

AIRLIFT OF ETHIOPIAN JEWS HAS BEEN HALTED, APPARENTLY BECAUSE OF ITS PREMATURE DISCLOSURE
By David Landau and Hugh Orgel

JERUSALEM, Jan. 6 (JTA) — The Jewish Agency confirmed today that the airlift of Ethiopian Jews to Israel via Sudan has been halted, apparently because it was prematurely disclosed. There were 35 flights since last November, by a Belgian charter airline, carrying thousands of Ethiopian Jews from their famine-stricken country. (See separate story.)

The operation had been subject to military censorship. The eruption of publicity about it here and abroad last week reportedly disturbed the governments of Ethiopia and Sudan, the latter a member-state of the Arab League.

(In Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian Foreign Ministry charged that the Sudanese government, unnamed "foreign powers" and "anti-Ethiopian and counter-revolutionary elements operating from within the Sudan have for a long time been forcing and enticing the inhabitants of the region to illegally cross over into the Sudan." The ministry also accused the unnamed foreign powers of providing "financial inducement" to the Sudanese in exchange for their cooperation.)

The publicity in Israel about the airlift triggered a barrage of accusations and counter-accusations between government and Jewish Agency officials over who was responsible. Ethiopian Jews already in Israel are fearful for the fate of their relatives who have not yet arrived. They are also angry over the way the local media described the newly arrived immigrants.

First Casualty Of The Foul-Up

The first casualty of what appears to have been a public relations foul-up was Yehuda Dominitz, veteran director of the Jewish Agency's aliya department. He was suspended by his department chairman, Haim Aharon, last Thursday, a day after the Gush Emunim magazine Nekuda published an interview which quoted him as saying the vast majority of Ethiopian Jews was already in Israel.

Dominitz insisted that his remarks were off the record and not intended for publication. Nevertheless, the Israeli authorities were forced to lift censorship. The rest of the media, which had known of the airlift but felt constrained not to publish, was furious that an obscure journal of West Bank Jews was able to break the story. It was widely published overseas.

The Prime Ministers Office, at a hastily called press conference Thursday, affirmed that what Dominitz told Nekuda was substantially true and disclosed some details of the measures being taken to house and integrate the newcomers from Ethiopia.

Sensational Stories Criticized

The Jewish Agency and the Ethiopian Jews blame the government for calling the press conference which resulted in a spate of sensational stories about the new arrivals and their poor physical condition. They were described as suffering from a variety of diseases endemic to Africa, some of them contagious. One physician was quoted as saying the newcomers resem-

bled Jews liberated from Nazi death camps at the end of World War II. The media also reported squabbles among mayors and local town councils in various parts of Israel accusing each other of unwillingness to accept the Ethiopians because the newcomers lack skills and are not likely to find jobs at a time of increasing unemployment.

Earlier Leaks Cited

Although the airlift operation was confirmed only last Thursday, there had been leaks much earlier. Leon Dulzin, chairman of the Jewish Agency and World Zionist Organization Executives, told a meeting of the WZO-American Section last November that the Jewish Agency "is preparing for a sudden jump in immigration, far beyond the figures we projected for this and the coming year. One of the ancient tribes of Israel is due to return to its homeland."

Dulzin added that when the true story of the Jews of Ethiopia is told, "We will take pride in what we have already achieved in this most difficult and complex rescue operation."

More than a week ago, the Israeli media carried reports of the welcome extended to Ethiopian newcomers in Eilat where many hundreds of them are housed in a newly built apartment complex. The same reports quoted officials of a Negev town as saying the Ethiopians were not wanted there because many of the townspeople are out of jobs.

The entire Ethiopian Jewish community is estimated at between 25,000-28,000. While most of them may now be in Israel as a result of the airlift and earlier clandestine escapes from Ethiopia, an unknown number remain in that country or are stranded in Sudan.

BELGIAN CHARTER AIRLINE AIRLIFTED SOME 10,000 ETHIOPIAN JEWS TO ISRAEL

BRUSSELS, Jan. 6 (JTA) — The Belgian Trans European Airways, a charter company with good connections in Sudan, is the carrier which airlifted about 10,000 Ethiopian Jews to Israel since last November, it was disclosed here. The flights were suspended over the weekend.

