

Miscellaneous Articles

Ladislas Sava's Articles in "New Times and Ethiopia News" in 1940–1941: The Historical Background by SZÉLINGER Balázs¹

During research on the Ethiopian–Hungarian historical relations I realized that Sáska László (aka Ladislas Sava) was more than just a settler among the Europeans who lived in Ethiopia. Apart from his medical engagement he wrote numerous articles about his experiences treating ethnography, anthropology, etc; and all over this he played a sort of historical role too.² He and his wife, Mojzsíss Mária, became eyewitnesses and documenters of the Italian occupation between 1935 and 1937. Sáska László (1890–1978) is more or less known to historians who are dealing with the Italo-Ethiopian war and the Fascist occupation.³ He was the author of a series of articles, which were published in Sylvia Pankhurst's *New Times and Ethiopia News* in London during the years of 1940 and 1941, although he used the pseudonym "Ladislas Sava" for obvious political reasons.⁴ However, as it reveals from the document published here, the original plan was a book and not articles.



Fig. 1: Sáska's medical stamp used in Addis Ababa⁵

Sáska László was born in Hungary in 1890 and became a medical doctor. After serving during the World War I as a medical officer, his birthplace Nagyenyed (today's Aiud) together with the whole Transylvania was attached to Romania due to the Trianon Peace Treaty in 1920. As a consequence of the difficult economic situation and following an unhappy first marriage, in 1932 he decided to immigrate to Africa with his second wife. His first choice was Italian Somaliland (Mogadishu). However, they moved to Ethiopia soon where Sáska became a doctor and friend of Ras Desta in Yirga Alem, Sidamo.⁶ On

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² A bibliography of his writings can be found in my PhD thesis: SZÉLINGER Balázs: *Magyarország és Etiópia. Formális és informális kapcsolatok, 1868–1941*. ('Hungary and Ethiopia. Formal and informal relations, 1868–1941'), Szeged 2009.

³ Note that in Hungarian names the family name is first and the given name is second.

⁴ This pseudonym was later mistyped in Sylvia PANKHURST's *Ethiopia: A Cultural History* (Essex, Woodford Green, 1955) as Boris Sava, and in Anthony MOCKLER's *Haile Selassie's War* (Oxford University Press, 1984) as Ladislas Rava.

⁵ courtesy of the Hungarian Geographical Museum, Érd.

⁶ SZÉLINGER Balázs, ibid. pp 74–78, 154–160.

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the eve of the Italo-Ethiopian war they moved to Addis Abeba where Sáska opened a private medical office in which, during the war and the occupation, he treated both Ethiopians and Italians. As he spoke Amharinya, Oromiffa, Italian and German fluently, during the treatments he was able to collect first-hand information from both sides.⁷ Apart from this, he eyewitnessed many events of the Italian occupation including the attempt on Graziani's life in 1937 and the following massacre. In the same year he and his wife could finally manage to get permission to leave Italian East Africa. Then they moved to Tanganyika, a British mandate in that time where after having the verification of his diploma by the British authorities he started the third medical practice of his life.⁸

