

Hungarian Physicians in East Africa

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Looking for a better life

Research expeditions to Africa, followed by the establishment of colonies and their increasing economic exploitation, significantly boosted health care development projects. It was not only essential to preserve the health of white people coming here from Europe, but the local population as a labour force and taxpayers could not be lost to the colonists either. All of this motivated the medical research on the most dangerous diseases and the healthcare systems' organisation. The Portuguese established a chain of hospitals to secure the route to India on the east coast in Mozambique and then in Melinde (Malindi, now Kenya). In the German East African colonies, the state established some hospitals, smaller clinics, and pharmacies in the late 19th century, including Dar es Salaam and Tanga. During World War I, the African Native Medical Corps was formed, which was the first step in establishing medical personnel in the continent's eastern region. The English government began establishing a health service after the war.¹ The situation was different in independent Ethiopia, where the reforms of Tafari Makonnen and Haile Selassie I encouraged the employment of "real" European doctors.²

The representatives of Hungarian medicine arrived to the African coasts in the middle of the 19th century. Only after the turn of the century did they embark on more extended missions on this continent. They could have been motivated to settle down here for several reasons, such as the hope of making a fortune or at least a better life, the will to help those in need, scientific curiosity, or just the love of nature, hunting and adventure. Some packed their medical equipment and left voluntarily. Others were forced to try their luck due to the circumstances. Among them were missionaries, soldiers, employees of the state, and companies. They healed the rulers of distant lands, as well as the wealthy and the poor. They searched for cures for terrible diseases, organized patient care, and built their reputation with scientific discoveries, descriptions of their hunting adventures, and collections of their writing.

Hungarian doctors' appearance in local, colonial or anti-colonial societies also meant a new approach and value system. Coming from a non-colonialist country, they had a different attitude towards their host country and its people. Therefore, they opposed the discrimination between whites and blacks with unprecedented humanity and enlightened thinking. Among other things, they treated patients from all parts of society in their clinics and hospitals. The rudimentary health care systems and the practically non-existent competition granted them a carrier opportunity that we cannot even imagine today.

However, their working conditions proved to be much more unfavourable. There were hardly any qualified support staff, proper equipment and medicines were not always available, and procedures were often performed without anaesthesia or sanitization. Unfamiliar languages, ruthless wars, and regular epidemics such as yellow fever, dysentery, typhoid fever, plague, and generally poor hygiene were much more challenging than problems in Europe. Often, they had to treat whole provinces and thousands of people with inadequate transportation infrastructure. They could not get everywhere, so if a doctor could not make it to a patient "the plant supervisor examined the patients with his stethoscope and then made a diagnosis on his own."³ Different cultural and medical traditions were challenging too. They had to work together with traditional healers while confronting their harmful practices.

Ethiopia had a special place in Hungary's East Africa relations regarding Hungarian doctors' role in several historical periods. Between the two world wars (although there were no official diplomatic relations), many Hungarians settled in the country.⁴ Among them were doctors such as Kálmán Mészáros, László Sáska and Ferenc Pádár, who stood out heroically both in their poorly equipped clinics and on the battlefields.

The Chief Medic of the Imperial Army

The extraordinary life of Kálmán Mészáros (1894–1971), which would make a good a novel, began in a small thatched house in Gyula that led to the Ethiopian imperial court. The excellent hunter and the talented doctor travelled throughout Africa for fifteen years. Years of practice in the military hospitals during World War I trained him to be a heavy-duty, persistent, tough man. It made him fit for the medical challenges of later Ethiopian military campaigns. The Great Depression of the 1920s made him unemployed, and after his eighteenth job application was rejected, he decided to emigrate. He arrived at the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa, through Djibouti in 1924. He soon became friends with his compatriots living there like the taxidermist, zoological and ethnographic collector Mátyás Gajdács. The Hungarians' cheerful company comes to life in his photographs left behind, as Dr. Mészáros plays his violin to entertain his audience.