Trans European is owned by George Gutelman, a Belgian Jew. Informed sources said here Friday that it was chosen for the delicate rescue operation several months ago because of its long standing relations with the authorities in Sudan, the country from which most Ethiopian Jews have been flown to Israel after making their way on foot across the border.

Trans European carries thousands of Sudanese and other Moslems each year on their pilgrimage to Mecca. Sudan, a member state of the Arab League, has no diplomatic or other relations with Israel. The sources said the planes carrying Ethiopian Jews which took off from Khartoum were therefore obliged to fly to Israel indirectly, landing first at various European capitals, including Brussels and Rome.

The same sources said the operation was conducted in semi-secrecy because a large number of Ethiopian Jews were suffering from a variety of tropical diseases.

Trans European announced yesterday that it has withdrawn as the carrier after the Ethiopian government accused Sudan of aiding the operation. Sudan denied the charge.

The Times of London reported that Ethiopian Christian refugees in Sudan told a British scholar, Tudor Parfitt, that about 10,000 Ethiopian Jews fleeing war and famine, had crossed "100 miles of some of the most dangerous terrain in Africa" to get to Khartoum. He also said the graves of about 1,500 of them were uncovered near refugee camps in northern Sudan.

ANGER AND RECRIMINATIONS

By David Landau and Gil Sedan

JERUSALEM, Jan. 6 (JTA) — There was a great deal of despondency, bitterness and mutual recrimination today following the disclosure of the airlift of Ethiopian Jews and the subsequent suspension of the airlift. Informed sources predicted that a major effort would now be made in Israel to "lower the profile" of the entire matter in the hope — if hope still existed — of remedying the situation.

The weekly Cabinet meeting discussed at length the suspension of the airlift, but this part of the meeting was classified a session of the secret Ministerial Defense Committee and officials refused to divulge any details. Cabinet Secretary Yossi Beilin reiterated his official statement of yesterday that there had not been any cooperation between the governments of Israel and Sudan in the matter of the Ethiopian Jews.

The recriminations were directed against the government press office for holding a press conference Thursday at which official confirmation was given to the Ethiopian Jewry exodus story. The Tehiya Party and the Citizens Rights Movement have submitted separate non-confidence motions to the Knesset over the press conference.

Jewish Agency, Government In Bitter Exchange

There has also been a bitter exchange between the Jewish Agency and the government over responsibility for the leaks which apparently halted the airlift. Agency sources were quoted from London, where the Agency is winding up its semiannual meeting, faulting the government for holding the press conference.

Government sources responded angrily, pointing out the Jewish Agency deputy chairman and treasurer, Akiva Levinsky, had appeared at this press conference, and that it had been held with the specific approval of the Agency and of all other bodies involved in the Ethiopian rescue effort.

These sources said the purpose of the press conference had been to focus international public attention on the absorption problem rather than on the actual exodus procedure. (In fact, Sudan was not mentioned by government and Jewish Agency spokespeople at the press conference.)

Anger against the widespread publication of the Ethiopian exodus was also expressed by the immigrants themselves. Some 150 immigrants at the Ashkelon absorption center locked themselves in their rooms today and refused to talk to journalists who came to visit them. Immigrants reportedly protested the disclosure of the airlift which, they claimed, could jeopardize the transfer of the rest of the immigrants.

Calls For An Investigation

President Chaim Herzog expressed the hope today that the leak of the Ethiopian exodus would be carefully investigated, because the publicity endangered the lives of thousands of people.

(In New York, Yehiel Leket, chairman of the World Labor Zionist Movement, also called for an "official inquiry" in order to find out how the exodus story was leaked "and to avoid such possibilities in the future." He told the 26th triennial convention of the Labor Zionist Alliance today that the "leaking of the story in Israel on the rescue of Ethiopian Jews is irresponsible and may bring harm to the continuing of the operation." The disclosure, he added, "may also spoil Israel's credibility as a partner to the necessary secret venture and agreements to rescue Jews from oppressed countries in the future.")

