yeah.

Tegest: Not outside. But inside, um you know, they'll just try to teach us. There is uh—uh, you know, well-educated teachers, and then the [other] teacher doesn't have enough education, and then he can't even help us. Just they do whatever they want. I mean, (Abel: "Wow") it was very hard.

Abel: So, some are educated and some were not, but they just became teachers.

Tegest: Not really. They just being teacher and then get—get, you know, salary.

Abel: Oh wow, okay.

Tegest: That's all, they don't—they're a not experienced teacher.

Abel: And you guys, did you have textbooks and other things like that?

Tegest: No, not much there, we don't. I mean um sometimes—the only thing I remember, we have English book, and then if I have that book, it's not—I can't own it. [Books were shared] between maybe two people or three people were allowed to own. Before I eat my lunch, I have to do my homework and then I pass it to the second person. One book for three people, that was English. That's the only book I have, I remember it was English book. The rest [of the classes] is like um no, we just lecture, uh the teacher lecture in the class and then he have to—we don't have like, example, like biology book, I don't have biology book. But the teacher have to write it on the chalkboard, it's like we need to copy through chalkboard.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: I mean like a notebook! We need to make notebook! (claps hands for emphasis)

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: Ourselves, yeah.

Abel: But was there—did they—you know, was there enough materials like notebooks and things like that or was that even hard to come by?

Tegest: No, we don't have—we don't have any, uh enough notebook. I mean, notebook to buy notebook to write it down?

Abel: Yeah.

Tegest: Yeah! We have it. It was a little expensive, but yeah, we have pencil, we have, I remember, there is a small [area to buy] uh stationery. We used to go in and we'd buy exercise book, pencil, and pen.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: Yeah.

Abel: Interesting. So that means that learning was hard without the textbook, because when you got home you didn't have anything else to continue studying, right?

Tegest: No but I have notes anyway. We need to copy the notes and sometimes I understand it, sometimes I don't.

Abel: Oh, okay.

Tegest: Well, we can't uh go back to the school and ask the teacher, and you know, it—it was very hard.

Abel: And there were no tutors, right?

Tegest: No tutors. Um, no.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: Nobody can tutor you; you have to tutor yourself.

Abel: (laughs) Okay, um. All right, uh so, how did you get to America? Um and uh how hard was it to come here from start to finish, in the whole process?

Tegest: Okay, um, to come here, uh to start from—from Ethiopia, it was a little bit—very difficult, you know? At the time, it was like age limited. So, um a family friend, um, a family friend asking somebody else [to help me], you know, through—through people, you go through people if you have—if you know somebody. If you don't, you can't [do the process]. So, we go through people and finally I got my passport, and after the passport is this process, you have to go here and there, you know, by—by a bus, or you can walk and—but the thing is, um, what I like about that, uh after you get your passport, it's not really—I didn't see it very difficult, but it takes time and you have to back and forth.

But after that, uh I need to go to American embassy to get visa. And then by the first time when I go, I didn't get the visa. I went—I think I went two times or three times. So, you line up outside and you wait, when you get your turn, they will interview um whatever they feel like. They can see your face and they say no. They deny you. I don't know the reason, but after that, you know, from what I did, what I did in the beginning, by the end. And um still family help me, you know. Through family member, you know, he had business back home, uh you know? A family member, and because of that he talk to the—the embassy who work here and then, you know? It was *very* hard, but I made it.

Abel: Ha, congratulations.

Tegest: Thank God!

Abel: Right, thank God.

Tegest: Yeah.

Abel: Ah, okay. So, when you came here to America, what did you leave behind in Ethiopia and what or who did you intend to bring over someday?

Tegest: So, I, by my father's side, they're good and, you know, they can—they can take care of themselves, but, uh, the part I left there, my—my mom's side, my mom have, um, my mom have like two children and um. But if I bring them, it would be nice. I have two sister and one brother. But unfortunately, right now my mom is passed away, but if I bring those [siblings] it will be nice. I'll be happy.

Abel: Okay. Um so, what was it like getting settled into America? Did you have trouble getting used to the culture when you were first here or for the first few years or anything like that?

Tegest: Hmm, not really. Um, what um was trouble me is the language.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: So, I have a little difficult to understand. Some of the people speak louder, some of like they speak faster. But, um, I catch up real good, real in a—in a short time. In about a year. And, which—which really help me is um watching TV!

Abel: Oh, okay.

Tegest: My—my aunt's daughter have a baby, uh and I used to—I use to help them to take care of her. So—

Abel: Leila.

Tegest: Yeah, her name is Leila. So, it's really help me talking to her, watching TV, watching cartoon. I think that's—that's the thing that help me to catch up and understand English quick.

Abel: Okay, so you didn't have, uh, like some kind of—nobody gave you a book of English terms or something and said this is what you need to know, like you just picked it up by conversation. Or what did you—

Tegest: I pick it up by conversation, (Abel: "Okay") really. Yeah, conversation and, um, and watching my TV.

Abel: Oh, and was that difficult still?

Tegest: Yeah, it was difficult. Yeah.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: It was.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: Not easy, so.

Abel: But you learned anyway. (laughs)

Tegest: I learn it anyway. And um by—by that time, it was like, uh I miss Ethiopia, uh I was lonely here. Um even though, uh this—this my family members around, but I missing that [inaudible] back home.

Abel: The experience of being with other Ethiopians?

Tegest: Uh, yeah. I guess, let me see, it like make me cry for two years? And after that, you know, I felt comfortable here.

Abel: Ha, aww.

Tegest: I'm the one telling people, "It's okay you'll get used to it. When you get here it's a little difficult, but you can do it. You will manage to escape this lonely and, you know, uh homesick and everything." So.

Abel: Wow, man. You lived very—you lived very different than I did.

Tegest: Yeah, yeah, yeah, you guys are lucky you were born here, liji [child].

Abel: (laughs) We are. Um, and finally, uh do you consider yourself an American or are you really just Ethiopian?

Tegest: No, I'm um, I live here long enough. When I came here, I was 24? 20, no—23 or 24.

Abel: Only a couple of years older than me.

Tegest: Yeah, and I don't have anything there [in Ethiopia]. I mean, even my children, my oldest son is 22 now. Yeah, I'm considering I'm American.

Abel: Okay.

Tegest: And I'm proud of it!

Abel: Well, congrats on being American.

Tegest: Thank you! (both laugh)

Abel: All right, thanks mom.

Tegest: You're welcome.