Kálmán Mészáros with his friends in Addis Ababa

His reports sent home after his arrival painted a picture of the country's staggering health care system. In the countryside, there was no patient care other than missionaries and traditional healers. The Ethiopians hoped for remedies by famous native and Arab witch doctors. In the capital, the most common diseases were haemorrhoids and intestinal worms. He also considered the prevalence of tuberculosis, typhoid, malaria, and trachoma to be severe, writing, "You can often see mad natives on the streets as they are running around the city dressed up in flowers, pieces of paper, and rags."⁵ People with leprosy were not isolated, and he also encountered rabies frequently. Of the three hospitals in Addis Ababa, only two were working. The streets were covered with dirt and stinking animal carcasses, making them hotbeds for typhoid. Flies covered everything – the animals, the bugs, the butchers. Changes were only brought about by Haile Selassie's reforms in the 1930s. The state and various church missions began developing the health care system, and provincial lords also started to hire physicians.

Kálmán Mészáros was soon hired by the *Ras* of Godjam, Ras Hailu, as his court physician. However, the *Ras* did not keep the terms of their contract. Therefore, he fled the province in 1925, returned to the capital, and opened a clinic. He devoted most of his time to the medical treatment of the royal family. Still, his humanity is shown by the fact that he also received ordinary people who could not pay for their treatment. Visiting royal family members living in different provinces of Ethiopia proved tiring in the absence of roads and railways. They were not very safe without an armed escort, and he had to ride for a week with 30 armed guards to the godfather and close friend of Haile Selassie to Kembata province's capital. He helped giving birth to the child of the emperor's "beautiful daughter" in December 1932 in Sidamo. László Sáska, who arrived in Africa the following year, later became the doctor for the provincial lord Ras Desta. Hirut Desta, the child Mészáros helped deliver during birth, visited Hungary in 1964 with his grandfather, the Emperor of Ethiopia.⁶ The ruler asked Kálmán Mészáros to help him find a location for the new provincial seat. In this sense, the Ethiopian settlement of Yrga Alem owes its present location to our Hungarian compatriot. He also reached the rural settlements during his long journeys where he always attended to the most urgent cases. In his writings about his cruises and hikes, the magically beautiful landscapes, untouched forests, waters and deserts of Ethiopia come to life. His reports are so realistic that we can almost experience the smells of his Godjami clinic as well as the thick, smoky air of the village huts where tough, determined people lived.

Doctor Mészáros became more and more recognized and popular in the court of reigning Prince Tafari Makonnen. In 1930, he was appointed chief physician of the Ethiopian army. However, during military campaigns, healing the severe wounds caused by conventional weapons' destructive power, like front-loading rifles or spears, posed quite a challenge. In the Battle of Anchem in 1830, he was the only doctor (supported by eight paramedics) for the army of 30,000. He was awarded membership to the Order of the Star of Ethiopia for his determination and perseverance. He rode alongside the commander-in-chief of the military at the parade of the victorious soldiers.⁷

A period of a few peaceful years was interrupted by the aggression of Italian colonizers in December 1934. The Ethiopian soldiers wounded in the battles were treated in the Harari hospital by the Hungarian Ferenc Pádár. The exceptionally talented physician studied in the Rockefeller Institute in New York. During the Ethiopian-Italian War in 1934-1935, he lived in Hara, and then he moved to Tanganyika (now Tanzania).⁸ In addition to Mészáros and Sáska, he was the third Hungarian doctor who did not flee at the news of an impending war. He decided to stay, and he treated the wounded and all those in need with death-defying courage and diligence.

