

Mark Zarecki

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Interviewed by Leah Cohen

Transcribed by Leah Cohen Bianca Milligan & Adam Cieply

Edited by Leah Cohen & Adam Cieply

Production by Brad Guidera & Angel Melendez

Web biography by Leah Cohen

COHEN: My name is Leah Cohen. I have the pleasure of interviewing--

[Both laugh]

COHEN: Mark Zarecki or Zaretski [correct pronunciation]

ZARECKI: Zaretski.

COHEN: --at his home in Ottawa, Ontario and we're here to ask Mark questions on his rescue of Ethiopian Jews. So, I, I know- I have a feeling you're not the type of person that's gonna wanna talk about the personal background. So, I'll just ask you when you got started or if you feel your activism on behalf of Soviet Jewry played a part, as well.

Zarecki: Well, it did, but it's my history. I'm a child of Holocaust survivors and that motivated me to take an activist role because I always felt Jewish community was never proactive, and I think in both situations proved that to me because when we started the Ethiopian Jewry and Soviet Jewry, the Jewish communities were against doing it. Once they saw that there was some success in it, that they embraced it, but initially they opposed them.

COHEN: So, who was involved initially in the Soviet Jewry?

Zarecki: Oh, it goes back years ago, but I think in- in Montreal...His name is escaping me. Um, I'll get back to you--

COHEN: It's okay, yeah, yeah.

Zarecki: I just can't remember his name off hand... but he is a rabbi and he worked for Hillel in the States and he was probably the leader of the Soviet Jewry movement in Montreal.

COHEN: Okay, wow. So, when did you first learn about Ethiopian Jewry - Jewry and the plight that they were in? And how did you--

Zarecki: Yeah, I don't recall how, but I'd met – Congress [i.e. Congress Jewish Congress] had brought in with Yona Bogala¹. And I met Baruch Tegegne ²a little bit before that and Baruch was really the one who, who inspired me to get involved... and when I met Yona Bogala who was literally the leader of the Ethiopian community in Ethiopia. So, that sort of gave me a bit of a background check and I think he is and was a historical figure. So, I became very enthused by what they were saying.

COHEN: What- what type of things were saying? Like how were they describing the situations?

Zarecki: Well, Baruch was more vivid in terms of the persecution. He was more aware and Yona was more about the history of the community and the values and the people. So, it was a little bit different.

Cohen: Did- did Yona Bogala also see a need to rescue--?

Zarecki: Yes, that's why he came.

COHEN: Okay, that's why he came to Montreal.

Zarecki: He was saying to [Canadian Jewish] Congress -- he was indicating that there was a terrible tragedy going on.

Cohen: Wow. What- what was the reaction of Canadian Jewish Congress after he spoke?

Zarecki: Not very much. Where the Jewish community got involved, they weren't wanting to get engaged. I met with Suzanne Gagnon who is an officiate in the PQ [Parti Québécois] government and he had gone to Sudan--

Cohen: Oh!

Zarecki: --and she had met the Jews in refugee camps. She was very taken.

Cohen: Wow!

¹ Yona Boagala [1908-1987] was born in Gondar region of Ethiopia and travelled to Europe and to Pre-State Israel. He worked as a teacher and translator and moved to Israel in 1970s, becoming the first leader of the Ethiopian Jewish community there. (source: Library of Congress authority record)

² Baruch Tegegne [1944-2010] was leader of Ethiopian Jews and strong advocate of their immigration in 1980s-1990s.

Zarecki: So, I met with her quite a few times and she introduced me to Minister of Immigration whose name escapes me. [i.e. Jacques Couture?] He had died after that, but he had signed papers to bring in the Ethiopian Jews to Quebec.

Cohen: Oh, so-

Zarecki: And I went to our illustrious Jewish community and we told them, "Folks, are you gonna go on side? Or will I have to say that the government is offering and you're doing nothing." So, they went on side.

Cohen: Wow.

Zarecki: But they weren't going to do anything unless they were cajoled or kicked. And- and the kicking was really from the PQ government that was prepared to take people in.

Cohen: That it would sort of shame them if they didn't.

Zarecki: I think they would be shamed.

Cohen: Yeah [Laughs].

Zarecki: If the government say they're going to take them in and then the Jews say we're not.

Cohen: Yeah, I think so. I think so. So, so-

Zarecki: And the Israelis we're not, in those days and before, because I've met with Israelis officials. ³Number one, they were not enamored to take on Ethiopian Jews. They're saying, "They're Black. They're not sophisticated. They won't fit in Israeli society." They-they weren't interested at all and it really was because of Western pressure, American Association [for Ethiopian Jews], CAJE [Coalition for Advancement of Jewish Education], Hillel that-that they all, I think were embarrassed to taking them out? But initially they were very cold towards them I think when we took out the original people — Gelila [Tilahun] lived with us.

Cohen: Yeah.

