

An Interview with Barbara Ribakove Gordon:
NACOEJ's Efforts in Operation Solomon

Interviewee: Barbara Ribakove Gordon, Executive Director and Founder,
NACOEJ¹

Interviewer: Judy Dick, Coordinator of Educational Programs, NACOEJ

Date: February 13, 2008

Location: New York, NY

Q: Can you tell me more about NACOEJ's involvement during Operation Solomon²?

Historical Background: *The Ethiopian government was losing a civil war and had established a relationship with Israel. They had already begun to allow Jews to leave under a family reunification claim. This caused many Jews to go to Addis Ababa³ in the hopes of getting on planes to Israel.*

The interviewee begins to go into great depth describing her experiences leading up to and during Operation Solomon.

¹ North American Conference for Ethiopian Jewry, the non-profit organization founded in 1982 by the interviewee. Its goals are to give aid to Ethiopian Jews in Ethiopia, help them get to Israel, work to integrate them into Israeli life, and maintain their traditions (NACOEJ. n. d. Retrieved January 29, 2008 from <http://www.nacoej.org/>).

² Second mass airlift of about 14, 500 Ethiopian Jews from Ethiopia to Israel in 1991 (Kessler, 1996).

³ Addis Ababa is the capital of Ethiopia and place of departure to Israel. The airport and Israeli embassy were in Addis Ababa.

Ethiopian Jews Arrive in Addis Ababa

Gordon: The rebels and the Ethiopian army are battling on the road from Gondar in the north to Addis Ababa in the center of the country and there's no transportation. And months go by and those who arrived with a little money have already spent it and they have no food and they have no shelter and they have no way of getting to Addis Ababa. In the spring of 1990 the rebels move on elsewhere, I don't think they were driven off the road, I think they had made all the progress they needed to make on the road, they were done with it, but that doesn't matter. Trucks and buses started to move. Some of them actually were sent and paid for by the AAEJ⁴ which decided they were going to try to bring the Jews down to Addis faster.

And thousands of Jews start pouring into Addis Ababa and they are in terrible condition. They are hungry and sick and dehydrated and ragged and some of them are dying. And they're showing up in Addis in May. May is the beginning of the rainy season. For us it's the beginning of the summer but for Ethiopians it's the beginning of the cold rainy season, and it's pouring rain, and these people are arriving in Addis Ababa and they have no shelter, and they're dying. Well, since it was now legal for Jews to come to Addis Ababa, the Israelis⁵ have an embassy there now. The American embassy, which has been in Addis for many years, but virtually under city arrest for

⁴ American Association for Ethiopian Jews. The AAEJ was created in 1974 and disbanded in 1993 after its main goal of rescuing Ethiopian Jewry and bringing them to Israel was achieved: Howard M. Lenhoff, *Black Jews, Jews, and Other Heroes* (Jerusalem: Gefen Publishing House, 2007). This transport program made Operation Solomon possible later in the year: Stephen Spector, *Operation Solomon: the daring rescue of the Ethiopian Jews* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵ During the reign of Emperor Selassie, Israel had strong ties with Ethiopia. These were cut in 1973, after the Yom Kippur war. A relationship began again in the 1990s, when the Ethiopian dictator, Mengistu Haile Mariam, needed help and allowed the Israeli embassy to reopen (Kessler, 1996, xxvii-xxviii).

most of it, was there. And NACOEJ, which has been sending in its missions pretending to be tourists, which is, you know, like a joke, um, we pretend to be tourists, the Ethiopians pretend to think that we're tourists, but obviously we're not. But of course in the 1980s we were a source of hard currency, nobody was coming to Ethiopia, they had no hard currency. We bring our American dollars, thousands of dollars, and we spend it, and we changed it at the bank legally, not on the black market. So they were letting us in a little bit. But now we can come in legally, and open a compound⁶ and start helping these Jews, which we did, the AAEJ did, they were ahead of us in Addis Ababa. And all of a sudden the JDC⁷ is there, with a clinic, and the Israelis are there, and in August the Israelis are asking that we all work as one team and we did, amazing, just amazing! Three American Jewish organizations, the AAEJ, NACOEJ, and JDC, and the Israeli embassy, and JDC Israel and the Jewish Agency⁸, were all working together, who ever heard of such a thing?!