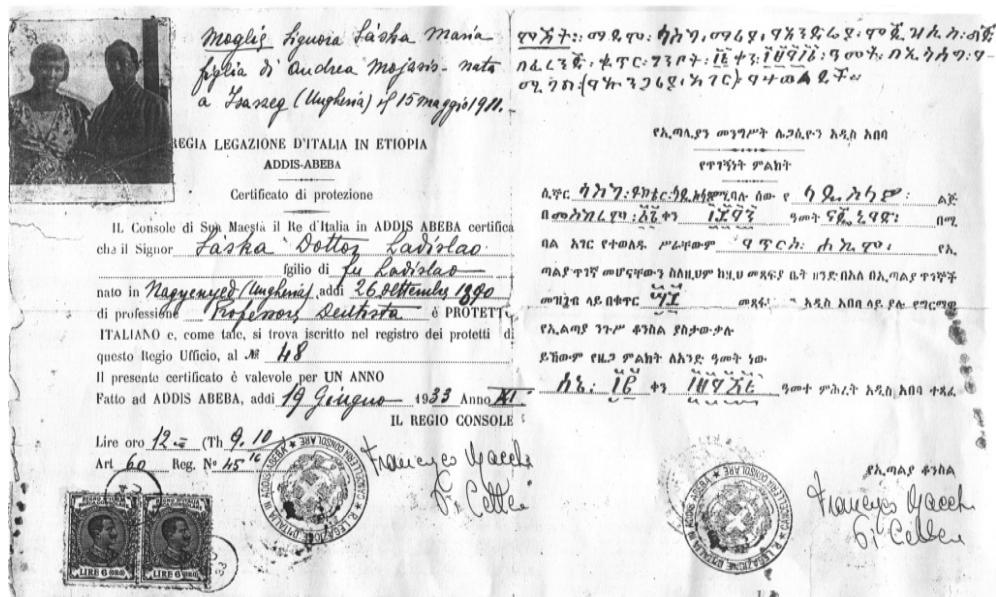


Fig. 2: Sáska László's certificate of protection, issued by the Italian consulate, 1933 (courtesy of the Hungarian Geographical Museum, Érd)

However, when in 1939 the Second World War broke out, Sáska and his wife became, as Hungarian citizens, enemies on British territory. Here, and during this time he wrote his memoirs about the war and Italian occupation in Ethiopia. He could have two reasons to do so. On one hand Sáska was very humanistic and, in the same time, a proud Hungarian. As it reveals from his writings, he felt responsibility for his Hungarian compatriots who in Hungary

⁷ His German knowledge was very useful when he treated “Italian” soldiers of South Tyrolian origin.

⁸ In this short article I don't deal with Sáska's wide scientific works including the discovery of several new plants, research on malaria and cancer. About this see KUBASSEK János: Sáska László tudományos munkássága Afrikában (“Sáska László's scientific work in Africa”), in: *Földrajzi Múzeumi Tanulmányok* 8 (Érd, 1990), 15–20.

could not have valid information about the events in Ethiopia, but were misled by the pro-Fascist press. On the other hand Sáska could meet British anti-Fascists or even Ethiopian refugees in Tanganyika by whom he got another motivation.

As it is clear from the document published here, Sáska's original aim was to publish a book in Hungarian language. At the moment I am not able to tell how and why the text reached London, and the Anglo-Ethiopian Society. The society immediately grabbed the opportunity and planned to publish the text as a book with rich illustrations (photographs made by Sáska himself). Menczer Béla, a Hungarian émigré in London that time, was in close relation to this society and to Sylvia Pankhurst too and most probably this is the reason why he got the task of the translation into English.⁹ However, the book was never published.

I found the following document in the National Archives of Wales, among the Herbert Stanley Jevons files. Jevons (1875–1955) was a professor of economics and political sciences in several British universities; at times he was the secretary of the Anglo-Ethiopian Society during the 1930's. Although the author and the exact date of the document is unknown, most probably it was Jevons himself, and written between 1937 July (after Sáska left Ethiopia) and 1940 July (the first article in *New Times and Ethiopia News*).

SYNOPSIS OF THE JOURNAL OF DR LADISLAS SASKA On the Events in Abyssinia before, during and after the Italian Campaign¹⁰

Dr L. Saska, a Hungarian physician who served as a military surgeon in the Austro-Hungarian army during the world war, settled in 1932 in Abyssinia in the province of Sidamo at Yrga Alem as a specialist in tropical diseases.¹¹ He lived in this town which was the residence of Ras Desta until 1935 and through his medical practices he made the acquaintance of Ras Desta who was the Governor of the province of Sidamo.

He gives in his journal a picture of Abyssinia before the war and there is ample evidence that Italian Subjects were used for purposes of espionage long before the invasion.

The author, as well as the other 20 or 25 Hungarian subjects resident in Abyssinia were approached by the Italian Consulate, as the Hungarian Government was considered as

⁹ Menczer Béla (1902–1983) lived in London since 1934 as an anti-Fascist émigré. As it reveals from his unpublished autobiography titled *Bread far from my cradle* (courtesy of the Hungarian Literary Museum, Budapest) he played a role as a sort of “eminence grise” behind the Ethiopian imperial government in exile. He was on friendly terms with Lorenzo Ta’ezaz and other Ethiopians in London. Apart from his excellent works in political science he published a few articles in *New Times and Ethiopia News* as well.

¹⁰ National Archives of Wales, Herbert Stanley Jevons files 216.

¹¹ As it was stated in the beginning, Sáska settled in Italian-Somaliland first in 1932, and moved to Ethiopia only in 1933. As far as I know that time he did not have any specialization in tropical diseases, although he was an expert in many fields of medical treatments.