HOME, AT LAST: FROM REPRESSION TO FREEDOM

By Hugh Orgel

TEL AVIV, Jan. 6 (JTA) — "Is this really Jerusalem, really Zion?" This question is asked over and over again by Jews from Ethiopia as they alight from the planes which have brought them here to freedom. When the newcomers are told that they are indeed in the Promised Land and in the Jewish State, most kneel down and kiss the soil.

They arrive in Israel without any luggage and are dressed more often than not only in a thin white cotton shirt — the "shammas" — and are often barefoot. The lucky few wear tattered sandals. After a quick medical examination at the airport, the new arrivals are taken to a special reception center in Ashkelon where they undergo a more thorough medical examination and are given elementary supplies, including new clothing.

Introduction To A New World

For virtually all of them, this is their first introduction to a new culture — almost a new world. They have never before seen electricity and electrical appliances. When they are provided with a refrigerator, they use it to store their new clothes, not knowing its proper purpose. The newcomers are also amazed and bedazzled by the buildings which surround them and in which they will now reside. They have never lived in houses of more than one story.

But the Israeli officials from the Ministry of Absorption as well as from the Jewish Agency, assisted by Ethiopian Jews who came here over the past year or so, say the newcomers, who have been arriving quietly and secretly for several months, are quick learners.

"They are very well disciplined, are quick learners, and adapt speedily to new surroundings and new circumstances," the officials say. But this is not mere happenstance.

A Special Program To Help The Newcomers

A special program has been drawn up to help the newcomers cope with the new conditions. During the first two months after their arrival they receive medical treatment, rest from their travels, are aided in their search for relatives from whom they had been separated in the past who arrived here earlier, and with the help of a team of translator guides they begin to acquire some initial idea of life in Israel.

After these two months, the immigrants begin to learn not only the Hebrew language but also basics about Judaism. They are taught arithmetic so that they can shop, they are also taught how to run a home, maintain hygienic conditions, and how to use household appliances.

Most of the immigrants who arrived up to approximately a year ago did not know how to read or write and were not accustomed to basic ideas and practices which are taken for granted in Israeli society. The

route from the repressive and famine-stricken society in which they lived before to the freedom they now enjoy cannot be traversed overnight. It is an often difficult and painstaking evolution. But Israeli officials and ordinary citizens take great care and patience in helping the new immigrants to assimilate the new culture and integrate into Israeli life.

(In New York, Yaakov Tsur, Israeli Minister of Immigration and Absorption, said that "an ancient tribe is now coming home to us after 2,000 years. We accept them like brothers." He told the 26th triennial convention of the Labor Zionist Alliance that there would be many problems in absorbing the Ethiopian Jews. "They have to close a gap of more than 2,000 years." But he described the ingathering as a "test for Israel and a test for the mutual responsibilities of Jews between Jews in the diaspora and in the free world.")

Some Criticism Is Voiced

There is, however, some criticism of how the newcomers are divided up among the various absorption centers to which they are sent. Members of the Gush Emunim and the settlers in Kiryat Arba, the Jewish suburb of Hebron, have been eager to accept the new immigrants -- for political reasons. The Jews from Ethiopia are religiously-oriented and would fit in well with the Orthodox milieu of the Gush settlements. They would also help expand the numbers of settlers in the administered areas.

But villages and settlements in northern Israel complain that the Ethiopian Jewish newcomers have been brought to their towns "like thieves in the night -- without warning and without preparation. We wake up in the morning and find that several families have been settled in a new housing block which does not yet even have a water or sewage system."

Residents in these areas ask: "What are we expected to do with them? We already have unemployment among the veteran residents -- and the new immigrants have no knowledge of machinery and have no special skills. More thought should have been given to their absorption."

Meanwhile, the new immigrants seem oblivious to all this. They are busy settling down and beginning a new life. At the moment they are preoccupied with one thought -- they are home, at last.

U.S. HAS BEEN HELPING ETHIOPIAN JEWS TO EMIGRATE TO ISRAEL

By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, Jan. 6 (JTA) -- The State Department confirmed Friday that the United States has been assisting Ethiopian Jews to emigrate to Israel, but refused to give any details.