When I got there in August, we already had people in there from May, and I got there in August, the woman who was the caretaker of the Jewish cemetery in Addis, there is a Jewish cemetery in Addis, was complaining that she never got to sit down for breakfast, lunch, or dinner because there were so many funerals every day. A lot of them were Jewish children, I had heard of that, that period, really, things were terrible.

⁶ NACOEJ's compound served as a community center, providing more aid to the Ethiopians as described later in the interview.

⁷ (American) Jewish Distribution Committee. They began donating money to help Ethiopian Jews in 1974 (Kessler, 1996, p. 163).

⁸ The Jewish Agency is an Israeli government-related organization partly funded by the United Jewish Communities/The Federations of North America. (Kessler, 1996).

Efforts to Help Ethiopian Jews in Addis Ababa

JDC opens a clinic and starts giving vaccinations and basic healthcare. We opened programs for children, and some employment for adults, and the death rate, as I said, goes down. People find housing and it gets paid through a stipend for families who are registered⁹ by the Israeli embassy, received at the embassy, and we were all were working all together. This is May, June, July, August of 1990.

And the Ethiopians are allowing some Jews to leave, not very many, because they open the gates and let some out to Israel, then they close them again and demand something more from the Israelis. And sooner or later they get what they want or they agree that they can take something less, or whatever, and they open the gates again and a few more planes go out taking Jews from Ethiopia to Israel legally. And finally the war is coming to a climax, the Ethiopian army has been pushed back and pushed back and the rebels are at the gates of Addis Ababa, or almost. And meetings¹⁰ start in America, in which we participated, in Europe, in which we participated, in Addis Ababa, in which we participated. With Israelis, wonderful people like Uri Lubrani¹¹, the great Israeli negotiator, American organizations, ours, AAEJ, JDC, many others, the UJA¹², I think the ADL¹³ was involved, all of a sudden it's a popular cause, what are we going

⁹ Registering meant that they were certified as Jews by checking them against a list of Beta Israel compiled in 1976. After they registered they received their ID cards (Spector, 2005).

¹⁰ By the winter of 1991, the Israeli government realized it was an urgent situation and an evacuation plan for the Ethiopian Jews was planned (Kessler, 1996).

¹¹ Lubrani, a diplomat, was part of an Israeli military mission that planned the evacuation of the Ethiopian Jews (Kessler, 1996, xxviii).

¹² United Jewish Appeal.

¹³ Anti-Defamation League.

to do, there's going to be a battle for Addis Ababa and there are still 20,000 Jews left there because they're leaving very slowly. And Uri Lubrani, I remember, saying that what really terrifies him, is not that the rebels will march in and take over, which they will certainly do, and he's not even as scared as we were about the battle for Addis Ababa, what terrifies him is if the government falls before the rebels come in, the Jews will be unprotected in a completely anarchistic city in which many, many people are armed. Because Ethiopian soldiers deserting the army had been coming through Addis and selling their guns, to get a few birr, Ethiopian currency, to try to go home to their villages, there were loads of guns. As Lubrani says, "Everybody knows the Jews get money from the Israeli embassy on a regular basis, they have no *protectziah*¹⁴ they are outlanders, they're Jews, they're not even Christians or Muslims like everybody else", and he was afraid that "there will be a mass slaughter of the Jews for their money, whatever they can get, so we have to get them out of there".

NACOEJ's Role

So the plan gets created and no one knows when it's going to happen but somehow or other they're going to get the Jews out of Ethiopia. And I get called into the office of the head of the JDC¹⁵ who tells me "Israel wants you to go to Ethiopia immediately

¹⁴ Israeli slang word that literally means protection, but also means having the right connections.

