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MEMORANDUM

**THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE**

**date** May 8, 1980

**to** File

**from** Abraham S. Karlikow

**subject** Meeting with U.S. Senators on Falashas

The meeting on the Falashas with U.S. senators was rather choppy, since an important budget vote was due as we were meeting. Senator Boschowitz was there for a considerable amount of time, and was the main protagonist; Senator Metzenbaum was there long enough to ask a number of penetrating questions; Senators Stone and Ribicoff dropped in for a few minutes each; and Senator Levin was there early in the meeting, but before anything really was said. Congressman Solarz, there at the outset, repeated his willingness to be of all assistance, but pointed out that he neither had been asked to do anything specific nor, really, had there been any reply to suggestions he had made; and said he certainly wasn't going to act without some sort of reading or decision from the Jewish group. Represented, but not present, were Senator Javits and Cong. Waxman.

Present on the Jewish side were Barbie Weinberg, representing the Shapiro Commission and the NJCRAC; Graenum Berger accompanied by Mr. Baruch Tegeme, the Falasha who has been an Israeli citizen these past five years; Karen Adler and myself. Present, too, was Israeli Minister Benjamin Abileah, to report on developments.

What he said, in essence, was that:

In the past four months, approximately 80 Falashas have reached Israel. In addition, another 32 came in last Thursday night. Processing takes about six weeks, once Falashas are located or make themselves known to the appropriate Jewish contact in the Sudan. Of this, about 2 weeks are needed to check if the person really is a Falasha Jew; the rest to process papers, etc., through the cooperating international agency. There is need not to do this too obviously or to draw attention, lest obstacles be put in the way of movement, or it become so patent that pressures are put on General Numeiri to halt this. The processing rate was about 10 a week; now it is hoped to process 30 per week. The number of Falashas known in the Sudan is approximately 200. Word has been spread in Ethiopia itself that those who can make their way across the border will be helped, so that more can be expected.

...continued...

The Israeli record was attacked by Berger, Tegeme declared that if only the Israelis would follow his suggestions many more could be helped to leave, Mrs. Weinberg brought up the report of Nate Shapiro that there were 600 more in the Sudan who could be brought out according to the Association's contact. In rather muddled fashion, also brought out were the facts that the Tegeme method would involve fake passports, and just getting the 600 names would cost \$2,000 each, after which there would be delivery to Western Europe, with final payment only for those approved as Falashas.

The bottom line for the Senators, though, was stated by Metzenbaum and reaffirmed by Boschowitz: one of disappointment with Israel for not doing enough fast enough and their hope that the Israelis would expedite matters and operate on a larger scale.

My own line was to point out that since we last had met, Israel had obviously set up a system for exit, that it was working and that the key issue was one of reaching Mengistu to get him to permit organized exit, else movement would have to be small. While everyone agreed with this last in principle, no one had any ideas as to how to bell the cat. A report from the State Department left by Congressman Solarz dealing with this and the potential of the use of grain as leverage vis-a-vis Mengistu (attached) is discouraging.

According to one report reaching the Association, Ethiopia and the Sudan may shortly improve relationships, which could lead to a closing of the now easily-crossed border between the two countries, and thus make Falasha exist by this means much more difficult. This is being checked.

It was agreed that there would be another meeting in Senator Boschowitz's office in about a month.

ASK/anc  
Att.

cc: Bert Gold ✓  
David Geller  
Sidney Liskofsky

## FALASHA

-- The current status of the Falasha

-- Conditions in which they live

-- Special problems

-- Whether they're discriminated against by the government or by their neighbors and whether the government can do anything to protect them.

The Department's best first-hand information on the above questions is contained in the attached report of a visit to Gondar region last summer by an Amharic-speaking officer of the U.S. Mission in Addis Ababa. Since then we have heard from other sources that the security situation in Gondar is worse, that market days are being held on the Sabbath, that there is an increased military draft which local officials may be applying to the Falasha with disproportionate harshness, and that many Falashas wish to emigrate. We believe there is still much that we do not know about the situation of the Falasha, and we are seeking more information.

-- Embassy views or possible avenues of approach to the Ethiopians re the Falasha, e.g., subcountries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Romania.

We believe the PMGSE would reject public or private pressure from any government or private group which attacked their record with respect to the Falasha or their human rights performance generally, or which sought to obtain the emigration of the entire Falasha people. We think it is possible the Ethiopians might respond positively to a series of requests by Falashas already in Israel that their families in Ethiopia be permitted to join them. Countries such as Tanzania, Kenya, and Romania might be helpful, at the appropriate time, in persuading PMGSE to be forthcoming on such cases.

-- Is there any possibility of a PL-480 quid pro quo in connection with securing the Falashas' release?

It is not impossible. There is no legal ban against the use of humanitarian food assistance in this way in Ethiopia so long as it is consistent with the Hickenlooper Amendment prohibition against development assistance. There would be strong resistance in Ethiopia and the U.S. to withholding food aid which is already committed to resettlement in Bale-Sidamo unless they let the Falasha

go. Additional PL 480 for Falashas raises the spectre of ransom, which is particularly sensitive for us today, and would be difficult to justify in terms of target groups in Ethiopia as purely humanitarian. Before considering the use of PL 480 as a carrot or a stick, we should examine thoroughly the possibilities of family reunification.

-- Who are the Ethiopians' trading partners? Are these countries where there are substantial Jewish political elements who might be influential with their governments in seeking their assistance in bargaining with the Ethiopians?

