

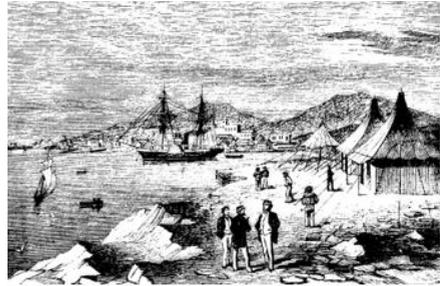
# SWEDEN IN ERITREA 1866-1993



Embassy of Sweden

**For centuries, Eritrea was colonized by successive external powers. In the shadow of Egyptian, Italian, British and Ethiopian rule, there was strong engagement in Sweden for the people of Eritrea. The Lutheran Church of Sweden and its Evangelical Mission, particularly, worked for more than a hundred years to promote education and vocational training, typography and book printing, health care and opportunities for the deaf. Swedish civil society support for Eritrea's independence struggle culminated in the official recognition of Eritrea as an independent state in 1993.**

In the spring of 1866, three representatives of the Swedish Evangelical Mission (SEM) landed in Massawa on the Red Sea Coast of what is now Eritrea. They were aiming to go to Oromia in South and Central Abyssinia in today's Ethiopia but were advised against advancing



*Port of Massawa in Eighteen-sixties*



*The first SEM missionaries that came to Eritrea in 1866: 1. Lars Jojan Lange 2. Per Eric Kjellberg 3. Carl Johan Carlsson*

south due to political and social unrest in that area. Instead, the Swedes were recommended Kunama as the most suitable region for pioneer missionary work.

For several hundred years, Kunama (a region found in the lowland planes in today's South West Eritrea) found itself at a juncture in the Horn of Africa where religious and political powers met. Indeed, Christianity

had arrived already during the first half of the fourth century A.D. with monks from Egypt who fled Constantinople to avoid persecution. This old church had produced the Orthodox (Ge'ez) sacred writings, including translations of the Bible. Hence, by the time that SEM started its missionary work in current Eritrea, the scriptures were already available in the Amharic language which is predominant in Ethiopia. Devotional literature, histories of mission and monthly or yearly periodicals by mission organizations were also circulated.

Once in Kunama, the Swedish missionaries swiftly established relations with the local population. It took time for

them to recuperate physically and adjust to the climate and local customs. Within a relatively short period, however, the newcomers from Sweden had become eager students of the language. Some had started setting up simple workshops and building an interracial and inter-tribal congregation in different parts of Eritrea. SEM was a protestant Evangelical mission which sought to convert Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Muslims, and Animists alike. Within four years of their arrival small stations were growing larger, though there is scarce evidence that any locals changed their faith.

Even though the SEM was a small community, they served the congregation with food, accommodation, and clothes to wear. In 1872, SEM built a school in Massawa where they taught carpentry, agriculture, and metal work. The school had started with five students because the mission could only afford that amount and by 1889 it had expanded to 84 people.

Unfortunately, after 49 years of operation in August 1921 the school was destroyed due to a major earthquake in Massawa.

Still in the early days of the 1860s and 1870s, groups of Swedish missionaries were sent to open multiple stations. On their way out of Massawa they found an area called Mai Wuuy (near Gahtelai in the hills between Massawa and Asmara), a place with hot springs that were known to cure various diseases. Since it was also a safe place to



*The hot water springs at Ailet, located 50km from Massawa*

stay, they decided to open a hospital in 1870. Many people started coming and the

Swedes soon added a school and an agricultural project. Appreciation locally for these programs led to the governor granting them increased security in the form of guards. The Swedes subsequently went on to open another hospital in Hamasen (now Asmara and its environs), Imbaderho (a village close to Asmara) and Ailet (located 50 km South West of Massawa).



*The Angarius, the Mission ship of the SEM, built in 1872*

In June 1869 the SEM community had decided to build a ship of its own in order to improve contacts with Sweden and bring more materials. All funds collected were used to build the ship and after raising the required

amount of money, the Swedes built the Angarius Ship in 1872. More missionaries arrived to help the ones already in Eritrea and they opened additional stations. After two years the first two women missionaries came to Eritrea where they rented a big house in Bet Mekà (Sub-Zone in Asmara) and established a hospital. In its first month over 150 people were treated; historians say it could have been the biggest hospital of its time in East Africa.