¹⁵ The interviewee is in New York. This detailed information is important historically because it explains how NACOEJ came to be involved with the Falash Mura.

because the operation's going to take place in a short time and you have to deal with the Falash Mura¹⁶". That brings us to -- you've heard of them? OK, you know who they are, alright. Along with the 22 or however many thousand it was of Jews who had come down to Addis in the spring and summer of 1991, there were a few thousand Falash Mura. They had come along, they had come to the Israeli embassy and said, "We're Jews and we want to go to Israel!" And they had been turned away. They were told, "You don't qualify under the Law of Return¹⁷, you're practicing another religion, we don't care, you know, why you come from families that converted, why they converted, how long ago they converted, how recently, whatever your secret practices may have been, it doesn't matter, you are rejected, go home to your villages". And they said they can't go home to their villages, they'd left everything behind. Some of them, by the way, were well-to-do people in their villages, they had jobs, they were judges, they were government officials. And they said, "No, we have cast our lot with the Jewish people, we've always believed we were Jews, we've always wanted to go home to Jerusalem, and we will not go back. And if we try to go back, they'd kill us anyway, because our land is now in someone else's hands". At the time, I didn't believe that, but now I know they were telling the absolute truth.

¹⁶ The Falash Mura are the children and grandchildren of Jews who made pro-forma conversions to Christianity in order to feed their children during periods of famine. Many secretly returned to Judaism under their own religious leaders. Those still in Ethiopia lead fully Jewish lives and are considered members of the Jewish people by leaders of the Reform, Conservative and Modern Orthodox movements in the United States, as well as by prominent rabbis in Israel.

¹⁷ "... the Ministry of the Interior, in April 1975... decreed that the Falashas (Ethiopian Jews) were entitled to automatic citizenship under the Law of Return, which declares that every Jew has the right to settle in Israel": (Kessler, 1996, pp. 161-162). This decision was made only after the Chief Rabbis of Israel had confirmed their belief that Ethiopian Jews were authentic Jews in the early 1970s (Kessler, 1996). The Israeli policy at this time was not to accept these Christian converts as Jews and therefore refused to be responsible for them.

So the Israelis had rejected them and they were not getting the little, pitiful stipend that the Jews were getting to pay their rent and buy their food. It had to, by the way, be a small stipend because the last thing in the world that you wanted to do was make the Jews richer than their non-Jewish neighbors. They had to be poor people to protect them. So the Falash Mura began to die in the streets in considerable numbers. At a meeting in the Israeli embassy, Michael Schneider of the JDC said “I want to help these poor people, we should give them something” and a decision was made that a smaller stipend than went to the regular Jews, but hopefully enough to keep them from actually dying, would be given to them. That they would be registered and there would be a cut-off date and word would go up to the Falash Mura villages that anyone who came down to Addis after a certain date would get no help whatsoever. And that was good because this was obviously a tragedy and if we try to stop more people from coming down and joining in the tragedy, we’re doing the right thing. And they needed somebody to interface with the Falash Mura and they asked NACOEJ to be that somebody, something they have regretted a great deal ever since¹⁸.

And so we agreed and Solomon Ezra, the Ethiopian-Israeli who had first introduced us to the concept of getting people out of Ethiopia, had come to work for NACOEJ in Addis. And we had an American, Andy Goldman, who was our representative there and they were there. And so in May 1991 Michael Schneider told me I had to get there very fast and stop the Falash Mura from rioting when the operation took place because they were going to be left behind. And I said “How on

¹⁸ This is another important historical detail concerning how NACOEJ came to be involved with the Falash Mura. The interviewee’s comment, “something they have regretted a good deal ever since” refers to the current situation in which the Israeli government would like to end the emigration of the Falash Mura to Israel and stop any aid given to them in Ethiopia, while NACOEJ believes in continuing the emigration and aid until there are no more Falash Mura left in Ethiopia (Uriel Heilman. *Falasha Mura Wait to Emigrate*, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, February 14, n.d., Retrieved February 10, 2008 from <http://www.jta.org>).

earth do you expect me to stop people from rioting, it's not possible and further more they don't know me. I'm someone who comes and goes. The people they know are Andy Goldman and Solomon Ezra!" Several months earlier the expats from America and other countries had left Addis in large numbers because it was getting very dangerous and they were supposed to leave. Andy and Solomon had refused to leave and we had allowed them to stay until finally when a battle looked really imminent and we were aware that if the rebels seemed to be taking the city, that the Ethiopian government would have no hesitation in bombing it, we ordered Andy and Solomon to get out. And they finally agreed to leave but only to go as far as Israel because they said we'd be back, we won't be gone long. So I said, "Andy and Solomon are the people that they know and trust!" "Well, get them there too and tell them we'll get them extra food and more money." So I went to Addis and Andy and Solomon came and joined me.