On 3 October 1935, the Italians launched an attack on Ethiopia. Kálmán Mészáros followed the imperial formations with his own Red Cross caravan, even when the European doctors had all left the front line. Haile Selassie lost a decisive battle and the war on 4 April 1936, and Mészáros returned to Addis Ababa, which was razed by the remaining forces of the army and the native population. Mészáros, with the legendary doctor John M. Kelly and some European and Swahili assistants, rescued the wounded from the streets that had turned into battlefields. Their base was the English Red Cross Hospital, which was set up in an evacuated school.⁹





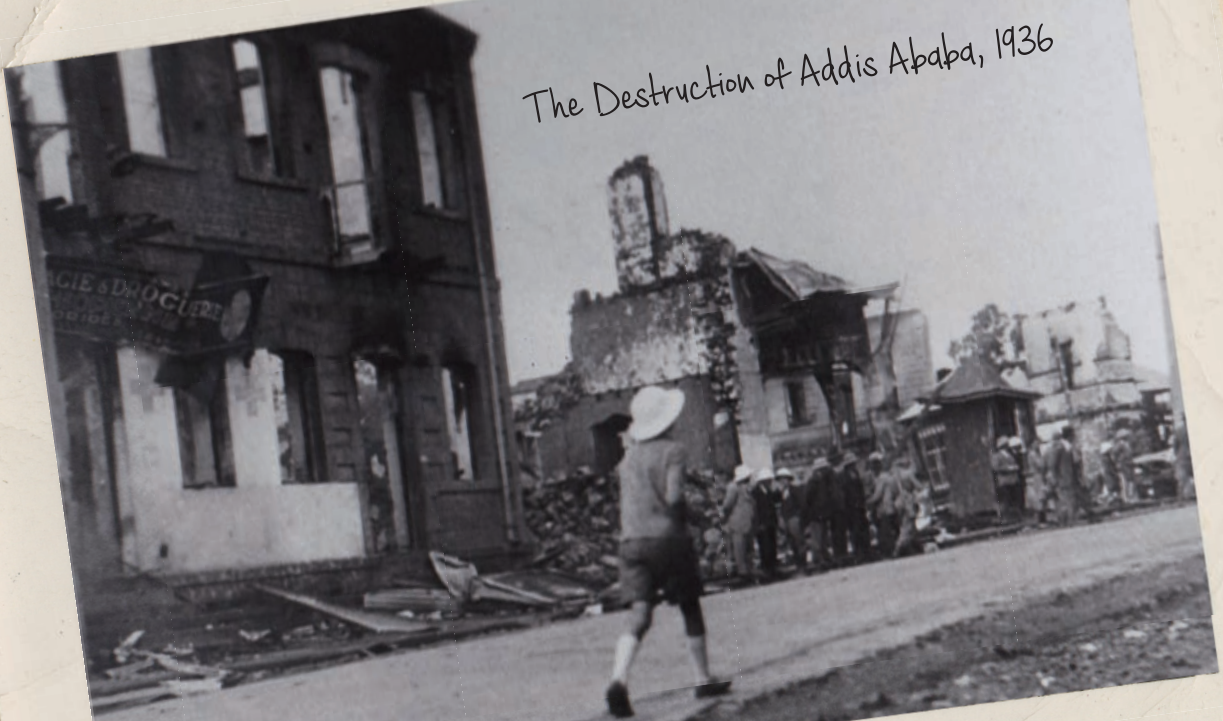
Kálmán Mészáros in a Great Chief's Garment



Addis Ababa
in the 1930s



The Destruction of Addis Ababa, 1936



The new lords of the capital were hostile to everyone, including the Hungarians living here. Mészáros was soon stripped of his clinic, so in late 1936 he left Ethiopia in frustration and moved to Tanganyika, which was under British rule. He lived in Chunya for a few months, organizing hunting expeditions and joining safaris as a medic. He first met the American writer and documentarist couple Martin and Osa Johnson in Ethiopia. A few years later, in 1938, he saw Osa again in Arusha. She had lost her husband in a tragic plane crash the previous year. During his visits to the filming locations, he befriended American actor Spencer Tracy.¹⁰ However, the growing preparations of war and news from Europe soon led him to return home.

He wrote a memoir of his African adventures titled *Abesszínia a vadászok paradicsoma* (Abyssinia: A Hunters' Paradise). His trophies, animal skins, and other items are preserved in Hungarian museums. He died on 25 September 1971 at the hospital in Miskolc. His love for the people, and his selflessness and willingness to sacrifice rightfully make him an outstanding individual of the Hungarian medical society.

