The Hall Family and Ethiopia: 
A Century of Involvement

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Moritz Hall cast cannon at the Gaffat foundry established by Emperor Tewodros II. Married to Wälättä Iyäsus (Katarina), née Zander, they left Ethiopia with Napier in 1868, and settled in Jaffa. Katarina Hall returned to Ethiopia c. 1902, joined by her sons Jakob Gottlieb, Friedrich Salomon, and David, and daughter Christina. The Halls were closely associated with the royal court, most notably David, who had a long career as a diplomat and businessman during Haile Selassie's reign.

The Hall family’s association with Ethiopia began early in the second half of the nineteenth century and continued through the second half of the twentieth century. Moritz Hall, the progenitor of the family, left the country in 1868. However, the family’s connections with Ethiopia were maintained. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Mrs. Hall and several of her sons returned, followed by other members of the family. They made significant contributions to economic, cultural, and political affairs under several monarchs.

Moritz Hall was born in the vicinity of Cracow on 14 March 1838, the son of Johann Jakob Salomon Hall and his wife, Sofia Rebeka Babette Hall, née Kunze. Very little is known of his early life. The first records of Moritz Hall’s presence in Ethiopia describe him as a “Pole,” 2 alluding to his identification with his birthplace, Cracow, a city traditionally viewed as Polish, but at that time a protectorate of Russia, Prussia, and Austria. The area surrounding Cracow became a part of Russian Poland, and the inhabitants of the area were subject to conscription into the Czar’s army. The same early records of Moritz Hall in Ethiopia also mention his service in the Russian army and suggest that he may have been a deserter. Concerning Hall’s knowledge of metal casting, one source claims that he learned the craft early in life, perhaps in the city of Warsaw, while another attributes his knowledge of arms manufacture to skills acquired during his putative army service.3

Very little else is known about Moritz Hall’s early life. It is to be assumed that he received a traditional education. From “Poland,” it seems that Moritz Hall came to Ethiopia on his own, as an adventurer.4 Once in Ethiopia, Hall was associated with the British and German missionary societies,5 including those that sought to convert the

1 Department of Chemistry, Barnard College, 3009 Broadway, New York, NY 10027, USA. <tholtz@barnard.edu>
2 Holtz and Holtz, 1992: 52; Holtz and Holtz, 2003: 12, 50, n. 27.
3 Dufton, 1867: 85; Waldmeier, 1869: 13; Waldmeier, 1925: 36; Crummey, 1972: 132.
4 Markham, 1869: 75; Rubenson, 1976:179.
5 Some accounts indicate that the missionaries may have been responsible for Moritz Hall’s arrival in Ethiopia, by appointing him as a servant to a missionary, or by placing him as an aide to an officer who traveled to Ethiopia (perhaps Lieutenant John Bell, who went to Ethiopia around 1850, or Lieutenant, later Captain, Charles Speedy, who went to Ethiopia in 1861). However, no contemporaneous records name Hall as serving in any of these positions. See Report, 1860:22; and
“Falasha” Jews to Christianity. In the early 1860’s, he joined the settlement of the Swiss German Chrischona Brethren missionaries living in a colony at Gaffat, east of Lake Tana, the source of the Blue Nile, who had come to Ethiopia as a result of the efforts of Bishop Samuel Gobat. The Chrischona Brethren were known as “artisan missionaries” because of their plan to live and work alongside the residents and to teach crafts and skills, thereby attracting them to Christianity. Other European missionaries and lay settlers in Ethiopia were attracted to the Gaffat colony, where together they endured many hardships, due to the remote location of the station, their poverty and lack of funding, and their difficulties in communicating with the local population, but they were determined to continue their work and make a life for themselves, regardless of the minimal success of their missionary activities.  

While at Gaffat, Moritz Hall married the young maiden Wälättä Iyäsus (1850-1932), also called Katarina (or Katherine), on 17 May 1863. At the time of their marriage, she was fourteen years old. Her mother was Assete Worq Maqado, a member of the Ethiopian aristocracy, the first Ethiopian wife of the German Christoph Eduard Zander (1813-1868), the artist and illustrator for the German naturalist Dr. Wilhelm Schimper. Katarina’s later use of “Howsepian” as a maiden name may indicate that she had at some point lived with or been raised by an Ethio-Armenian family, who may have been related to her mother. The first child of Moritz and Katarina Hall, a son named Jakob Gottlieb, was born in 1866.