Zarecki: That's- and we said, "Listen, if we can do that, you cannot tell me that your government" -- because I spoke to them this way — "cannot do that. When we,

³ There were a few covert Israeli operations such as the naval rescue of Ethiopian Jews at the Red Sea, in Sudan, but Canadians were not aware of them at the time.

as private citizens, were able to remove people.” Because they were saying that they didn’t have the capacity, they can’t do it. Which was all bogus.

Cohen: So, when did the first group come? Like Gelila and, I think, maybe her other?

Zarecki: I don’t really know. No,

Cohen: [Overlapping voices] Was it- because I think it was Gelila...

Cohen: No? Maybe her mother.

Zarecki: It wasn’t her mother. Her mother came much later.

Cohen: Oh.

Zarecki: It was the three sisters.

Cohen: Three sisters.

Zarecki: Devora, Gelila and Bethel, and then we took out other people. We used different tools, which I developed, and I was in touch with the Americans and some of the techniques they were using to take people out, we set up.

Cohen: [Coughs] Which Americans? Oh, sorry.

Zarecki: American Association for Ethiopian Jewry, in particular, and NACOEJ [North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry], a group in, I think it’s in Boston.

Cohen: So what were some of the methods that you learned from the American groups?

Zarecki: The initial methods, methods were really easy. Just giving them an invitation to come to a wedding. And they were getting permission to get visas for that. Then we started to offer, um, letters of acceptances from the schools.

Cohen: So these were not... They weren't genuine.

Zarecki: Nothing was legitimate. And um, I involved McGill [University], Vanier College, Dawson [College]. Uh, [Phone Rings] the administrators agreed to take people out, knowing they wouldn’t [phone rings] come, and they had assigned a person to the code at the applicants. So if anybody called them from Ethiopia... [phone rings]

Zarecki: So we got the universities and colleges to issue fake letters of acceptances. In the code on the letters, they knew that they were from Ethiopia, and there was a

person assigned in each of their offices to deal with it. Because our fear was that the Ethiopians would start to check up if it was legitimate. So the schools did right, say that they were legitimate, and they got in contact with us or me, in particular, when the Ethiopian Government approached them.

Cohen: Um, how did you persuade the administrators at the different [institutions?]

Zarecki: I worked in Hillel. I knew all these administrators.

Cohen: Ah, you had a personal contact already.

Zarecki: Yes. I had asked a couple of professors, but they didn't need persuading. They weren't Jews.

Cohen: Wow, wow. So what, how, I think you mentioned that the, you were contacted when the, after the Ethiopian Government had contacted--?

Zarecki: Yes, because they started to, at first, they weren't contacting the schools, and then I guess we were suddenly getting some money, that they started to question whether they were legitimate, so contacted the schools. They'd verify the legitimacy of it all.

Cohen: So what did the schools do?

Zarecki: Nothing, they knew it wasn't legitimate. But they, told the government that it was legitimate.

Cohen: How many people were brought in?

Zarecki: I think that we must have taken in up to two-hundred people. I don't think more than two hundred. Many of them who landed went directly to Israel. But we took out a lot, and there's about maybe eighty, one hundred of that two hundred that stayed in Canada.

Cohen: So about half went to Israel and half stayed?

Zarecki: Yeah. Well, more...

Cohen: More than half.

Zarecki: And even after, many went on aliya [to Israel].

Cohen: So you were saying, before that um, Suzanne, um, from the PQ government--

Zarecki: Gagnon.

Cohen: Gagnon.

Zarecki: I have to find the documents. I kept it but my wife misplaced it.

Cohen: Okay, but I'm sure it will...

Zarecki: I don't know.

Cohen: So, so she was, so she herself saw the... so it's interesting that they had already gone to Sudan, so....

Zarecki: She, by the way, had outreached to Congress and all the Jewish agencies. None of them offered to do anything. Baruch [Tegegne] introduced me to her. She's a staunch separatist. So was the minister, and they were very taken by helping the Jews. Contrary to public opinion, yeah.

Cohen: Yeah, hmm. So, like, what was I going to say? Like at what point in time did Baruch Tegegne first contact you? Had he already brought Jews into the Sudan or was he—you know, how did --?

Zarecki: He knew. I think he probably had. Later on, years later, he was running there and back between Ethiopia and Sudan. Then I think when he had established sort of the route, then people were able to go without him.

Cohen: I'm a little bit vague about this but it seems to me that Gladys [Zarecki] had mentioned that you also brought people out by means of churches, or things like that, using your home address. So how did that work?

Zarecki: Same story. They needed the proof, you know, that somebody was sponsoring them. Synagogues wouldn't cut it so we just put Minister So and So, and we would use my home address as the churches. So the churches were, in effect, were inviting these people to come.

Cohen: Okay. I have the impression that there some people from Congress that were helpful like the late Stan Cyt[rynbaum]--

Zarecki: Later, later they got helpful, not at the beginning. When they were threatened, that we would go public with the government helping them **not**, so they became nice boys and girls.⁴

⁴ Stan Cytrynbaum later became the chairman of the Canadian Jewish Congress Committee for Ethiopian Jewry.

