

# Out of Ethiopia

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Bee staff writer

Through the airplane window, Biroho stared down at the lights of the city that would become her home. She had no idea where Fresno was. She only knew that she and her eight children were in America, 9,000 miles from her native Ethiopia.

She had been warned that her sponsors probably would not meet them at the Fresno Air Terminal, where the plane was about to land.

"Don't expect any help from your sponsors," she had been told before leaving Africa. The woman known only as Biroho — Ethiopians do not have last names — had been given the number of the Fresno Police Department to call if no one met her.

Although she spoke four languages, English was not one of them. How would she communicate if she had to call the police?

Biroho clutched the worn piece of paper with the telephone number. She had held it so long she could barely read the number.

But she was not afraid.

The daughter of a Protestant pastor in Keren, Ethiopia, she had always trusted God to help her. Hadn't he protected her when her husband was arrested and then disappeared?

Hadn't he helped her walk 140 miles by night across the mountains with seven young children and herself eight months pregnant?

great happiness, she said, when she realized they were meeting her: "A heavy burden was taken off my back."

Then, a young woman from the church, Genet Yacob, greeted her in Tigrigna, her native language.

"Tears were coming," Biroho recalled. "I said, 'How could this be? In America, you speak this?'"

Then the senior pastor of the church, the Rev. Roger Whitlow, gave Biroho a bouquet of spring flowers.

"I felt like a queen," she said. "In our culture, flowers are for royalty or ambassadors. You give flowers to someone you love and respect. It was beyond any expectation to be treated like this."

## A family's trek to Fresno begins on foot and on faith

The family was taken to a four-bedroom house, already furnished for them by the sponsoring church. But that was not the only surprise waiting there.

A table spread with Ethiopian food — a feast — had been prepared by Genet and her sister, Senait Yacob, and a friend, Martha Felleke, all Ethiopian students at Fresno Pacific College and church members for several years. (Because they have been in this country three years, all have taken last names.)







Biroho is thankful to live where, she says, she can be a free woman. 'What is this, that I deserve this blessing?'



Fresno Bee

Biroho and her seven children started in Keren, in the upper corner of Ethiopia, and walked westward for 15 nights, traveling 140 miles over mountains to Kassala. They were taken to Khartoum, where Biroho gave birth and where the family lived for two years.

## Agency arranges sponsors for refugees

U.S. World Relief, through its regional office in San Francisco, placed Biroho's family and four others in Fresno. It aids about 75 refugees from Ethiopia each month, according to the sponsorship developer, Richard Nash. These refugees are sponsored by churches in California, Nevada and Utah.

Nash said the U.S. government allows approximately 600,000 immigrants to enter this country each year; only 10 percent of them, or 60,000, can be political refugees, he said. Last year about 650 came through San Francisco's World Relief office.

Nash, formerly from Fresno and Valley Christian Center, was pastor of a Dinuba church for two years before taking the World Relief post 18 months ago.

Spokesmen in Fresno for Catholic Charities, International Rescue Committee and Church World Services said they help refugees from other parts of the world, but they have not sponsored any Ethiopian refugees in the valley.



Working a winter garden is a new experience for Biroho and her youngest helper, Aster. Biroho says she is pleased with the success of the cabbages and that she plans a larger garden for summer. She is surprised at the ease of growing food in Fresno, a stark contrast to the famine in her native country.

Fresno Bee photos by John Walker

Sudan?

Even now, as she related the story, her eyes filled with tears.

"When we were landing, I was praying: 'Jesus, you are the only one who knows what is ahead. I put my trust in you.'"

On the ground, more than 100 people from a large Fresno church, Valley Christian Center, were waiting for Biroho and her children.

They would be the first of five Ethiopian refugee families the church would sponsor under the auspices of the World Relief organization.

When she walked off the plane and saw the crowd, Biroho thought a dignitary was arriving. She felt

As soon as she and the children were alone, they knelt together to give thanks. "Surely," she prayed, "this must be the prayers of my mother and father that you have gone before me and prepared everything here."

Now, almost a year after their arrival, the family has settled into life in Fresno.

The two oldest children — Nantsnett, 16, and Yonas, 15 — are bringing home A's and B's from Roosevelt High School. Yonas, a freshman, was picked for the varsity soccer team. Brother Atobrohan, 14, has become a soccer star at Yosemite Middle School.

Four of the children are students  
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# Ethiopia

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at Rowell Elementary: Medhani, 12; Gebilit, 11; Girmay, 8; and Semare, 7. Rowell Principal Art Carlson said all are well liked and have adjusted beautifully.

The youngest child, Aster, turned 4 on Christmas Day. She attends English classes with her mother.

And 36-year-old Biroho, a woman who all her life washed clothes by hand, has a washing machine.

With Genet translating, Biroho talked about the unstable political conditions and famine in her native land that forced her to flee to an area where there are so few of her countrymen.

About 50 native Ethiopians have lived in the MidCal region 10 years or longer. Biroho is one of about 25 who have arrived in the past three years.

Many of the Ethiopian refugees risked great hardship and death to make their escape, but even among such people Biroho's story is legendary.

In June 1981, her husband, Paulos, was arrested for political reasons. She took food to him every day in prison.

"Then, one day, they said he wasn't there. I assumed they had killed him," Biroho said. "It was no longer safe for me to stay in Keren. I was pregnant . . . With the help of God, I thought of a plan, a desperate plan . . .

"One by one, I sent the children to the place where the people who own camels live [Bogu]. Once people got used to them being there, it would be easier for all of us to get to Sudan.

"Then, it was time for me to go. It is a six-hour walk to this village. If I left early in the morning, they would suspect me. So I left midday.

"You have to go through the police blockade. I pretended I was illiterate, that I was going for a wedding. They searched me completely to be certain I was only going for the day.

"I was so shaky. I was very scared, but God helped me. If they found out, they would shoot me right there. I spent the night there [in Bogu]. I was very tired, but we started the next night over the mountains.

"It was bad there. The Ethiopian planes . . . were bombing the freedom fighters. People thought I was crazy. They said I couldn't do it with seven children. They said I wouldn't make it.

"But it was by God's strength I escaped. I trusted him. If he can take people out of the grave, I knew he could set us free."

In Kassala, a city near the border of Sudan, people stared in disbelief to see a pregnant woman, a camel and seven children (at the time, ages 3 to 12) walk out of the Choke Mountains, 140 miles from the nearest city.

The journey had taken 15 nights. By day,

they hid from the bombers. By night, with moonlight to guide them, they made their way through the valley and over the mountains, where peaks reach 12,000 feet.

That would be like crossing the Sierra from Fresno to Bishop on foot.

Biroho and her children were taken by a church group from Kassala to Khartoum, where she delivered the baby — her first in a hospital. For the next two years, with support from Catholic clergy, she lived in Khartoum and waited for word of her husband.


In the meantime, she housed other Ethiopians who were fleeing and needed a place to stay. Her reputation grew and many knew how she was helping her countrymen, often at great risk to herself and family.

The situation in Sudan was becoming less stable and a church in Khartoum helped her apply to enter the United States. She was interviewed every three months for a year, she said, "to be sure I was telling the truth" about why she wanted to come to America.

Finally, she was accepted and signed a promissory note for \$3,510 in air fare.

"I was really happy I could go to a peaceful country where my children could get a good education," she said.

A final note: Word arrived a few weeks ago from Biroho's husband in Khartoum. He is safely out of Ethiopia and eager to join his family. Valley Christian Center will sponsor him.



... — which he promptly  
members of Valley Christian  
ees they sponsor. The two  
ne event, walking about with