And we were running programs in our compound for the normative Jews. And the Falash Mura would show up every two weeks to get their stipend from us, which Solomon would give them. And Solomon and Andy and other members of our organization who had gone and spent some time there, had come to believe that these people were sincere about wanting to return to Judaism, that many of them had given up a decent life in Ethiopia in the hope of going to Israel. We had come to respect them and believe in them. Furthermore, the Chief Rabbis were saying they are Jews and they must be welcomed back into the fold¹⁹.

¹⁹ The interviewee explains her transition and how NACOEJ came to support the Falash Mura. The Chief Rabbis of Israel also ruled that they be accepted as Jews (Uriel Heilman. Aid Request for 8, 000 Falasha Mura Prompts Concern of Endless Aliyah, *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, January 9, n.d., Retrieved February 10, 2008 from <http://www.jta.org>).

Evacuation Plans

So in May 1991 Andy and Solomon and I are there in Addis and the Hilton hotel is beginning to fill up with journalists coming to see the fall of the city. And the Americans who are left in the city are called into the office of the American ambassador, Bob Houdek, who tells us that the airport is shortly going to close. “We have one more plane that can get you out of here and take you home to America tomorrow. Everyone who’s willing to get on that plane raise your hand.” He looks around and, of course, no hands are going up because those who stayed intended to stay. And some of the memorable things, Bob Houdek gave us a talk. He said, “OK, I’ve lived through a couple of revolutions in Ethiopia, in Africa, so here’s my advice. If you refuse to leave, if you’re living in an apartment or a villa, go check into the Hilton. It’s probably pretty safe because the rebels are not going to want to attack the representatives of other countries deliberately. They’re going to want help. So they probably won’t attack the Hilton, can’t guarantee it, but you’re safer there than anywhere else when the battle for the city begins. When you hear gunshots outside, don’t go to the door to see what’s going on, don’t go to the window, go under the bed and stay there. And make sure that you have put into your room water and food because you may be there for quite a while. Now go home and check into the Hilton.” Well, we were already staying in the Hilton and other people came in there. And I remember still one night when there were tanks were taking up positions in the streets. And, we still don’t know when Operation Solomon, which didn’t have a name yet, was going to take place.

Thursday, late afternoon, May 23, we get a call to come over to the Israeli embassy immediately, Andy, and Solomon, and I. No, wait a second, I'm skipping something, OK. We're at the compound, Wednesday²⁰ and Mengistu flees the country, having told his entire people to fight to the last drop of blood, he gets on a plane and takes off with his entourage and they head for Zimbabwe. And he's gone, and we're at the compound, and, Solomon is over in one part of the compound handing out stipends to Falash Mura and Andy and I are in another area where we have weavers working²¹, and embroiderers working, and children playing games and stuff. And a car pulls up to the area where Solomon is, he comes to tell us what has just happened. He said an Ethiopian in the uniform of an Ethiopian army major got out of the car and walked up to him and said "I'm a Jew, and I'm telling you now, close this place down, send everybody home, you go home, wherever you're staying,, because things are going to get very bad now. Mengistu has left the country and things are going to be very dangerous, close this place up and get everybody out of here." So Solomon came over and told us so we closed the place up. Those Falash Mura who hadn't received their stipends had to leave without them. And the embroiderers rolled up their work and the weavers rolled up their work on their looms and put it all in one little room that we have as an office that could be locked. And Andy gave everybody the same instructions we had gotten from Bob Houdek, except, of course, they didn't have any windows, so we just told them not to look out their doors. They didn't have any beds to go under so we said get down on the floor and keep your children there. And they were in real danger

²⁰ May 22, 1991. Mengistu left on May 21(Spector, 2005).