*a friendly if not a vassal state by Italy. But most of the Hungarian residents refused to enter the Italian Intelligence Service.*¹²

As Hungary has neither Legation nor Consulate in Abyssinia the Hungarian subjects were under the protection of the Italians. This circumstance, of course, made them suspect in the eyes of the Abyssinian Government at the beginning of the war. The author himself was expelled as a foreigner standing under the protection of Italy, but later he got permission to stay in Addis Ababa where he remained until the middle of July 1937, that is to say some 14 months after the capture of the Abyssinian capital.

As Dr Saska was expelled from Abyssinia at the beginning of the war and his domicile and surgery was attacked by the rioters in the memorable days which elapsed between the departure of the emperor and the entering of the invading Italian troops, he has no reason to be prejudiced in favour of the Abyssinians. The horrors which he saw in the Addis Ababa hospitals during the war, and especially during the massacre on the 19th February which followed the attempt on the life of Marshal Graziani (of which the author was one of the few European witnesses) make it an imperative duty of conscience to denounce the crimes of Italy to the world. He is able to speak to-day as he is domiciled in the British Colony of Tanganyika.

As Dr Saska was employed in an Addis Ababa hospital even after the capture of the town by the Italians, he had several conversations both with Italian chiefs and with the white and black soldiers, and is able to reveal many unknown facts as to the state of affairs in Abyssinia.

He asserts categorically that the Italian colonisation did not succeed and will not succeed under the spirit of the Abyssinian people. He considers Ras Desta, the Abuna Petros and many others as national martyrs and heroes.

It is through the present distress that the real national spirit of Abyssinia has come into being. The methods of Italy have not succeeded although they are beyond description. At first the Italians tried to win, through money and through corruption, the foreign residents and Abyssinian chieftains who might be able to render them service. The overwhelming majority of the chiefs refused, and the rest accepted only in appearance in order to get possession of Italian arms which they turned against the enemy of their country.

In Italy the worst criminals have been released from prison on condition that they exercise their cruelties against the defenceless natives. The author asserts that over 30% of certain Italian units were composed of such released criminals. While it is not true that there was any political amnesty in Italy and that Italian anti-Fascists were not released from prison as the Government announced, it is true that the number of imprisoned anti-fascists greatly increased during the war.

Released criminals and other Italian soldiers were attracted to Abyssinia by pornographic drawings and photographs representing native women exhibiting their charms. (Photographs will be given with the Journal.)

The atrocities committed by hyperite [sic!] gas are already well-known to the world; still Dr Saska is one more witness, and a well accredited one, to attest that hyperite gas has been

¹² About the Hungarian-Italian relations that time see my article: "Hungary and the Italo-Ethiopian Conflict (1935–1936)", in: *Aethiopica* 11 (2008), 85–116. Sáska mentions only one Hungarian resident in Ethiopia who was working for the Italians.

used with horrid effects on the wounded whom he has treated as a physician. He is equally well accredited to give evidence on matters of intimidation and terror used by the Italians against foreign residents and correspondents after the occupation of Addis Ababa. Europeans who have been in Abyssinian service have been insulted by the Italians as "white negroes" and have had, in some instances, to undergo abject humiliation and brutalities.

The author has witnessed the death of several Abyssinians by firing squads and he tells how heroically they died convinced of the rightness of their cause. Execution however, was not the only method taken to destroy the fine flower of Abyssinian youth. The author knows several cases where murders of a more abject kind have been committed. For instance, several entirely healthy Abyssinians were imprisoned in epidemic hospitals in order that they might be infected with contagious diseases.

It is with some reluctance that the author feels bound to relate such stories but he cannot help revealing the truth in order to try and awake the conscience of Europe. Particularly revolting are the details which tell of the Italian organisation for the enforced prostitution of Abyssinian women. The author adds photographic evidence to his assertion that dead Abyssinians have been burned in masses with petroleum.¹³

The author, who in the world war did service in an army fighting against Italy tells us that he did so without any sort of hatred against the Italian people. He says that on the contrary he was happy that by his profession as a physician he was not forced to any inhuman action as so many other soldiers were. Yet he cannot help feeling to-day that some repulsive traits are inherent in a nation which has produced a Nero, a Domitian, a Caracalla, a Mussolini and a Graziani.¹⁴

He finishes his book with pathetic warning to the Hungarian people with whom he pleads to shake off the shameful vassalage of Italy. It should be noted that the author before his Abyssinian experience was in no way an adherent or advocate of any party persecuted by Fascism, but on the contrary he makes it clear from a few allusions to Hungarian politics that his sympathies are on the conservative side and that he considers Count Stephen Tisza, the leading Hungarian conservative statesman of the pre-war and war-time as his political ideal.¹⁵ The Abyssinian experience however, has made the author a convinced anti-fascist and a convinced adversary of Italy's so-called imperial policy.