Cohen: I see. Jeez.

Zarecki: But before that, they weren't.

Cohen: So, could you describe what the process was like? You told me a little bit at breakfast about... like what was a typical route. Was did somebody had a visa, a student visa and they brought [in unofficially] Like, could you tell me a little about that?

Zarecki: There are two distinct routes. There's the direct from Ethiopia which I just described with the paperwork.

Cohen: Yes. [Interrupts] that flew directly to Canada?

Zarecki: Yes. And then when there were refugees in Sudan, then it was a bit different. Then the Israeli government helped bring people here who they did not want to bring to [Canada, sic], to Israel. Those tended to be the Mossad agents that worked for them in the operations.

Cohen: [Surprised] They did not want them in Israel?

Zarecki: These guys, I think, were a bit embittered because they saw the struggle and the thousands who were killed and they did not want at that point, to go to Israel. So they allowed them, because they were employees and helping, to come to Montreal.

Cohen: So, Eji [Tadesse], for example, I think you told this case, a friend or a relative, gave her the student visa to leave, and she recalls stopping in Italy at a house for other Ethiopians. Like, how did you set that up...?

Zarecki: I think at one point, the Israeli government was working with us because they didn't want to, at one point, and then they saw that we were somewhat successful so, we worked with them. So we supplied the papers, when they came out, they were also a bit involved, and took them, as you say, to Italy and that was the main reception center for Russian Jews and Ethiopian Jews. so they went there.

Cohen: Why was it necessary to have the reception center, there? Was it--

Zarecki: Just for the practicality. [in unison] That's why many of them never came here, went directly to Israel, because they went to the reception centre, and then went on aliya even though the paperwork and stuff was to come to Canada.

Cohen: They just went directly to Israel?

Zarecki: Yeah.

Cohen: Did you have any other contact with the Americans other than these two groups that you mentioned in Boston and Chicago? Like was there any contact between [you and] the US government--

Zarecki: Not really. But the contact we've had was informal with the refugee character who was stationed in Addis Ababa, UNHCR, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in America. He agreed that when we sent him money by diplomatic post, and we did that through the Canadian government, he then would then distribute the money to the Ethiopians.

Cohen: So it was the money used to bribe officials--

Zarecki: The money we raised went to them directly. I had met with [Canadian Prime Minister Brian] Mulroney. Stephen Lewis set it up.

Cohen: Did Stephen Lewis set up your meeting with Brian Mulroney? Wow.

Zarecki: Yeah, that's where they agreed to help support what we were doing. So, the Canadian Embassy was helpful in transporting the papers and the documents.

Cohen: Okay. Did you find them to be sympathetic, as well?

Zarecki: More than the government i.e., the Jewish leadership of Canada. They were very sympathetic. It was only after being pushed that the Jewish community was sympathetic. These guys were sympathetic early. Stephen Lewis was a *tsaddik* [a righteous man, in Hebrew or Yiddish] and he was very taken for helping the Ethiopian Jews and he's helped other communities, as well. So he pushed that, facilitated with that. [Coughs]

Cohen: So you said the money went directly to the Ethiopians. Was this for the purpose of bribing officials to leave, in effect?

Zarecki: Yeah. And sometimes just so they had money to pay for their airfare, but it was, primarily, bribery, bribe money.

Cohen: So, who were the contacts in Ethiopia that they would know whom they could bring out? Like...

Zarecki: Well, I was in touch with Malka [Abraham], directly.

Cohen: How did you--

Zarecki: Because Baruch set it up. Baruch had his contacts. So, Malka -- I didn't know Baruch's contacts -- but that's where we got the names. But as you see, many of the people who came over were his family members. So that's where that went [both laugh]. And Malka was really well-connected with the Ethiopian government and she was able to get people to get visas out and she was able to know whom to pay off to take people out. So she was very helpful. Malka, I was in touch within Ethiopia and Bosen, I was in touch with- in Ethiopia.

Cohen: What was Bosen's role? Like Malka?

Zarecki: No, she was just to get her out and her family out.

Cohen: Sure, sure.

Zarecki: So, she was speaking to me directly. Most of them went through Baruch Tegegne or through Malka. The odd one I spoke to directly. I don't recall why I had direct communication with Bosen but she is one of them.

Cohen: I remember from years ago that there was a group of Ethiopian Jews that went to, I think, Kefar Batyah in Israel, and with the idea of cultivating leadership within the community. There was some program. I think it was in Kefar Batyah.

Zarecki: Mmhm.

Cohen: I was wondering if Malka and Baruch were part of that. Like they were young and then came back to Ethiopia?

Zarecki: Well no. Malka was in Israel. She was a nurse, right? I think she was trained in Israel. Not Baruch, Baruch was just a renegade. [Laughs]. Baruch was just a renegade [laughs] and a very virulent fighter for the Ethiopian Jews. He was a good soul. [He passed away in 2010].