Ethiopia's principal trading partners are those which buy its coffee - the U.S., Canada, and countries of western Europe. Many of these have substantial Jewish elements with political influence. But the coffee market is extremely free, and boycotts, as in the case of Uganda, are not really effective except as a gesture of disapproval. A western boycott of Ethiopia coffee would lead to coffee smuggling, sales to the East, and a stiffened PMAC position against western economic "imperialism."

Report by U.S. Embassy, Addis Ababa on Early July Visit  
to Falasha Settlements in Gondar Region, Ethiopia

General Condition of the Falasha

In all but a few areas of Gondar Region the Falashas are geographically and administratively, but not socio-culturally, integrated with their neighbors, the Amhara Christians. Except for the occasional Falasha that wears the Star of David, their dress, language and manners make them generally indistinguishable from the numerically dominant Amharas.

The Falasha are estimated to number 28,000. However, this figure is based on very crude measures and they could well number two or three times that amount. It is generally thought that their population has been declining over the past years, particularly due to their migration away from the more marginal agricultural areas and integration into the more urban, more Christian areas. However, it is not unreasonable to surmise that as the condition of the Falasha improves through the realization of the Ethiopian Government's policies of rural land reform and rights of minority groups, as well as through the intervention of development activities of the type that ORT (Organization for Rehabilitation through Training, a private volunteer organization based in Geneva) is initiating, pressures that have contributed to their disintegration as a discrete cultural group will be relieved. In fact, given the generally large family sizes observed and reported, coupled with increased health and sanitation facilities provided under the ORT project, an absolute increase in their numbers is not unlikely.

Geographically, the Falasha are scattered throughout the central highland areas of Gondar region, namely, Gondar, Wegera and Semien Awrajas (districts), though some are reportedly also found in the Tigray and Gojjam regions as well. However, it is within a 50 km radius of the city of Gondar that the majority of Falashas seem to have settled. This also represents the general area of the visit.

Though the Falasha are widely known to be potters, blacksmiths and basketmakers, occupations that were in the past generally regarded as disdainful by the surrounding Amharas, they are for the most part farmers, struggling along with their Amhara neighbors to coax crops (barley, maize and teff) out of the rugged hillsides of highland Gondar. In many of the areas the wind is strong, frost is common and crop damaging pests pervasive.

We observed no real distinction between the condition of the two groups; they were both noticeably poor and lacking, except as ORT and the Falasha Welfare Association has provided water, electricity, education and health services. However, compared to other areas of rural Ethiopia, their condition appears strikingly similar; it is only that the physical environment may be a bit harsher than elsewhere and thus an additional contributor to their pitiful existence.

In spite of the obvious poverty, our team was welcomed to each village in an extremely friendly and hospitable manner. In many instances we were invited to share bread and drinks in the homes of Falasha families, though perhaps only because we were seen as responsible for the areas' recent development activities. There was certainly no display of anxiety among any of the villagers as our vehicle approached and before the purpose of our trip was made evident.

At many of the sites we witnessed villagers actively involving themselves in ORT activities, whether digging a well or building a school. The communal spirit, presumably Falasha and Christian combined, was high in anticipation of the new services being brought to the community.

#### Ethiopian Government's Treatment of the Falasha

Reportedly, ORT is the only private organization currently allowed by the government to work in Gondar, and, through our discussions with Gondar officials there is no doubt that they are aware of the attention that ORT gives to the Falasha and that they are wholeheartedly in support of it.

Local officials have visited many of ORT's project areas and during our meeting repeatedly expressed their hope that ORT would be able to increase its activities in the area. It was also reported to us that a recent visit to ORT project sites by an Addis Ababa official likewise left him with a favorable impression.

Other evidence of the support that the Gondar Regional Administration is (indirectly) giving to the Falasha is the cooperation given to ORT by various government agencies. EPID (the government's extension service) assists with the supply of fertilizer; the Ministry of Health advises on the provision of health services; the Rural Projects Agency supplies engineering expertise and laborers for construction projects; and

the Ministry of Education supports ORT operated schools by providing some teaching staff. At a more local level, there have been numerous instances of farmers associations, whose jurisdiction transcends the Falasha/Amhara tribal boundaries, giving land for the development activities of ORT.

It is also worth noting that the government has openly displayed its tolerance for the religious practices of the Falasha. Since arriving in Gondar region in 1977, ORT has built four new synagogues and has renovated others. Moreover, in 8 of ORT's 23 schools, Hebrew is taught, though only offered as an option, precisely for its ecclesiastical value. Both of these activities are reportedly well known to the government officials. Reported also was a recent decision by the Gondar administration to allow the Gondar city market to open on Sunday so that the Falasha could do their shopping on a day other than Saturday, their Sabbath.

#### Security in the Region

According to various accounts, the security situation in the area is steadily improving. Areas that until just recently ORT was denied access to, have opened up. ORT writes its own permits for traveling within the region and checks at the numerous roadblocks are only perfunctory and generally performed by ununiformed, unarmed youth. This is not to say that ORT is able to travel at will throughout the region, but according to their account, the relaxation of tension and restrictions is noticeable.

The one area that was mentioned as still being insecure and vulnerable to frequent attacks by opposition groups is the Armacho Valley. This area is said to extend through four Awrajas - Chilga, Gondar, Wegera and Simein - in some of the roughest terrain in the region. Though we had occasion to hear speeches by military personnel claiming recent government victories in the area, and observed what was described to us as the Peoples' Militia (perhaps numbering thousands) returning from Armacho after "securing" the area, we have no way of judging the veracity or significance of such information. Indeed, the latest word from ORT, which operates three schools in the area, is that they have not received any news from Armacho for months and presume that it is still basically insecure.