The book contains 46 closely typewritten pages and a fore-word in Hungarian. The intention of the author was to publish the original in Hungary, but under the present half-dictatorial system in Hungary such a publication would be impossible, or at least too risky according to liberal Hungarian legal authorities. The type-written copy however, has been seen by several prominent men of the Hungarian press and political life and they would be glad to see it translated and published in a democratic country.

¹³ After the occupation of Addis Abeba, one of the first Italian orders was to surrender all photo cameras in private possession. However, Sáska and his wife turned in only one camera of two in their possession and continued to take photographs in secret.

¹⁴ Note that Sáska wrote this under extremely stressing psychological circumstances, which explains his lack of neutrality and this strong expression, unusual for him as a scholar of natural sciences.

¹⁵ This expression "on the contrary" shows again how Hungarian politics were misunderstood in Western Europe, suggesting as if Fascists and Conservatives were identical.

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The translation will be done by Mr Bela Menczer (28 Cartwright Gardens, W. C. 1.) who has the sanction of the author. The translator is a contributor to several [missing text]

Mr Menczer gives as his references Professor R. W. Seton-Watson, Director of the London School of Slavonic and East European studies and Dr G. P. Gooch, F.R.S.H.¹⁶

As a Hungarian authority who has seen the typewritten copy we give in confidence the name of Professor R. Vambery, Chairman of the Anglo-Hungarian Society in Budapest, Editor of a great Hungarian political review and legal adviser to the British Legation in Hungary.¹⁷

The book will be illustrated by rich photographic material still to be completed. The title suggested by the author, but still subject to alteration is "The Tragedy of Ethiopia."

We shall be able to secure the collaboration of an eminent English writer to review the translation, and to preface the book.



Fig. 3: Photo taken by Sáska between 3-5 May 1935 (courtesy Hungarian Geographical Museum, Érd)

¹⁶ Robert William Seton-Watson (1879–1951) was the Head of Department of Slavonic and East European Studies in the King's College of London during the 1930's. George Peabody Gooch (1873–1968) was a historian, journalist, MP, and editor of the famous political journal *Contemporary Review*. The abbreviation after his name means that he was a fellow of the Royal Society of Health (F.R.S.H.).

¹⁷ Vámbéry Rusztem (1872–1948), lawyer, political journalist, editor of the only one liberal magazine that time in Hungary called *Századunk* ('Our Century').

Conclusion

As mentioned above, Sáska's eyewitness account has been never published as a book, but as a series of articles between July 1940 and February 1941.¹⁸ In that period perhaps not too many paid any attention to it, since the World War II had already started and Ethiopia was liberated only a few months later. However, after the war, during the preparations of the peace treaties, Sáska's account became once more important. The Ethiopian Government raised the question of Fascist war crimes in Ethiopia twice, first in the League of Nations and later in the United Nations War Crimes Commission.¹⁹ Sáska's eyewitness evidences were used in both cases. As it is wellknown, the Italian Fascist war crimes in Ethiopia were never punished, and still there is a debate about them. Younger generations, especially in Italy, don't know anything about this. On the one hand, the document published here shows that the editors of the *New Times and Ethiopia News* showed great interest in this eye-witness account and examined carefully what to be published, including the author's and even the translator's background and political views for the sake of maximum credibility. On the other hand, this document also shows that although the Hungarian government supported Italy, eminent Hungarian intellectuals in emigration, such as in this case Sáska and Menczer, stood firmly on the Ethiopian side.

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¹⁸ I am currently preparing the publication the full text as a critical edition in English, Amharic, Italian and perhaps Hungarian.

¹⁹ Richard PANKHURST: "Italian Fascist War Crimes in Ethiopia: A History of Their Discussion, from the League of Nations to the United Nations (1936–1949)", in: *Northeast African Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1-2, 83-140.