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History Made: Airlift of Ethiopian Jews Accomplished

In what was a brilliantly planned and flawlessly executed operation, 14,194 Ethiopian Jews, comprising over 3,000 families, were airlifted from Addis Ababa to Israel within some 36 hours.

Code-named "Operation Solomon," the airlift was accomplished in a mere 40 flights, involving dozens of aircraft. Twenty-four of the planes were Israeli air force jets, including Boeing 707s and Hercules transport planes. Ten El Al jumbo jets were used, and three flights used planes chartered from Ethiopia's state airline. At one point, there were 25 aircraft in flight simultaneously.

During the complicated operation, 10 babies were born — four or five of them in mid-flight. No deaths were reported, and only 195 were hospitalized upon arriving in Israel.

For the purpose of the operation, the El Al air crews and planes were conscripted into a special "El Al" wing of the Israeli air force. Israeli identification markings were painted over on

all aircraft, which were specially adapted to cater to far more than the usual number of passengers.

The IDF planes used in the airlift had their seats removed and replaced with foam rubber mattresses on which the huddled masses sat and lay.

The El Al jet freighters had had their cargo attachments removed and replaced by narrow seats, on which the newcomers sat, four in a normally two-seat row and seven in a center-row four-seat arrangement.

One El Al 747 jumbo jet set a world record by transporting 1,087 passengers, two-and-a-half times the normal capacity. To do this, arm rests were folded back, allowing six people to fill four seats. Three kitchens and eight of the 12 bathrooms on the plane were also converted to seating.

The plane's manufacturer, Boeing Corp., found it hard to believe the number when informed of the record load.

Ironically, Israelis were some of the last people on earth to learn of the airlift, because of



FLEEING ETHIOPIA — More than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews gathered at the Israeli Embassy in Addis Ababa on May 24, 1991, to be bused to the airport for the secret airlift to Israel. — AFP Photo



TOUCHING ISRAELI SOIL — Ethiopian Jews wait patiently for family members as they walk from an Israeli cargo plane's ramp. — UJA photo/Zion Ozeri

strict censorship rules that had barred any mention of Ethiopian Jewry since the May 21 resignation of Ethiopian leader Mengistu Haile Mariam.

The news blackout was imposed for fear that publicity from Israel might jeopardize the operation, just as published reports about Operation Moses halted the 1985 airlift of Ethiopian Jews from neighboring

Sudan.

Some 300 buses operated by the Jewish Agency for Israel transported the new immigrants to 44 absorption centers, 39 hotels and guest houses and many mobile homes throughout the country.

About 3,200 olim were directed to the south, some to Ashkelon and Eilat, most to mobile homes set up by the Jewish

National Fund at various sites in the Negev, including kibbutzim and moshavim. Other immigrants were taken to facilities in Jerusalem, Tiberias, Nahariya and Haifa.

About two-thirds of the immigrants are children under the age of 18, and some of them went to institutions operated by the Youth Aliyah Department of the Jewish Agency for Israel. Those
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Operation Solomon: An Eyewitness Report

By Martin F. Stein

UJA Honorary National Chairman

After two days of tense anticipation, I finally received the call that we would be leaving at 6:00 p.m. to witness the airlift of thousands of Ethiopian Jews to Israel. At the same time, 14,200 people, without telephones, televisions, or other electronic means of communication, notified each other in only eight hours that it was time to go. As if by some "divine intervention," the miracle of the ingathering had begun.

It began after we had arrived in Israel and were rushed to the military side of Ben-Gurion Airport. I reminisced of a past Ethiopian rescue from refugee camps, but little did I anticipate that this operation would be one of the most exhilarating and moving moments of my life. These refugees knew they were coming home and the warm greeting they received from their Israeli brothers and sisters was incredible.

As the Ethiopians stepped off the planes with little more than the tattered clothes on their backs and their thirsty children in hand (more than two-thirds of the arrivals were children), they bent down and kissed the ground, sighing, smiling and crying. Looking beyond their thin bodies and rags, these people were clearly regal and noble. As the Israeli soldiers led them to rest stations to wash and eat, a steady stream of Israeli citizens appeared with bags of clothing, shoes and toys. Israeli children played with the Ethio-



Martin Stein and young Ethiopians who just reached Israel. —UJA Photo/Zion Ozeri

pian children, dancing and singing in joy at the miraculous homecoming. The pilots of the rescue planes danced on the tarmac and soldiers held babies and wiped their tiny faces. With compassion, sensitivity and genuine affection, the Israeli people attentively cared for each new arrival.

Many poignant moments occurred during these days of rescue. One in particular took place in front of the Diplomat Hotel. A young second-year

Hebrew University student, who was assigned to meet the buses at this stop, patiently awaited the arrival of the first bus. As the door opened, a miracle unfolded. The first people who emerged were his parents whom he had not seen for seven years. Tears and shouts of joy and relief spilled from their loving reunion.

As we bore witness to these indescribable days, the biblical truths of our faith revealed themselves with hypnotic clarity. After thousands of years, we are still our brothers' keepers. We are responsible one for the other — Jew caring for Jew. We are the chosen people, not because we are better than any others, but because we demonstrate in deeds, not just words, what ethical, moral conduct is all about. At this miraculous moment, we relived our Jewish mission to be "a light unto the nations." We renewed our faith in ourselves and in our hopes for humanity. This was a moment that will forever stand out in our history amongst the peoples of the world.

(Editor's note: See pictorial review of Operation Solomon, page 15.)

Soviet Jewry Update

The local Soviet resettlement program continues to grow, despite the fact more volunteers are constantly needed to assist in driving, tutoring and socializing. Sally Schrader, the Resettlement Coordinator, plus key volunteers such as Penny Eisenberg, Miriam Diamond, Gregory Bunich, Isaac Grossman, Irving Mond and Jewish Family Services secretary, Dori Mileham are working hard to ensure that the many facets of resettlement occur in a timely fashion.

In 1990, Charlotte resettled a total of 31 persons in nine families. Although two families moved to New York for employment, 26 individuals are still in Charlotte. All the adults are working, although not all have jobs in their original fields. English has improved; the children are again at the JCC camp. Some have moved from their original apartments to other locations. All have been self-supporting for close to a year now. One example of how the emigres feel about Charlotte is that Igor Tsirlin, the son of one of the families who moved to

New York, has returned to Charlotte for part of the summer.

In 1991, there are 25 new emigres who arrived in April, May and July; 9 additional people will be arriving this month. The last four months of this year will also bring in new families. Many of the people are relatives of people already living in Charlotte, unlike the group that came last year. Of the newcomers, most adults are already employed; all are in English classes. The three young children attend the JCC camp. The teenagers are working part time and attending English classes at West Charlotte High School.

All of the new emigres have wonderful attitudes and desire to work to become totally self-supporting. They are anxious to meet with Americans and become integrated into the Jewish community.

What is currently needed are additional furniture, volunteer drivers, people to take families to Temple services, furniture movers and job possibilities. No one should assume that a handful of volunteers and the Resettlement Coordinator can alone resettle people who are starting over in a totally new culture. To be of assistance and come to know wonderful people who are pleased to be in Charlotte, please call 364-6594 or 364-6596.

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