

# Israel shone in airlift

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**HAIFA** — “The largest Jewish school in the world, perhaps ever, was in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in 1991,” Asaf Agmon told *The CJN* in an exclusive interview in Israel last week.

Agmon is the CEO of Israel’s Fisher Brothers Institute for Air & Space Strategic Studies – a non-profit organization that receives funding from the Israeli Ministry of Science and works with NASA to bring Israeli experiments into space.

He described the chaotic, tumultuous scene some 20 years ago, in May 1991, in the compound in and surrounding the Israeli Embassy in the capital of Ethiopia.

His was an authoritative description. For he knew it, first-hand, as the commander of the daring overnight rescue mission named Operation Solomon that brought 14,325 Jews from Ethiopia to Israel during a span of merely 36 hours from May 24 to 25.

“At one point there were more than 5,000 Jewish students ‘enrolled’ in the Jewish school in Addis Ababa,” Agmon said.

How they and their parents and grandparents arrived there and why they were there en masse in the Israel Embassy compound is one of the great rescue stories of modern time.

Israel was determined to rescue as many Ethiopian Jews as possible. Indeed the Jewish state had been doing so, in relatively small numbers, as early as the mid-1970s. In the early to mid-’80s, in a more organized but still always clandestine fashion, Israel saved some 10,000 Jews from Ethiopia.

Some of the stories of the rescue of the earlier groups of Ethiopians have been told. Most have not.

The three-to-four-week trek in the desert to get from Ethiopia to Sudan to the secret, rescue departure points, fighting hunger, disease, bandits, soldiers, hot sand, lack of water and fear was the first part of their stories. But there were other dangers, as well.

Agmon knew them all as he also commanded Operation Moses, a series of rescue efforts between November 1981 and April 1983.

Jafar al-Numeiry was then the ruler of Sudan, and for a certain consideration, he agreed to allow Sudanese soil to be used as the port of exit for the Jews of Ethiopia to Israel.

He rescinded his permission once the rescue efforts became the subject of media reports in the West and other Muslim rulers in the region persuaded him to desist in giving the Israelis land and air space to save other Jews.

But Agmon returned to the Horn of Africa in 1991, this time to Ethiopia, where strongman Mengistu Haile Mariam was the ruler. He was in a fight to the death with Eritrean-based rebels who sought to depose him.

For weapons and money, Mengistu agreed to allow Ethiopia’s Jews to depart

for Israel.

Many of the Jews who had made the journey to Sudan had to find their way to the Israeli Embassy in Addis Ababa. And they did. Other Ethiopian Jews found their way there with the help of Israeli agents, among whom were Jews who had arrived from Ethiopia some years ago.

Nearly 15,000 Jews, in all conditions of health – 5,000 of them children – were corralled together.

But Agmon and his fellow pilots, soldiers and volunteers did not have the luxury of time and leisurely paced, systematically scheduled flights to freedom.

The rebels were quickly closing in on Mengistu. With his overthrow, the Jews would likely be slaughtered.

Thus, Operation Solomon was executed non-stop, through two days and one night until all 14,325 Jews who were in the embassy compound on May 23 were brought to Israel.

Agmon recalled that at the start of the second day of the operation, Mengistu’s soldiers who were guarding the compound had started to come uncomfortably close to the Jews still waiting to get on the buses that took them to the planes.

“They were bribed back away from the compound, away from the frightened Jews with as many cigarettes as my pilots could bring me that morning from Israel. It was very close.”

Mengistu was deposed the next day.

“As far as I know, there has never been any comparable air rescue operation conducted anywhere by any other country,” Agmon said. “In terms of the dangers to the rescuers and to the people being rescued, it stands out in modern history.”

Agmon also said, “We don’t consider ourselves heroes. It was a privilege to take part in it. We did it as Jews, helping and saving other Jews.”

“The rescue was conducted Friday and Saturday. Because Friday is a special day for Muslims, it was quieter for us to operate. But the point I wish to make is that no observant soldiers refused to take part in the operation because of the Shabbat...”

“It was one of the best chapters in the unfolding story of the State of Israel,” he said. But he also added that the chapter is not yet complete. There is still a great deal to do.

“The integration of Ethiopian Jews into mainstream Israeli life is a major challenge for Israelis and indeed for Diaspora Jewry, too,” he said.

Agmon added that many people who took part in the rescue operations, including himself, volunteer in assisting in the integration of the Ethiopian immigrants, especially in the schools.

Operation Solomon is to be the subject of a ceremony sponsored by the Fisher Institute for Air and Space Strategic Studies on the actual date of the rescue, May 25, at the Israel Air Force Center in Herzliya.



Asaf Agmon