The residents at the Gaffat settlement initially benefited from the benign and welcoming attitude of the Emperor Tewodros (1818?-1868), who sought to modernize his nation as he attempted to consolidate his rule over Ethiopia. He encouraged the efforts of missionaries and foreigners, because he felt they would enlighten his subjects and improve their lives. However, the emperor’s emotional stability was severely affected first by the death of his wife Tewabetch in 1858 and further undermined by the deaths of his English advisers and friends, Walter Plowden, killed by brigands in 1860, and John Bell, at the hands of rebels against the emperor, in 1861. As part of his attempts to modernize his army, he ordered the members of the Gaffat colony to manufacture modern weapons, including cannon. Despite their protests that they had no knowledge of weapons production, the Emperor insisted. The artisans at Gaffat erected a foundry for the production of arms. It was at this juncture that Moritz Hall’s experience as a caster of brass (or iron) stood him in good stead. At Gaffat, the members of the colony constructed not only the molds to cast cannon, but also the mill dam and waterwheel for the bellows used in the smelter and ovens of the forge. After several unsuccessful attempts in 1862-1863, Moritz Hall and his artisan-missionary co-workers manufactured several cannon and other pieces of ordnance, to the emperor’s satisfaction. Most notable among these was the mighty cannon known as “Sebastopol,” still in existence today. The armaments foundry at Gaffat may be viewed as the beginning of modern industrialization in Ethiopia.

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7 Strebel, 2001: passim.
9 He said “it was the happiest day of my life.” See Rassam, 1869: II, 304-306.
10 Concerning the name of the cannon, see Pankhurst, 1971: 67.
11 The remains of the Sebastopol cannon are located at Mäqdäla. See photo in McEwan et al., 2006: 17. According to Pankhurst, 1977: 255, the settlement and foundry at Gaffat were destroyed in April of 1867. The European workers and their families were relocated at Debra Tabor, where the arms foundry was rebuilt and where Sebastopol was cast on 21 September 1867.
Despite his satisfaction with the successful casting of the cannon, Tewodros began to drink in excess and became vindictive and deranged. He now imprisoned all the English missionaries, ostensibly because he felt that a letter he had sent to Queen Victoria had been ignored, and subsequently, in 1867, the emperor held the other foreign worker missionaries and their associates captive, including Moritz Hall and his family. Eventually, all the captives were taken to the fortress of Mäqdäla, southeast of Gaffä. According to a letter published in a newspaper of the Basel Chrischona Mission, it was at this time, during the captivity at Mäqdäla, that Moritz Hall, born to Jewish parents, converted to Christianity.

On 13 April, Easter Monday, 1868, all the captives at Mäqdäla were freed by the British military expedition led by General (later Lord) Robert Napier, sent to rescue the British prisoners. During the battle and the storming of the fortress, the Emperor Tewodros took his own life. On the day of their liberation, Moritz and Katarina Hall’s second child was born, Magdalena, a daughter named for the battle at Mäqdäla. The Hall family and the other liberated foreigners left Ethiopia along with the British forces.

The Hall family was offered a passage to India with the returning British troops of the Indian army, but they appear to have traveled to Syria, perhaps to Baghdad. By 1874, the Halls settled in Jaffä, in the neighborhood known as the “German Colony,” where many inhabitants were members of the Temple Society, an evangelical German Protestant denomination with settlements in Palestine as part of its messianic ideals. Moritz Hall continued his connections with the missionaries of the London Jews Society and resided in their Jaffä mission house. From 1883 to 1885, Moritz Hall served as the manager of the missionary-sponsored Artouf colony in the hills west of Jerusalem, for potential converts to Christianity, but after his dismissal from this post, Moritz Hall returned to the Jaffä German Colony, where he was one of the elders of the community. Moritz Hall supported his family as a lumber merchant and as the proprietor of a hotel managed by his sons, known as the Hôtel du Parc because it adjoined the “Baron’s garden,” named for the Russian Baron Platon von Ustinov (1858-1917), who married Magdalena Hall in 1888. This garden, with its exotic trees and animals, was a popular gathering place for members of the German Colony and other Europeans visiting Jaffä or living there. The Hôtel du Parc was highly recommended by contemporary guidebooks and was a favorite with tourists. Kaiser Wilhelm and his wife, Augusta Victoria, stayed there when they visited Jaffä in 1898. Moritz Hall and his family came under the protection of the German Consulate in Jaffä, which he served as an Honorary Dragoman and interpreter. He never returned to Ethiopia. His health seems to have deteriorated, and there are references to a penchant for strong drink. He died on 27 January 1914, after a stroke, and was buried in the Templar cemetery in Jaffä.