The First Mansion of Kálmán Mészáros in Addis Ababa



In Love with Africa

László Sáska (1890–1978) spent 45 years on the continent among Hungarian doctors, and his medical reputation stems from his work in Sidamo (Ethiopia) and then in Arusha (Tanzania). He was born in Nagyenyed, a city with a rich history in Transylvania, and he studied in the Bethlen College, a historical school of great explorers and scientists, which would define his career in the future. In addition to protecting human health and life, the scientist's curiosity and adventurous personality encouraged him to emigrate in 1933. He set out for Italian Somalia with his dauntless wife, Mária Mojzsis. However, the unpleasant climate and the barren sand desert forced them to travel to Ethiopia, which had a diverse population and rich flora and



fauna. He did not have to wait much for a lucrative position because the emperor's son-in-law, Desta Damtew, invited him to his court in Sidamo. He was working as the only doctor in the province of four million. The importance of his role was illustrated by the fact that twenty-five armed guards usually accompanied him. Wherever he travelled, a courier announced his presence in a resounding voice: "Beware, for the royal wanna achim (chief physician) is coming." Accompanying the prince's expeditionary army, he travelled throughout the province in 1934. During the expedition, he assessed the shocking health conditions of village populations which drove him

László Sáska with his wife

Mária Mojzsis, 1956

to undertake the enormous task of establishing a proper health care system. The South Ethiopian army's medical service organisation was a remarkable result of his three years in Sidamo. His wife sewed the war flag of the Sidamo army and gifted it to Ras Desta.¹¹

At the beginning of the Ethiopian-Italian War, in early October 1935 he fled to the capital with his wife. As a doctor in Addis Ababa, he met with Italian military officers, Ethiopian soldiers, and civilians. As a third-country citizen, he could form an unbiased opinion about the country's situation. His reports remain irreplaceable historical sources about the Italian occupation forces' shocking deeds, including the atrocities against the civilian population, the Italian yperite (mustard gas) attacks, and their horrific consequences. The things he saw made him a committed anti-fascist.¹² In 1937, the Italians expropriated his clinic, and after he was expelled, the Italian fascist party's headquarters was established in its place. The building still stands in the Atkilt Tea district of the capital.¹³ After careful consideration, Dr. Sáska was forced to leave the country and moved with his wife to Tanganyika. He settled in Arusha, which he thought had a pleasant climate, and lived at the foot of Mount Meru for more than forty years. Their garden was famous for the vivid birdlife and one of the richest rose collections in East Africa.

He opened a small clinic with eight beds in Arusha, located on the road leading to Moshi. After the proclamation of Tanzanian independence, he was among the first to abolish the separation of the white and black patients, which was still common and customary then. He healed the inhabitants of the Arusha district, and he provided free care to the indigenous Maasais and Kikuyus people as needed. He spoke five languages, including Swahili. To cover his expenses, he charged the Europeans (mostly hunters) for their treatment. In recognition of his work, he was not interned in a detention camp during World War II despite being a citizen of a hostile country.¹⁴

He spent a considerable amount of his Arusha clinic's income on malaria and cancer research. As a sign of recognition, he was elected to become Corresponding Member of the English Cancer Research Institute. His scientific reputation also boosted his medical practice. Many patients with malaria or cancer visited his clinic from afar, including Nairobi and Eldoret in Kenya. Semmelweis University gave a Golden Certificate of Achievement to the eighty-year-old doctor in Arusha. He was also elected to be a member of the Romanian Academy of Medicine.¹⁵

László Sáska was a versatile scientist with extraordinary curiosity. He made ethnographic, zoological, and botanical observations in Ethiopia and Tanganyika. He made detailed descriptions about the different areas of the lives of the people around him such as the women warriors and the phallus cult. His notes on the people's beliefs, traditional medicine, magic inscriptions, and the magical effects of onions and bats are rather intriguing and exciting to read. He continued his scientific research trips in Arusha. He hunted and collected in the Ngorongoro Crater, Lake Manyara, Uganda, Kenya and the Congo Basin. His documentation of rare tropical orchids and discovery of two unknown orchid species are just two examples of his numerous accomplishments.