²¹ The interviewee had mentioned that they gave Ethiopian Jews some employment. She explained that NACOEJ chose to create an embroidery program because it was a traditional craft that both men and women could do.

because, I mean, they were in mud huts, I mean, with bullets flying around, no barrier. “Just get down on the floor and stay there when you hear shooting,” and they were very quiet and very calmly left.

And we got into our little beat-up car and drove back to the Hilton where word had gotten out that Mengistu had fled. And some of the Hilton staff promptly got a ladder and took down this huge portrait of Mengistu, whom everybody hated, and then about an hour later they got nervous and put it back up. And the place is filling up, filling up with reporters and they’re all there to cover the fall of the city but they are also looking for Americans because there were rumors that there’s going to be an evacuation of the Jews and they want to know what we can tell them about it. We tell them, “We don’t know anything about it, don’t know where you heard it from, we don’t know anything about it.”

Operation Solomon Begins

On Thursday, we get this call to come to the Israeli embassy and we were then officially instructed that Operation Solomon now has a name and it is going to begin on Friday morning. And we are to be at the embassy at 6AM and we will have jobs to do until the Jewish Agency personnel who are coming over from Israel arrive on the first planes that are coming over to pick up the Jews. And we should now go home and be prepared to get here first thing in the morning. So we went²² back to the hotel and didn’t really sleep that night, and very early in the morning we met in the lobby. And then Solomon was very

smart and said, "Listen, they told us to be there at 6AM but the curfew --" there was a curfew in Addis of course, nine o'clock at night until 5:45, something like that, in the morning. He said "Your watch may say that it's 5:45 and the curfew is over but there are guys out in the street with guns and their watches may not say that the curfew is over, so we're waiting until six o'clock and then we'll leave." And that is what we did. We got into our beat-up car and drove to the embassy where we were assigned our tasks for the operation.

And meantime a kind of information tree had been arranged, they were giving instructions the night before to a lot of Ethiopian Jews. We watched them getting their instructions. They were to fan out that night and tell everybody to head for the embassy the next morning and to bring their children and nothing else. They were to leave everything behind. "Just show up with the children and your identification papers and your papers from the JDC clinic where many people had been treated for tuberculosis" -- there was a lot of tuberculosis. "You bring all those things with you and nothing else".

And the next morning, Friday, the Jews come to the Israeli embassy, they all knew where that was because that was where they came to get the money that was their living stipends. I was assigned to one of the very early desks, wasn't a desk, there was a little wooden bench and a chair, to check people's ID as they came in. The head of the household would have a card, with his photograph on it and his name, and on the back there would be the names of all his dependents, his wife and the children and what age they were. And I was to check that the man looked like the man, and the right number of dependents, and I would have a translator in case I had to ask questions. And in case

people brought anything with them besides their papers, I was to take it all away from them. There were reasons for that. Some of the Israelis were afraid that the Ethiopian Jews would have told their Christian neighbors, where they were going and that the Christian neighbors might give them a package with a bomb hidden in it. Highly, highly, highly unlikely, this was not a terrorist scene. But more important, they were going to be packed into the planes, and a bundle could take up the space a baby would take up and nobody knew how many planes would get through.

So that was my job, and a very painful one it was, to take people's things away from them, that was awful²³. And you know, occasionally there was a guy who had a job, and had a radio, and could not believe his radio, such a precious possession, was being taken away. And some of them had brought food, they were going on a journey, and they packed food and we wouldn't even let them take that! Some of them had a bundle with precious little photographs in it, and with clothes in it, and I did tell the women, "You know, if you have an extra dress in there, put it on!" and a man who had another pair of pants, "See if you can put it on over what you're wearing". They were, you know, struggling into their clothes.