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12 Christlicher Volksbote, 9 January 1867 (no. 2): 11.
13 Some accounts state she was born during the battle. See Holtz and Holtz, 1992: 57.
14 Their oldest son Jona (“Klop”) was the father of Sir Peter Ustinov (1921-2004); Moritz Hall was thus the great-grandfather of the famous British actor and director. See Holtz and Holtz, 1992: 62; Gräber, 1999: 173-174; Holtz, 2005: 980.
15 The Hebrew author Mordecai Ben-Hillel HaCohen (1928: Vol. 4, 62), Hall’s neighbor and friend in Jaffä, mentions Hall’s Ethiopian connections and his status as an elder of the Jaffä German colony. It was at this time also that Moritz Hall appears to have been acquainted with the Nobel Laureate S.Y. Agnon, who included an anonymous character identified as Hall in his Hebrew historical novel, T’mol Shitshom (Gestern, Vorgestern and Only Yesterday). See Holtz and Holtz, 1992: 49.
16 In 1952, his remains were transferred to the Jerusalem Templar Cemetery when the Jaffä Templar Cemetery was moved.
By the end of the nineteenth century, the Halls had thirteen children:

- Jakob Gottlieb Hall 1866-1919*
- Magdalena Hall Ustinov 1868-1945*
- Daniel Hall 1870-1943
- Pauline Hall 1872-1874
- Christina Hall 1874-1964*
- David Hall 1876-1971*
- Friedrich Salomon Hall 1879-1964*
- Joseph Hall 1882-1964
- Augusta Hall 1884-1936*
- Vera Hall Schumacher 1886-1983*
- Immanuel Hall 1888-1917
- Katia Hall Bach 1891-1978
- Olga Hall 1895-1911

(* indicates personal association with Ethiopia)

Without her husband, Katarina Hall returned to Ethiopia, accompanied by her son Jakob, around 1902. In time, Katarina Hall became a close confidante of the Empress Taytu, so close that she was viewed as wielding considerable, if not undue, influence at the court, particularly because of her involvement in the education of Lij Yasu. Katarina Hall died on 15 August 1932 in Addis Ababa, where she is buried.

Jakob Gottlieb Hall returned to Ethiopia, the land of his birth, after having lived in Jaffa and briefly in Haifa, and also in the United States. In Ethiopia, he was a businessman and an importer of machinery for the royal household. Besides his machine shop at the royal palace, he directed a school there for the sons of the aristocracy. Later on, he obtained concessions for exploring and mining minerals in Ethiopia. The Emperor Menilek appointed him to accompany Ethiopian diplomatic and commercial missions to Europe.

Friedrich Salomon Hall returned to Ethiopia in 1906, as part of his older brother Jakob’s program to bring German settlers and investors to Ethiopia, and to promote the development of industry and the country’s natural resources. Friedrich Salomon Hall founded and managed the Imperial Hotel, the first modern hotel in Addis Ababa. Many European travelers stayed in this hotel and described the magnificent views from its windows, as well as the barely adequate amenities in this so-called luxury hotel. During World War I, Friedrich Salomon Hall became a member of the secret mission led by the German Professor Leo Frobenius. The goal of the mission was to provide communication and funds for the German ambassador in Addis Ababa from the German Foreign Ministry in Berlin. Friedrich Salomon Hall disguised himself as an Arab guide of the mission, but the members of the mission were unmasked by the Italians in Eritrea, before they ever reached Ethiopia. According to one version of the story, Friedrich Hall tripped and exclaimed a decidedly European, non-Arab “Hoppla!,” and at the same time

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17 Katerina’s decision to return to Ethiopia may have been prompted by her contact with an Ethiopian delegate who traveled to Jerusalem in 1902 to resolve the status of the Ethiopian churches there. See Smidt, 2005b: 26.
was observed to have corns on his toes from wearing shoes, which would not be seen on a traditionally sandal-shod Arab.20 The members of the mission were imprisoned first in Eritrea, and then on an Italian island in the Mediterranean Sea, for a total of four years, until the end of the war. Friedrich Salomon Hall later settled in Dire Dawa, where he was a coffee trader, and was married to an Englishwoman.

David Hall was born in Jaffa but settled in Ethiopia, joining his mother and brothers there after World War I. In 1922, he founded the import-export firm Hall & Co., which represented several foreign firms in Ethiopia, including Ford, Opel, Agfa, and ICA. He became active in the cattle trade. He obtained a brewery concession and founded the Saint George Brewery, later the Addis Brewery, still in existence today. Visitors and travelers in Ethiopia during this period mention David Hall as the local agent who arranged for supplies, guides and servants, pack animals, and other necessities for their trips and expeditions.21

In addition to his business activities, David Hall served as director of government purchasing and as an adviser to the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry, and later as a Counsellor of State to the Emperor Haile Sellasie (1892-1974). In 1930, at the time of the celebrations of Haile Sellasie’s coronation, David Hall was the official press officer and the government’s liaison with foreign correspondents and dignitaries. Soon after, in 1935, David Hall went to Germany on a secret mission to buy arms for use against the Italian invaders of Ethiopia.22 During the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, David Hall lived in Palestine from 1936-1941, and as a diplomat in the service of the exiled Emperor, he traveled to Europe and to England to further the Ethiopian cause.23