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László Sáska and
his wife in Somalia

Not only did he share his scientific successes with the world, but he wanted to pass on his experiences to people back in Hungary through his writings, documentaries and photographs. He donated many items of his collections and trophies to Hungarian museums. He was laid to rest in the Arusha cemetery at the foot of Mount Meru.



The Flag Made for Ras Desta's Army -
Sewn and Embroidered by Mrs. Sáska

Closer to Africa

After World War II, the emerging great powers sought to extend their spheres of influence to (ex)colonies fighting for their independence. Following the rise of left-wing governments, many cooperation agreements were reached, including the decision to deploy health experts. As part of the socialist bloc, Hungary also had an increasing presence on the continent starting in the 1960s. The "shrinking world" brought Africa closer to Hungary along with the threat of tropical diseases. There were several ways for Hungarian professionals to reach the African continent. The World Health Organization, UNESCO and the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs regularly sent experts. TESCO Ltd. (Technical and Scientific Cooperation Office Ltd.) contracted healthcare workers beginning in 1968, sending them to Ethiopia, Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda.¹⁷

Most of these experts left for Ethiopia, where the Hungarian embassy had already helped to deepen relations. In the 1970s, a few Hungarians went to the hospital in Dessie. They fixed and reorganized the health care system, and they trained nurses. Miklós Poczik was the first Hungarian doctor to take a job in rural Ethiopia after World War II. He spent three years with his family in Dessie and established his practice in the regional hospital as the only surgeon in the province of Wollo, with a population of 3,500,000. He was devastated to witness the famine and cholera epidemic of 1973 when people starved to death on the streets while shops and bakeries were stocked with food. It was during this period that the first Hungarian female doctors arrived in the country. For example, a high-quality clinic for obstetrics and gynaecology was established under the leadership of Elvira Klung in Dessie.¹⁸

István Hulin also began his work in Wollo province, but soon became known as the only neurosurgeon in Addis Ababa. The Hungarian wife of the Ethiopian Minister of Commerce helped him get a job at the well-equipped Saint Paul's Hospital in the capital. He knew Péter Takács well, who was the Emperor's anaesthesiologist during his surgeries. After the emperor was deposed in 1974, a period of turmoil started. Dr. Hulin treated, among others, the deputy of the country's new leader, Mengistu Haile Mariam, who collided with a tank while driving his car and suffered a brain injury. It was just as demanding to work as a surgeon in the country as when Kálmán Mészáros did. Many wounded from the clashes of the Eritrean war of independence were coming in from Massawa by plane. Seeing and treating people's burns from napalm attacks by the Soviet-backed Ethiopian forces was brutal. There were also many wounded during the Ethiop-Somali war, in which the goal was to annex Ogaden Province (1977-78). Mengistu killed thousands of his opponents in an attempt to stabilize his socialist



dictatorship and many injured of these clashes ended up in the hands of the Hungarian surgeon. Street battles and shootings posed permanent threats for the Hungarians living there. His job was not made any easier by the fact that the resistance often stole ambulances, which were then used to transport their weapons. Dr. Hulin was as talented a musician like a few of his fellow doctors, and he gave concerts as a jazz pianist in Addis Ababa.¹⁹

József Heidl had an extraordinary journey to Africa. He packed his fishing equipment and his guitar in his car trunk, then drove all the way down from Budapest to Ethiopia with his son. He navigated through the tanks stationed on the closed Sudanese border, then was allowed safe passage into Ethiopia in exchange for the fish he caught on the road.²⁰ József F. Füsi opened his surgery clinic in one of the hottest cities, Massawa (which was then part of Ethiopia and today Eritrea). After a hard day's work, he and his family enjoyed the sight of palm trees and the Red Sea's sunny beaches. The war in Eritrea interrupted their idyllic life in 1974. They evacuated the Asmara hospital staff, and he remained the sole surgeon in the whole province for half a year. After more significant clashes, more than 200 people required surgery.²¹