Cohen: Yeah, yeah. So, I don't know. What do you remember? Like what... Do you remember any particular story of a person? Oh, you were telling me earlier the story about the bus driver. Do you want to tell that here?

Zarecki: Habtenish. They were using busses to transport the people from refugee camps to the airports, so the authorities caught her bus and they were going to arrest [them] if they found out they were Jews but she pretended she was a Muslim and she started to do her prayers, lying down on the rug. They saw that, they let the bus go.

Cohen: Wow.

Zarecki: But all of those people who were engaged with assisting were really in danger themselves and if they were not smart, they could have gotten captured and endangered everybody's lives. But they were slick people. They don't talk about it. If you speak to her, she will give you a story that you wouldn't believe. Like I knew because I had spoken to her earlier. The same thing with Aberra [Minywab]. All of them were deeply involved in helping people leave. Even Gelila. When I spoke to Gelila when she first came. She was describing her treatment in school and stuff and it was during the Reign of Terror and how they would watch from the balconies with people were being slaughtered on the streets, but she recollected that being a young child.

Cohen: What did you say?

Zarecki: She recollected that being a young child. I don't know if you spoke to her today if she would remember what she had said when she came when she was ten or twelve years old, but she had seen extreme violence. Everything was extreme violence. I mean, she would tell me that every year, a couple of kids in her school were killed. Right, and that's in elementary school. That doesn't happen. Now your buddy who you spoke to, Eji's husband, [Aklilu Afowerk] he was very middle class, very affluent and wealthy so he maybe had a sense of other affluent people, but I don't think he had a sense of the average character.

Cohen: No, no, but then I wonder if it's unusual that he made decision to leave.

Zarecki: No. Lots of people get out. There's lots of Ethiopians that have fled to the States, to Canada, there are lots living her -- I don't know if you have any in Chicago -- but Ottawa has a lot of these Coptic churches here, all over the place, Ethiopian Coptic.

Cohen: Yeah, yeah. Do you want to talk about what happened when people came here? And you know, you mentioned like obviously you adopted Gelila? Like what happened here and how did they adapt?

Zarecki: I don't know if I would you the word adopted because it wasn't an adoption.

Cohen: Oh, okay.

Zarecki: She lived with us, it's sort of like a fostering, a foster family. So, the three of them, the three sisters, three families fostered: Cytrynbaum, Edit Kupfer and us. The other ones came out, they came out more or less intact families. So some us helped them find residences and sort of befriended them. I was less involved in that and more involved with getting the documents and trying to get people out. But when they came, there were people who were very hospitable and tried to

help them integrate. Shomrim Laboker [synagogue], for example, was very welcoming. Rabbi [Chaim] Denberg, may he rest in peace, in particular, so he created a bit of community there and they went there to pray. He also arranged conversion for some of them because they weren't necessarily Jewish.

Cohen: Halachically?

Zarecki: No. Not Jewish. They were married to Jews or had had relationship to Jews. If you look at Aberra's wife, you'll see that she has a cross tattoo on her arm. So many of them who came out were pintel Yidn, as the expression goes, many of them when they came out married gentiles and identified as Christians, not as Jews...

Cohen: Aha, aha. Look, people can choose...

Zarecki: People choose. So Yona Bogala's wife is gentile. His daughter that came here follows the Christian traditions and he was a leader of the Jewish community. There's lots of these mixed marriages.

Cohen: Okay, there were lots of outright conversions...

Zarecki: Yeah, yeah, they were gentiles, period. But they were married to Jews, and some we took out who we thought were Jewish, it turned out that they were already practicing Christians.

Cohen: Aha. Do you think that it was a general reflection of the community at the time, that there was like a lot intermingling or--?

Zarecki: And what would you say about the American Jews?

Cohen: Yeah, I'd say very assimilated, yeah. I don't know what it's like in Ethiopia.

Zarecki: Assimilated. More than here.

Cohen: Were most of the people brought out from a particular area, like more Addis Ababa or Gondar or--

Zarecki: Well, we took, primarily, from Addis because of Baruch and Malka. Most we took out were from Gondar. The other area which was near Eritrea, there wasn't as many Jews and we didn't really take out from that area. The Israelis took out those. Well, they took primarily the Gondar Jews, too. But we really weren't that familiar with Gondar Jews...Mostly Addis Ababa. Gondar's a province, there were lots of villages that had Jews in it. It's not like the whole province.

Cohen: Right. Like villages within Gondar, yes.

Zarecki: Same with Eritrea.

Cohen: Like you said before, your main role was to arrange for documentation and all that, did you ever--

Zarecki: It's the role I created!

Cohen: Created, yeah, yes, very much so! Apart from the Jewish community, where you mentioned that there been a lot of resistance, were there um, did you find sympathies within different levels of government? Or not at all?

Zarecki: Well, the government wanted to follow the leader of the Jewish community, but the Jewish community was happy to say, "No". The government was even happier to say, "No". So it became more open when the Jewish community was squeezed into saying, "Yes".