Department deputy spokesman Alan Romberg read a carefully worded statement after being asked about the announcement in Israel a day earlier that some 10,000 Ethiopian Jews have been airlifted to Israel recently:

"The United States is deeply concerned about the plight of African refugees, including African Jews, who have been affected by conflict, oppression, famine in the region. The U.S. has taken a direct and special interest in their well-being and we are continuing to work with international organizations, voluntary agencies and the governments of concerned countries to provide food, medical

care and resettlement opportunities for refugees. The U.S. has been working quietly and closely with a number of organizations and governments to save the lives of African refugees, including African Jewish refugees."

Romberg said he would not "get into the detail of what we have done and how we have done it."

BACKGROUND REPORT 2,000 YEARS OF ISOLATION

By Gil Sedan and Hugh Orgel

JERUSALEM, Jan. 6 (JTA) -- The airlift which has brought large numbers of Ethiopian Jews to Israel in recent months has revived long-standing problems and controversies stemming from that community's 2,000 years of isolation from the rest of world Jewry.

Until 1973, the Israeli rabbinate refused to recognize them as bona fide Jews. In that year, the then Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Ovadia Yosef, ruled that Ethiopian Jews who call themselves Beta Israel (House of Israel) are descended from the lost tribe of Dan and eligible for repatriation to Israel.

In 1975, the government officially recognized the Ethiopians as Jews entitled to citizenship under the Law of Return and about 300 of them made their way to Israel during the next few years.

Conflict arose when the rabbinate demanded that all males undergo a new ritual circumcision. The Ethiopians took this as an affront and the rabbis modified their demand to a "symbolic drop of blood" to be drawn as part of conversion to the talmudic and halachic Judaism practiced in Israel.

Even that was subsequently dispensed with. The rabbis asked only that the new arrivals submit to ritual immersion. But spokesmen for the Ethiopian community here considered it a degrading act and an expression of doubt that they are authentic Jews.

An Old Problem Revived

The problem was revived with the arrival of as many as 10,000 Ethiopian Jews in Israel by airlift from Sudan since last November. Israel's Ashkenazic and Sephardic Chief Rabbis, Avraham Shapiro and Mordechai Eliahu, respectively, maintained that the "conversion-from-doubt" (Giyyur Lehumra) was necessary if the newcomers are to avoid personal problems in the future.

They noted that Ethiopia's Jews lived apart from the rest of Jewry for two millennia and there was concern that over that vast period they inter-married with non-Jews. Another problem is the widespread divorce among Ethiopian Jews which Israeli religious authorities fear is not carried out according to halachic rules.

Ethiopian Jews were cut off from developing Jewish tradition after the destruction of the Second Temple. But they guarded their Jewish identity which they continue to express by strict adherence to the commandments of the Torah, particularly the dietary laws and Sabbath observance.

They read the Torah in the Geez language, an ancient Semitic tongue. They speak Amharic, also a Semitic language which is the official language of Ethiopia. Ethiopian Jews do no work on the Sabbath or light fires. They observe ritual purification and the various Biblical feasts and fasts, but have no Chanukah or Purim.

Controversy Over Lineage

There is still controversy over their lineage. The rabbinate has officially accepted their claim to des-

cent from the tribe of Dan, which the Philistines ousted from the coastal plain of Israel, and the claim that their ancestors were the Ethiopian princes, including the Queen of Sheba, who King Solomon and members of the court took as wives.

But many anthropologists maintain that the Ethiopian Jews are descended from local tribes which converted to Judaism in the sixth century of the Common Era, under the influence of the Jewish community of upper Egypt.

Physically, the Ethiopian Jews are indistinguishable from other Ethiopians who are dark-skinned with African features. Until the 17th century they constituted an autonomous kingdom within the Christian Ethiopian empire.

With the loss of independence they became a poor, rejected minority. Rumors of semi-independent Jewish tribes in Ethiopia reached Europe in the Middle Ages. Authentic information was first made available by James Bruce, an Englishman, in 1790. They were estimated then to number 250,000.