Dr. György Demeter, a leprosy expert, arrived in the country at the end of the 1970s on behalf of the WHO with his wife, Katalin Fekete. Besides working in the leprosy hospital, he roamed the countryside with his jeep and treated village folks in his improvised tent-clinics.²²

Éva Mária Czére and Endre Mérő, a physician couple also employed by the WHO, lived in Mogadishu for five years from 1973. They spent the best years of their lives on the Horn of Africa.²³ They could see the country still torn by internal conflict in a more fortunate period, during the modernization efforts of Siad Barre and before the economic crisis resulting from the Ogaden War. As a result of a series of agreements between Hungary and Mozambique, Hungarian doctors could work and live in Mozambique as well. Dr. Endre Holvay lived on the former Portuguese colony for six years.²⁴

Der Marabout.



Marabou

Recent Missions

After the end of socialism in Hungary, the new government determined that Hungary's presence in Africa and the aid it provided to developing countries took up too many resources, so they terminated these connections. Rebuilding was a lengthy and costly process, in which the representatives of Hungarian medicine had considerable leeway. Because medical care in East Africa was predominantly low in quality, doctors could go where and when they were needed. Organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières, Doctors for Developing Countries, and Baptist Aid sent volunteers to help those in need. The projects of the African-Hungarian Union were other good examples of benevolent engagement in Africa. They launched programs in more than ten countries, and their medical missions have served thousands of patients since 2009. From their base in Kapeeka, they go on missions to Malawi and Uganda.²⁵ Since 2017, two Hungarian medical teams have worked in the foster house in Bura, Kenya supported by the Taita Foundation.²⁶ Erika Bálint, the daughter of Dr. Sáska's friend Gábor Bálint, lived with her father in Uganda and practised surgery at a paramilitary hospital in Addis Ababa. She went to Kenya as a volunteer with the help of an American organization.²⁷ These examples show that selflessness and the will to help remain governing principles of Hungarian doctors. Besides, one will always want to come back to Africa after having a taste of the wonders this continent has to offer.

The African missions of Hungarian doctors searching for cures of tropical diseases go beyond the daily process of healing and research. Gábor Ternák, a medicine professor in Pécs, spent his first extended tropical mission in Kafanchan, Nigeria. He established a collaboration with the university hospital in Eldoret, Kenya in 2009 so that Hungarian doctors and medical students could study in Africa. It was his idea in 2013 to open an educational hospital in Eldoret in cooperation with the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta, in which Hungarians could also work and do their research.²⁸ Our internationally recognized researcher and lecturer, Director of Trop-Med Hungary, Dr. Ágnes Axmann, worked in Ethiopia and other African countries. During her scientific work, she had outstanding success in inventing an anti-malarial drug. In 2000, she was selected as one of the top 2,000 scientists of the 20th century.²⁹

The Hungarian government's strategic development plans are essential in terms of building connections in Africa. In the framework of the "Southern Opening", the idea of reopening various embassies came up in 2015. The government launched a humanitarian aid program in Ethiopia and Tanzania in 2017, then supported health care service projects in Kenya.³⁰ In the framework of a fixed-loan programme, Hungarian companies began building hospitals in Kenya.³¹ In 2019, Hungary and Uganda signed Hungary's largest ever bilateral development assistance programme, worth 20 million USD, in the fields of water treatment, health care, tourism, governance and cybersecurity.³²

Being a talented doctor in the tropics is still not good enough. It requires a strong physique, patience, and compassion. Those travelling to Africa should expect to face multifaceted challenges. They have to fight a wide range of diseases, including many that we are not familiar with here in Europe. They also need to be prepared for the less advanced medical infrastructure. However, Hungarian physicians have proved that they can do their jobs on an outstanding level, despite all the difficulties. Facing unknown challenges and dangers demonstrates of their courage. We should be proud of our Hungarian doctors for their achievements in Africa.



Gábor Ternák

The University
Hospital in Eldoret