Cohen: I remember way back when, when I was a student and would be writing letters to the Members of Knesset [of Israel]—

Zarecki: They didn't like that. [Both laugh]

Cohen: Yeah, they didn't like that. I remember we got a very angry letter from Yuval Neeman... [Both laugh] but I remember the basic claim that we were – that by not keeping quiet, we were endangering the secret operations, being done for [i.e. by] Israel [on behalf of rescuing the Ethiopians]. So did you think that there was anything valid in that, at the time? [These letters were received in the fall of 1982.]

Zarecki: No, no. When they started secret operations, the [Israeli] Embassy called me every week, to tell me how many were coming out because when they started, they were wanting to pacify us, so they were telling us what was going on. So at that point it was clear that not was not much for us to do then because they were operationalizing. But when you were doing, there was nothing really going on and thousands were being slaughtered, like three, four thousand Jews were killed going to Sudan.

Cohen: Oh. Okay, here you'll have to pardon my ignorance. Was it because—I don't know how to put it? Like when did things start to really become bad for Jews in Ethiopia? Was it after Haile Selassie?

Zarecki: No, it was the Reign of Terror was Mengistu who took over. Then before that it wasn't good for them, but after that, it became more violent.

Cohen: Was it also directed against other groups? You know, like political groups?

Zarecki: Listen, the big thing in Ethiopia is killing people. If you don't kill people, you are not a citizen of the country. They were slaughtering people, left, right, and center. Jews were one of the groups were targeted but there was lots of murder.

Cohen: In general?

Zarecki: Yeah. It was not a good country to live in. Now, it's quieter but I still would not suggest becoming a resident of Ethiopia. [Laughs]

Cohen: Yeah... Wow.

Zarecki: So yeah, the Jews were probably a victim of the general tone of violence but there was a strong tinge of antisemitism and Sudan, too, they're anti-Israel. They're a Muslim county and the Jews in the camps had to hide that they were Jewish.

Cohen: Oh, they---in refugee camps...?

Zarecki: Yeah, refugee camps and the medical staff would poison the Jews when they identified someone as being Jewish. The Jews, actually, buried their dead in their tents. So they lived on top of their families' bodies until they left. So, it wasn't a good place to be.

Cohen: No, no, and it sounded even worse in Sudan.

Zarecki: Well, it was getting worse in Ethiopia and they fled to Sudan so imagine if they if they lived in that environment in Sudan, what they thought was going back at home?

Cohen: Were you in communication with these other groups on an ongoing basis, like the group in the Chicago and in Boston, in an ongoing basis?

Zarecki: Yes, of course. Often, often.

Cohen: Often. And how--

Zarecki: Often. I'd say not, daily, [laughter] but near daily because we were sharing names, we were sharing information, we were trying to share who's on first base, who's on third base. I spoke to them regularly and they were very helpful and supportive--

Cohen: Did they do similar—

Zarecki: --Because we were the junior people in all this. They were doing this for years and we just started to experiment. They were sort of skeptical if we could be successful, when they saw we were, they were helpful. [Actually], they were very helpful from the beginning.

Cohen: So they were doing this for several years before?

Zarecki: Yeah, yeah.

Cohen: Like, in other words, before the mid-70s, they were already--?

Zarecki: Yes, they were active for a few years. Graenum Berger was the one in charge. [1908–1999, was an American Communal administrator and planner. He was the founding President of the [American Association for Ethiopian Jews](#) which helped significantly in the rescue and aliya of Ethiopian Jews.] He came in [to speak, in Montreal]. You recollect that we brought him in a few times? And Shapiro, I met him a couple of times, I never brought him in but he was sort of also-- They were both wealthy and they sort of developed the money resourcing to help take people out, but they were involved in taking out thousands. They're the ones who, in effect, pushed the Israel government, that's what we were doing it, but they pushed the government to do something.

Cohen: Because they were doing it on a larger scale?

Zarecki: Yeah, yeah, they were marketing. They were bigger than —We were like the pygmies, but we were one the same side. [Laughter]

Cohen: They were happy to adopt the junior--

Zarecki: Yeah, yeah, they were very willing and helpful.

Cohen: Did they also involve their governments. Or was it just--?

Zarecki: Yeah.

Cohen: Did they also have the student visas? Like how did they work? ...The money?

Zarecki: I don't know. I sort of developed the idea of the student visas. Maybe I got it from them. I just don't recollect. We were doing it independently and I don't recall hearing of them taking out large numbers of student visas. I think that I got the idea, if it didn't come firsthand, was seeing Ethiopian [not] Jews, and Ethiopians studying at the universities, in general, and that's where I got the idea

for that. Same thing with the wedding invitations and stuff. We saw people were coming, not Jews, and we just replicated for Jews. And as Gladys said, with the minister, priest---

Cohen: [Indecipherable]

Zarecki: So, we never identified the people we were helping as Jews because that would have worked against them.

Cohen: Did you ever-- Were you ever worried, personally, that the Ethiopian government would come to you, because of your address that was being used?