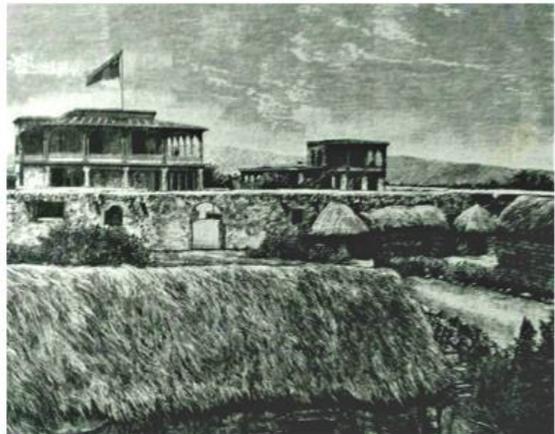
In December 1873, after a war between the two local tribes Hazega and Tsezega, missionaries decided to build a school in Geleb, near Keren city, with around 4,000 inhabitants. This place was chosen because it had a river and a more conducive climate. The Swedes talked to the governor in Eritrea and secured permission to start a cotton cultivation which expanded gradually. Historic records suggest that the locals welcomed this opportunity of employment and that they were

also pleased to advance their lives by studying and working.

In 1876, major battles on Eritrean soil between Egypt and Ethiopia laid many villages to waste and defenceless women and children were seized or fled. To alleviate some of the suffering, the Swedish missionaries decided to open a vocational school for women in Massawa (1876-1879). Despite great interest, only 35 women could be admitted to the school. To allow more females to learn and enhance their capabilities of work, the Swedes decided to move the parish and the school to Imkullu, a cosmopolitan centre on the Red Sea. After hearing in 1877 of the Swedes' vision and resource requirement, and in defiance of Italian opposition to



*The children's home in Geleb, 1908*

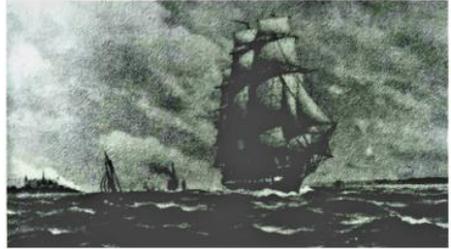


*Imkullu seen from the outer court*

the Swedes, the governor of Sudan went to Massawa and decided to support the school with his own money, which helped it grow and expand. By 1879 the school was completed and all the women plus eight new female students moved to Imkullu. Tailoring, handmade crafts and house holding were some of the courses the school provided.

The Swedish stations in Massawa and Imkullu became unpredicted schools for services. Just before the earthquake many fugitives, and countless victims of violence from conflicts, hunger, thirst and sickness found their way to these places and healed on the shores of the Red Sea. With time, the missionaries from Sweden also opened a hospital and a typography. They soon brought a printing machine to Asmara. From 1886 printing work started and the mission engaged in writing and printing primers for basic education, publishing newsletters, as well as translating and printing tracks of the Bible and hymn books

in Tigrè, Tigrinya and Kunama, producing some 3,000 copies. Furthermore, SEM opened three bookstores in Asmara. Eritrea thus became known as the first country in East Africa to offer printing services.



*The frigate Vanadis, under the command of Prince Oscar Bernadotte, cast anchor at Massawa on February 21 1885*

A year before that, in 1885, an unusual event was recorded in history books when Prince Oscar Bernadotte (1859–1953), son of King Oscar II of Sweden who reigned from 1872 to 1907, visited Imkullu with the rest of the crew of the frigate Vanadis, which was on a round-the-world journey.

The frigate cast anchor at Massawa von February 21, 1885 and stayed for a few days only, because they could not endure

the mosquitoes and the hot temperature. Prince Oscar's diary entry for February 22, 1885 reads:

*What I saw in Imkullu gave me, then a young man, much to ponder.*

*There God gave me one of those nudges forward, through which he wants to help us, human beings, to come into the path of life. I didn't understand it then, but before long I realized that God had met me.*

Some historians also say that the frigate *Vanadis* was directed to Massawa with the aim of demonstrating that Sweden could flex its muscles for the defence of its citizens against a perceived threat by Muslim leadership in neighbouring Sudan and to encourage them not to lose hope after many of their companions died of malaria.