After the liberation, David Hall returned to Ethiopia and lived in Addis Ababa. He resumed his business activities with a view towards public service. He traveled to Europe as a representative of the Ethiopian government, to interest displaced persons in settling in Ethiopia. His concessions put him in charge of road building in southern Ethiopia. He founded the Ethiopian Cooperatives and Mutual Assistance Fund, which was successful in providing employment and assistance. These cooperatives included a medical insurance fund with its own hospital and an experimental farm and agricultural school administered by Seventh Day Adventist missionaries, built on his land holdings in the countryside outside Addis Ababa, to educate and train street children from Addis Ababa as productive agricultural workers. As administrator of enemy (Italian) property, he had a pasta factory brought to Ethiopia, in an effort to provide much needed food. He continued his government service well into the 1950’s, serving as an adviser to the emperor and accompanying him on state visits. In his later years, he made his home in Addis Ababa, where he was highly respected for his wide first-hand knowledge of Ethiopia and Ethiopian affairs. Foreign visitors and researchers frequently consulted him for assistance and guidance with their projects. He paid for the construction of the synagogue in Addis Ababa. He was honored by the Emperor with Ethiopia’s second highest order, and upon his death in 1971, was given a funeral in the Trinity cathedral and was buried in a place of honor in its cemetery.24

Christina Hall went to Ethiopia as a teacher and then became a governess at the Royal Palace. She lived in Cyprus during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. Vera Hall

20  Smidt, 2005a: 44; Smidt, 2005b: 70.
21  See, for example, Herzbruch, 1925: passim; and Fuertes and Osgood, 1936: 12, 17, 27, 30.
24  Ethiopian Herald, 7 March 1971: 1, 3.
married the German physician and missionary Dr. Alfred Schumacher, and served with him for many years in Lebanon. She later joined her family members in Ethiopia, where she became a governess at the court of the governor of Eritrea. Augusta Hall, another sister, was also in Ethiopia at this time. When the members of the Ethiopian royal family fled to Jerusalem at the time of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1936, the Empress Menen and her daughter, Princess Tsehay, were interviewed by the local press. The reporter commented on the Princess’ fluency in English, French, and German. She explained that as a child, her mother’s German lady of honor took care of her, perhaps one of the Hall sisters.

Although Magdalena Hall Ustinov did not return to Ethiopia, the land of her birth, she was instrumental in augmenting the Ethiopian presence in Jerusalem. The Empress Taytu had convinced her adviser, Katarina Hall, to persuade her son-in-law, Baron von Ustinov, to acquire property in Jerusalem near the Ethiopian Church. The land was purchased in 1910, and construction of a large building began. Baron von Ustinov and his family left Palestine for Russia in 1913, where Baron von Ustinov died in 1917. His widow Magdalena, who went to live in England and later in Canada, inherited the land in Jerusalem and the partially completed building on it. During a trip to Jerusalem in 1924, she sold the property to the Empress Zauditu while the Empress was also visiting there. The Empress continued the construction on Ustinov’s foundations. The building became the Ethiopian Consulate and is still in existence. It is an enduring reminder of the activities of the Hall family in both Ethiopia and in Jerusalem.

Moritz Hall started his family’s relationship with Ethiopia when he came there as an adventurer. His ties to the country were strengthened by his marriage to Katarina. The subsequent records of the activities of the Halls and of their children reflect the family’s century-long involvement in Ethiopia’s history and underscore their varied contributions to many facets of Ethiopian life.

25 Smidt, 2005a: 45, who notes that members of the royal family called her “Tante Vera.”
26 Hoffman, 1936: 5.
27 Pedersen, 1983: 79; Smidt, 2005a: 42.
Figure 1. The Hall family in Jaffa, in the garden of the residence of Baron von Ustinov, 1902, at the time of the wedding of Daniel Hall. From left to right, upper row: Joseph, Friedrich Salomon, Jakob Gottlieb, David, Christina, Augusta and Vera Hall. Middle row: Mrs. Klimscher, Daniel Hall, Natalie Klimscher née Michalski, Moritz Hall, Wälättä Iyäsus (Katarina), Magdalena von Ustinov née Hall (holding Tabitha von Usintinov), her husband Baron Platon von Ustinov. Bottom row: Olga Hall, Katia Hall (later Bertsch), Immanuel Hall, Jona (“Klop”) von Ustinov, Peter (“Petja”) von Ustinov. (Photo courtesy of Otto Bertsch)
References


Christlicher Volksbote aus Basel. 9 January 1867 (no. 2). p. 11.


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