Zarecki: No. I met the Ethiopian government. I went with Alan Rose [Executive Director of the Canadian Jewish Congress, at that time]. We met with the ambassador in Washington because there is no Canadian ambassador at that point. They knew us, they were scared of us. They have this image that the Jews control the world—

Cohen: [Interrupts and laughs]. So you were part of that?

Zarecki: So they understood that we were part of that international conspiracy. So they worked with us. They knew what we were doing. Alan Rose, when I went with Alan Rose to these meetings -- I also have the documents of who we met with and when and Alan was just put it, ??? of the committee, was me. I was the only one that went with him. There were descriptions of what we told them. Alan had told them more than I had wanted to. He told them of how we were operationalizing these things. It never impacted it negatively, but they knew what was going on.

Cohen: So these were like Ethiopian diplomats?

Zarecki: The ambassador so—

Cohen: The ambassador, sorry, in United States.

Zarecki: In United States and Canada- because they didn't have an embassy in at that point in Canada.

Cohen: So they were aware, but they were too afraid to—

Zarecki: I don't know if they were too afraid but they were aware which I assume they reported to the government but there was never a blockage of preventing us and I was fearful that he would have created that opportunity for them. So they clearly didn't stop it. I thought that you knew all of this!

Cohen: Well, I knew about the student visas and [indecipherable] the part with the church but I think that I was less aware at the time and I do remember you were getting reports from the Israeli Consulate [background rumbling noise] about the beginnings, the very first – the very exciting news but I think, at the time, I, myself was probably less attuned...

Zarecki: The [Ethiopian] Embassy was useful, helpful. We were aware of three or four kids, Jewish kids, who were in big trouble in Sudan. I spoke to our man. They were reprieved within forty-eight hours.

Cohen: Oh, they had been captured?

Zarecki: Yes. And I was impressed because, number one: they responded immediately. As soon as they got – we gave them the information, they responded. So they were – we worked with them. At the beginning, there was negativity but afterwards, they worked with us. Whenever we gave them information to help people, they did. So, the tone had changed and when they were helpful, they were really helpful. But there was a change in tone. I think [Yitzhak] Shamir was the Prime Minister [i.e. he was the Seventh Prime Minister and served two terms – [1983–84 and 1986–1992] and he was very empathetic to helping and I think he forced the government to change because I don't think that the civil service on lower levels were not interested. But he forced them to take it on.

Cohen: Like it came from on top?

Zarecki: I believe that it came from on top.

Cohen: So, they had to kind of—

Zarecki: I think that it came from on top because there was so much resistance and it was racism.

Cohen: Do you think that it made a difference as to which party as whether it was Likud or the Maarakh – the Labour party? Like did you find---

Zarecki: The difference was Shamir.

Cohen: Shamir, himself.

Zarecki: And when he changed it, I think every government following that, was supportive. Until that point, they were not helping at all, but I think that after him, they all were supportive. I don't understand why they weren't. You know?

Cohen: Do you feel that it was real racism, basically?

Zarecki: Yes. I know it was. The way they described them. You know, “They’re not educated. They’re not smart. They’re not going to integrate into Israel”. I mean it was just racist stuff.

Cohen: Hmmm.

Zarecki: And the local communities are like lemmings and whatever they’re told to do, they did.

Cohen: Okay, like lemmings to Israel – they don’t want to---

Zarecki: Yeah, yeah. The head of the Federation – he remembered the animosity--

Cohen: --from the Israelis--

Zarecki: Well, even within Federation. [Manny Weiner, executive director.] in Federation, Task force for Ethiopian Jewry and in effect, Mark

Cohen: Oh, from Federation, yeah, and years later, Federation gave him an award for this— [both laugh].

Zarecki: There seems to be at a meeting. They said, “Mark, you see how I’ve changed.” [more laughter]. He knew, he knew the dynamic and he recognized that, you know, they went from hating and condemning and blocking to ??? diplomacy? So, he thought that it’s always that way. The Jewish communities are not proactive, are not—

Cohen: --are fearful, maybe?

Zarecki: Yeah, there’s another word I’m looking for. I don’t know if the word is fearful but they’re very regressive and they won’t take a position unless they were asked to or told to. Even though, it’s the right thing to do, they wouldn’t do it until they’re given instruction to do it and they would oppose it until they’re given instruction to support it. And that was the same thing with Soviet Jewry. I remember the same situation. How they were being – telling us, “You shouldn’t be doing this. It’s endangering the Jews,” and the same story, the same script, they had for Ethiopian Jewry and then after a while, they started to change the tune and were supportive of it.

Cohen: Were there any specific individuals who began to be helpful, as you’re saying, once it was already embarrassing for them?

Zarecki: Well, Irwin Cotler, when he was president, he was opposed to it, when we went to him with the documentation, he did an about face and he was always pro after that.

Cohen: Okay, like once he saw the documentation. Wow, wow. And what was Stan's role?