*Beleza mission station, with school children dotting the hill side, 1908*



*The Chapel and congregation at Geshinashm at the beginning of 1900*



*The mission house in Keren, built in 1919*



*The Evangelical church in Tsezega, 1904*



*A view of Asmara mission station and the church, 1902.*

*1. The Church 2. Missionary's residence 3. The school for boys 4. The bedroom for boys 5. The residence of the Head of the station 6. The printing press 7. Teachers' residence 8. Preparatory school first floor and residence for teachers second floor*

Based on the work at Imkullu, which the Swedes saw as increasingly successful, decisions were taken to open other stations, hospitals, and churches in different areas. These sites were opened in Beleza 1890, Asmara & Tsezega 1891, Kulluku 1899, Gheshinahim 1900, A'dwgra 1905, Shimanigus 1909, and Keren 1919.



*Mission station at Kulluku, built in 1899*

From its humble beginnings in a small site, the SEM over decades developed a major centre with multiple satellite venues. After 1915, its multifaceted mission venture involved evangelism, education, medical and diaconic work as well as the production of literature in several cities.

In parallel, Italy had made Eritrea a formal colony, built the capital Asmara and created infrastructure between towns. In the 1930s, the situation in Eritrea was getting tense as colonial powers were preparing for war. In December 1935, the Italian governor with support from the Catholic church expelled the Swedish missionaries and requested them to hand over all property to an Italian missionary for safekeeping. Leaving Eritrea was painful, as the Swedes worried that all that they had worked to develop for 70 years would be demolished. Whereas they pleaded to the Italian authorities to allow them to stay or at least not to give their properties to anyone else, the missionaries found themselves having to leave everything behind.

From the day of their expulsion, the Swedish missionaries prepared to go back to Eritrea. Sources say that after the end of World War II, there were only limited opportunities for

the missionaries to return to Eritrea. Once the Evangelical Church of Eritrea agreed with the new British rulers to allow them back, a few came with a major objective: Develop and cultivate Eritrea. Once back in Eritrea, the Swedish church supported agricultural, medical and educational activities. In September 1955, after their arrival in Keren, the missionaries in collaboration with Finnish and German missionaries rented an apartment in a building called Palazzo Riva and opened a school for deaf children.

The governor of Keren was convinced by the increasing number of students that the school needed a larger place. Embarrassed, perhaps, to offer such a lowly place for such a noble cause, he remodelled a former Italian military camp and donated it to the missionaries, who could thus welcome up to 80 students.

The school taught the Swedish–Finnish sign language for the

deaf, tailoring and general education. After 14 years, a fire accident left the school ruined and unusable. To assess the situation, Swedish Embassy representatives from Addis Ababa visited the school in 1966 and with the financial support of Swedish Save the Children renovations were pursued until the reconstructed school could be inaugurated in April 1969, serving 80 children.

During the 1970s, the Eritrean political environment saw a marked deterioration, which prompted the school's director to move the school from Keren to Asmara. In 1979 a new school was opened in a former chapel of the ECE.

For some twenty years, the Church of Sweden and SEM worked inside the Eritrean province of Ethiopia together with the Evangelical Church of Eritrea. However, due to the Ethiopian Derg regime's oppression and continuous bombings against Eritrea's liberation struggle, the

Swedes were forced to go back to their country.

In parallel with this partnership between churches, both secular solidarity organizations and student groups in Sweden mounted support for Eritrea's fight for independence from Ethiopia, channelling aid to the front of Eritrea's liberation struggle through the East African Council of Churches. To further facilitate receipt of such support, the Eritrean Relief Desk (ERD) was established, soon to be renamed the Emergency Relief Desk since the aid was

also being sent to Ethiopian rebels. Materials and financial assistance were collected in Sweden and transferred through Sudan to the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF).

Following the EPLF's victory over the Derg regime in 1991 and the subsequent referendum in favour of self-rule, Sweden recognized Eritrea as an independent state in 1993 and established diplomatic relations.



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Eritrea and Sweden share a history of more than a century and a half. On the foundation of religious, cultural, educational and health cooperation summarized in this report, today's bonds between the two peoples are strong. To learn more about the common past, you can watch a film on [www.swedenabroad.se/en/embassies/eritrea-stockholm](http://www.swedenabroad.se/en/embassies/eritrea-stockholm).

To contact the Office of the Embassy of Sweden in Asmara with your ideas about our common future, please write to [sweden.asmara@gov.se](mailto:sweden.asmara@gov.se).