Beginning in 1904, the Polish-born Jewish scholar, Jacques Faitlovitch, attempted to bring the Ethiopian Jews -- known as Falashas (strangers) -- into contact with the mainstream of Jewish life. Pro-Falasha committees were established in Europe and North America which trained teachers and maintained schools in Addis Ababa. Since 1948, similar activity was carried out by the Jewish Agency.

Only in 1960, however, did Jewish organizations in the West attempt to establish contact with the Ethiopian Jewish community which shared the fate of most of their hopelessly poor non-Jewish neighbors and endured the latter's often open hostility toward them. The average income per capita in Ethiopia is about \$100 a year and the average life expectancy is 36 years.

Attitude By The Present Regime

The present Marxist regime in Ethiopia takes a negative attitude toward all religions and has acted to secularize education. A ban was imposed on the study of Hebrew and synagogues were ordered closed several years ago.

For a long time the regime denied the Jews the right to emigrate and suppressed by force any expression of cultural uniqueness by Jews or other ethnic groups. The government regarded attempts to leave the country as treason and imposed severe penalties on those who were caught.

But the attitude toward Jews has been modified during the past two years. Although Hebrew is still officially forbidden, synagogues have reopened and visits by outside Jews, including Israelis, have been allowed. The number of Ethiopian Jews was estimated at 25,000 several years ago but many are believed to have perished, victims of starvation and the ongoing civil war.

Because the very existence of the Ethiopian Jewish community was in jeopardy, organized efforts to bring them to Israel were begun by former Premier Menachem Begin shortly after he took office in 1977.

His Defense Minister, the late Moshe Dayan, then disclosed that Israel was supplying arms to the Marxist regime with which it did not, and still

does not have diplomatic relations. As a result of the disclosure, the early airlift was halted after only two flights.

LEGISLATION INTRODUCED IN CONGRESS TO ESTABLISH 'RADIO MACCABEE' WHICH WOULD BROADCAST RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE PROGRAM TO JEWS IN THE SOVIET UNION By David Friedman

WASHINGTON, Jan. 6 (JTA) -- In an effort to prevent the isolation of Soviet Jews from the West, legislation was introduced in Congress Thursday to establish a program called Radio Maccabee which would broadcast Russian-language programs to Jews in the USSR.

Sen. Paula Hawkins (R. Fla.) and Rep. Matthew Rinaldo (R. NJ) introduced concurrent bills in the Senate and House during the opening session of the 99th Congress to provide \$3 million for setting up Radio Maccabee as a separate arm of Radio Liberty which broadcasts into the Soviet Union.

The special program would include items of general cultural, intellectual, political and religious interest to Soviet Jews as well as provide Hebrew education courses. It would particularly serve the needs of refuseniks and activists.

Hawkins and Rinaldo stressed at a press conference Thursday, the increased harassment of Soviet Jews and the decrease in emigration which totaled less than 1,000 in 1984. "The plight of Soviet Jews has rarely been worse," Hawkins said.

Hawkins said Soviet Jews are fighting to make their voices heard. "Their courage, their organization, and their contacts in the West have allowed them to retain some visibility despite overwhelming Soviet pressures," the Senator said.

Hawkins stressed that the Soviet government knows that the Jewish activists need information to survive, "information flowing in from the West, flowing out with the news of their plight We are here to keep the lines of communication open with the Jews of the Soviet Union."

Program Essential At This Time

Rinaldo noted that Radio Maccabee is needed at a time when "Soviet authorities, in violation of the Helsinki accords are interfering with both postal and telephone communications and seek increasingly to isolate their Jewish population from contact with the West."

He stressed the news service would "supplement and not replace" Radio Liberty's existing programs to the USSR. He said that presently Radio Liberty devotes a half hour a week to a program for Soviet Jews and, rather than take the time away from its existing programs, the new service is needed. He said it is hoped that Radio Maccabee could be on the air for up to six hours a day.

JERUSALEM (JTA) -- For the first time since 1982 Israel will take part in Cairo's annual book fair, which opens January 22, according to reports from the Egyptian capital Sunday. Israel was not allowed to participate in the 1983 fair because of its invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Last year, Egypt said Israel had applied too late and no stands were available.