Zarecki: [Indecipherable] He saw that I was about to blow it – that the government was helping them – they weren't. So, he changed his tune. Stan Cytrynbaum?

Cohen: Yeah.

Zarecki: He was appointed the congressperson because he was part of an elite of people. He is more conservative than I am, but he certainly was one hundred percent behind the Ethiopian Jewry. He was sort of—he spoke their language. So he cooked with it. [Laughter] And they with him

Cohen: Did you meet with other, like, PQ politicians? Other than the Minister of Immigration and [Suzanne Gagnon]?

Zarecki: Did I meet with other ones? I met with not with government officials but with the bureaucrats and I – we, as Jews in Quebec had, I think a mis-impression that the PQ were hostile to Jews and this and that, and I didn't feel that, at all. If they said this minister defend and ?? and he didn't and maybe because his defendant ??, [laughter] but he – but they were very supportive of it.

Cohen: It sounds like the lower levels' bureaucracy were also--

Zarecki: See, this woman who—

Cohen: Lise [sic] Gagnon—

Zarecki: Suzanne, I think. See, she came to me through Baruch. Baruch met her. She came to me. She was a real Péquiste and bureaucrat. And she's the one that wanted to save the Ethiopian Jews and she's the one that took me to the minister, but she had the game plan, in mind. So there's irony - gentiles – PQ is supposed to be so anti-Israel and [anti] Jewish, who are actively involved in wanting to help these people. That's why when I see political situations, I sometimes wonder what the truth is because the Jewish community is very reactionary; it's often the last one to come on side. They only go on side when they see it's okay to go on side. But they're never going to initiate or do anything proactively.

Cohen: [mumbling] They won't take a stand.

Zarecki: I saw that with Soviet Jewry, I saw that with Ethiopian Jewry and I suspect with the Holocaust, too. The Holocaust is maybe twenty years before all of this and I don't know what they had done. When I read things like, **None is Too Many**, but you see that the governments had animosity, but I wonder what role the Jewish community played in not trying to dissuade them from being anti-Jewish. Because I meet here...Listen, I can tell you – I have in the old government -- I'm not trying develop relationships with the new government -- but I have, I'll show you, personal cell phone numbers --- You wouldn't know the names like [indecipherable] who was Minister of Justice, Chiarelli was minister, the current leader of the Liberal Party so I have their personal cell phone numbers. So these guys are -- and Anita Vandebeld, the MP [Member of Parliament – Liberal Party] for this area [Ottawa West- Nepean riding] I have her cell phone number, she's helpful,[name indecipherable] Who else? But yes, the ministers who are in our area, I have found to be very, very helpful.

Cohen: It sounds here in—

Zarecki: In Ottawa, in particular. Well, the mayor I worked with. I think in Montreal, it's different, many francophones and I don't know how much our community has contact with them... Like I said, I'll show you –They actually gave me their personal cell phones-- except now that I call, they don't answer the phone. But what the hell? [laughs]

Cohen: Okay [laughs] They gave it to you...

Zarecki: When I would call them, they would –even Anita Vandebeld, wanted to meet with me, like, monthly, I didn't have the energy or time but she's good, too. She also, she's to the left of the Liberal Party. John Fraser, he's the acting leader of the Ontario Liberal Party. I have his number.

Cohen: It sounds like you were always very effective speaking to people—

Zarecki: Yeah, you have to speak to them. You're effective -- because if you don't talk to them and they don't know you and fund raising for the Agency because the government officials, you know them, and they help... You probably wouldn't know them. You haven't lived here for a while but there are three MPPs that I had their cell phone numbers.

Cohen: Phone numbers, wow. When you were back in Montreal and you said there was support from the Federal Canadian government, as well, did you also raise money from private philanthropists who wanted to--?

Zarecki: Yeah, the money we sent to Ethiopia - most of it was [from] private people.

Cohen: So, was that from the Jewish community?

Zarecki: Yes, the gentiles were not giving us money. The gentiles, as I say, they facilitated.

Cohen: Yeah. They had a lot of the political will and--

Zarecki: Yeah.

Cohen: So did you find, like, individual Jews to be very sympathetic or was it a hard sell? What was it like?

Zarecki: No, I wouldn't say that. You know, anybody who is a child of a survivor or a survivor were an easy sell. But the people involved politically, whether they were at the Federation level or whatever, were part of the [indecipherable] I think that the connections I made more easily [indecipherable; 44:38] either children of Holocaust survivors or survivors were more empathetic than somebody born here.

Cohen: Well, I remember hearing about this a student, I remember she spoke publicly, I don't know her name, but she said that she was a child of survivors and the idea that it's happening again. At the time that I was on the Task Force for Ethiopian Jewry, I remember that you suggested that we go with the slide show and speak to school groups, community groups, and whoever was willing to listen, and all in all, do you think that this had an effect [in swaying local Jewish opinion to rescue Ethiopian Jewry?]

Zarecki: Of course. Yes, one hundred percent. Because the more people became aware, the more it embarrassed the Jewish leadership. So it did have a positive effect.