And of course, the number of dependents changed, I mean, you know, very often there was an additional baby on the woman's back that wasn't listed, and another one in her tummy that wasn't even born yet! And we were also told to take whatever money they

²³ At the end of the interview, the interviewee told how she and a colleague had planned on going through the bundles after the operation to find any photos in them and bring them to Israel to return them to their owners. However, they had no time to do so because they were ordered to leave on the last plane to Israel.

had, if they had any money, collect it, and that also made sense, because Ethiopian currency at that time you couldn't use in any other country in the world, it was a worthless currency, it would be worthless to them in Israel, but it could still be useful in Ethiopia. So we had to ask them, the Israelis gave us plastic laundry baskets, at all the tables like mine. And so we asked them to drop their money in, and I still remember, a few people who had dropped their money in, discovered as they went on to the next inspection station that they still had a few coins in their pockets and came running back to drop that in too.

And while this was going on at my little end, Solomon, of course, was translating for me. But then they came and called him into the final checking place, because he knew everybody in the community, he was Ethiopian, and could speak Amharic²⁴ and they wanted him there. And Andy, they had first asked to do computer work in the embassy, he was very good with computers, but afterward they assigned him to a kind of flying squad because there were non-Jews trying to climb over the walls of the embassy even though they were very high walls. Thousands of non-Jews gathered in the street outside the embassy, because, of course, word got around that planes were coming and Jews are leaving. There were thousands of people, it became hard for the Jews to get in. I mean, there were guards at the gate, they had to examine to see who was coming in before they even got to my little station. And there were stations of more difficulty, you know, of people who were better qualified than I to identify people, spread out.

²⁴ Ethiopian language.

And all this was taking place outdoors, because the Israeli embassy is a tiny building, it had big grounds, but a tiny, tiny, little building. There were about 14, 00 people²⁵ coming, and one of the many miracles of that day, this was the beginning of the rainy season, this was May 24th, and the day before there had been storms, hailstorms, which were not at all uncommon. And what were we going to do if it began to pour?! And at one point the sky clouded over, the wind came up and it got cold, it got dark, and then it blew away. That didn't usually happen, when that happened, you usually got rain or hail or both! But the weather stayed good, comparatively, all day long. And so this was going on all day, and of course in the mobs, children got lost and then they set aside an area for lost children, families could go and claim them. There was one period when I had sitting on my bench an adorable little kid, probably about two or three, it's hard to tell because Ethiopian children tend to be stunted by malnutrition. And so this little boy was just sitting there until one member of his family came and found him. And Andy, I would see Andy go running by holding somebody by the collar and running him to where the guards would throw him out because he climbed over the wall. And Solomon we didn't see at all, because he was in the final stage of checking in this last room with Micha Feldman from the Jewish Agency and some other people. And then finally some planes arrived from Israel with the Jewish Agency workers who were supposed to take our place²⁶.

²⁵The numbers the interviewee mentions vary. About 20, 000 Jews were estimated in Addis Ababa at the time and more than 14, 000 were airlifted to Israel (Kessler, 1996).

²⁶ Operation Solomon began on Friday, May 24, 1991. It was over the next day. 41 flights were conducted airlifting the Ethiopian Jews to Israel (Kessler, 1996).

The interviewee said that at some point at dark, when the curfew started again, the gates were opened and Jews simply poured in, and the organized system fell apart. All day and night the planes filled up and flew out to Israel. Towards the end, she was ordered by the NACOEJ president, who phoned, to get on the last plane out to Israel. She remembered that everyone on the plane was tired and happy but that it was also tinged with sadness for her and her colleagues. They had witnessed the Falash Mura left behind, weeping, and had wanted to give them money but had had no time to do so. The interviewee described the joyful reception of the Ethiopian Jews by the whole country of Israel. She stated that it was the high point of her career. However, her work was not yet over. Six weeks later, in NY, she was called to the JDC and asked, at the request of the Israelis, to continue to work in Ethiopia taking care of the Falash Mura while Israel determined their fate. It took seven more years until the Falah Mura group left behind was allowed to immigrate to Israel. She continues NACOEJ's operations in Ethiopia because there are more Falash Mura there and NACOEJ aids them and supports their continued emigration to Israel.

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