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THE CROWN COUNCIL OF ETHIOPIA

HIS IMPERIAL HIGHNESS PRINCE ERMIAS SAHLE-SELASSIE HAILE-SELASSIE
PRESIDENT



Her Imperial Highness Princess Sophia Desta

January 25, 1934 – November 11, 2021

Emebet-Hoy Hannah Mariam Meherete Selassie Dereje has released the following statement on the passing of her mother, Her Highness Princess Sophia Desta, who will be deeply missed. Our condolences go to Hannah and to the rest of Princess Sophia's family.

Princess Sophia (then titled Emebet-Hoy) was born in Jimma, Ethiopia on January 25, 1934 to Ethiopia's great war hero Ras Desta Damtew, and Her Imperial Highness Princess Tenagnework Haile Selassie. Princess Sophia was thus a granddaughter of Emperor Haile Selassie I and Empress Menen Asfaw. When Ethiopia was occupied by the forces of Fascist Italy in 1935-1941 her father Ras Desta Damtew remained behind to lead Ethiopian forces on the southern front. He was captured and summarily executed by the fascists in February 1937. Her mother Princess Tenagnework was forced to go into exile with her children and the rest of the Imperial family to avoid capture by the fascist forces. The family first went to Jerusalem where the young Emebet-Hoy Sophia and her cousin Princess Ejegaheu Asfawossen spent their childhood. Princess Sophia later attended school in Alexandria, Egypt and afterwards joined her sisters to continue her education at Clarendon School in the United Kingdom.

Emebet-Hoy Sophia pursued her higher education at Froebel Institute at the University of Roehampton where she graduated with a BA in Education majoring in teaching. She was married in January 1959 in Addis Abeba to Captain Dereje Haile Mariam, son of war hero Haile Mariam Mamo, and was elevated by her grandfather Emperor Haile Selassie to the rank of Princess. She was widowed when Captain Dereje was killed fighting to put down the attempted Imperial Guard coup d'état of December 1960.

Princess Sophia Desta established a private institution, the Entoto International School which she ran personally. The school offered scholarships for students who came from underprivileged backgrounds thus giving them opportunities to achieve higher quality education. She was also involved in the many philanthropic efforts of the Imperial family including establishing Cheshire Ethiopia and working with the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) which provided support and training for young Ethiopian women and helped to enhance their livelihood. Princess Sophia will be best remembered for selflessness, generosity, her tireless charity work and avid interest in the education and welfare of not just Ethiopian children but all children and humanity alike.

Like her siblings and other family members Princess Sophia Desta enjoyed a very close relationship with her grandfather, His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie and was a frequent visitor at the Jubilee Palace. She accompanied His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I on several foreign state visits, most notably visits to Yugoslavia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Australia, Jamaica, and Trinidad and Tobago.

Princess Sophia Desta was among the members of the Imperial family that were imprisoned by the Marxist Derg regime upon the overthrow of the Ethiopian Monarchy in September 1974. She endured imprisonment under harsh conditions for 14 years, finally being freed in 1988. She first settled in Geneva, Switzerland and later in London, where she died on November 11, 2021. She is survived by her sister Imperial Highness Princess Seble Desta, her daughter Emebet Hoy Hannah Mariam Meherete Selassie Dereje, her grandson Lij Desta Asfaw, many nephews and nieces and family members.

She will be dearly missed by her family and friends by whom she has long been held in great affection.

Emebet Hannah Mariam would like to express her deep felt thanks and gratitude to all those near and far who have expressed their sadness at the passing of her mother.

May God rest the soul of Princess Sophia among the blessed, and may her memory be eternal.