Cohen: Is there something that you would like to talk about that I didn't ask regarding the--

Zarecki: No. I have lots of documents. If I ever find them, that would be an asset to preparing a book on it.

Cohen: Or an article, anyhow.

Zarecki: Yeah, yeah. And the documents that Stan Cytrynbaum put together with Alan Rose spoke pretty much about meeting and things with government officials which I tried to find by I don't have it. It's in my message box.

Cohen: Maybe it's there or maybe it would also be in Congress so maybe—

Zarecki: Congress would have it for sure. The Archives. Canadian Jewish Archives.

Cohen: The Archives, or--So, maybe I should write down things to follow up or—

Zarecki: Well, after. Well, Stan Cytrynbaum wrote it and it is in Congress. And by the way, there's allusions and stuff— I didn't look at it, but Stan had found various documentation that included my name, my picture, like in a broad sense.

Cohen: Oh, like within--

Zarecki: When talking about Ethiopian Jewry and stuff but it was not very specific. They did a lot of marketing. When we went to these meetings, Alan Rose, we went together, and he just put down himself on it as the representative of Congress. So it was just sort of downplayed it. Stan knew it was me because I had spoken to him about it, right *before* he had checked the material and archives.

Cohen: Oh, okay.

Zarecki: And that's the sad part — like Stan was clearly a clear player, Stan was clearly a major player, and he died. Baruch Tegegne passed away. Like a lot of the people who played political roles and things no longer exist. Yona Bogala was older. He had died.

Cohen: I think that you told me that Baruch's book, [**Baruch's Odyssey: An Ethiopian Jews Struggle to Save his People**] was only like — he wasn't aware of the bigger picture--

Zarecki: He wasn't aware of the bigger picture.

Cohen: Like was he more aware of the actual operations, like bringing people out?

Zarecki: [Laughs]. Well, he *was* the actual operations - in Sudan but the political intrigues, he didn't really know. You know, he was a lovely guy, but he wasn't sophisticated in that way and he didn't really understand what was going on. So he just gave a perception what he thought about it, but it wasn't really necessarily reality. Which is okay because what he had done was--

Cohen: [Interrupts] --was amazing

Zarecki: [Indecipherable]

Cohen: I hear what you're saying so it be like - because the part he would have known would have been whom to contact, whom to bring out, and how to—

Zarecki: You know, I don't recall. When I read the book when it first came out, I read the book and I didn't focus on that because I knew what he had written but the other political stuff, I was a bit disappointed.

Cohen: Okay, as you say, he was just unaware or something?

Zarecki: He wasn't aware, and he was focused on what he did successfully. He took people out. That was the most important part of what he did.

Cohen: I think that we also mentioned different people, I do have the names written down. I believe Aberra had something written about him here in Ottawa or somewhere...

Zarecki: Could be. But Aberra also does not talk about what he had done. I know he was a Mossad agent. The other one who I told you about – Habtenish. All of them, all the guys that you knew – Natan who lived in Israel and Eliano [??] —were operatives from the Mossad. They were young kids; they were seventeen and eighteen and they're doing this work!

Cohen: Hmm. Do they not talk about it because they're concerned of like security--?

Zarecki: No, it's beyond that point. No, not; not at all. Just they don't.

Cohen: You mean it's over?

Zarecki: I mean if you ask pointed questions, they'll give you right answers [laughs] but they don't speak about it openly. But if you ask, it's not like they will deny it. If they ask specific things, they're not going to deny it, and they are very fluent in talking about it.

Cohen: So, why do you think that they don't talk about it? Just because, they're living in the present?

Zarecki: My father was a survivor. He didn't spend time talking about what happened to him either. They just – um, that's in their past.

Cohen: They're not like -- Like one time, I visited—

Zarecki: They're not like Canadians or Americans who are egotists who like to brag. They don't brag...And there's people do one way or the other but many of the people are very modest.

Cohen: Modest, yeah. No, I really thank you and I'm also hoping that the more I learn maybe I can come back to you with questions.

Zarecki: Sure, and I'll give you more names but I gotta get Natan's phone number and address in Israel [51.14]

Cohen: Yeah, I don't know if I can remember Natan so well, but I definitely remember Baruch very well and Yona Bogala, that's a person I remember early on.

Zarecki: No, but Biliano and Natan and what's her name – Habtenish

Cohen: [At the same time] Habtenish.

Zarecki: We were friends. I mean I had close relationships with them throughout my time in Montreal. Then when they left to Israel.

Cohen: So they left later to Israel...Did you find for them like that they were obviously relieved to be out of Ethiopia but like that like Canada was neither here nor there for them? Like, in other words, it seemed like it was very the community [unclear]... strongly wanted to live in Israel and many of them were in Italy, chose to go to Israel...

Zarecki: And many, like I said, Natan, a lot of his people went on aliyah, later on—

Cohen: --later on went to live in Israel

Zarecki: Yeah, yeah.

Cohen: I don't know how to put it but was Canada like a weigh station?

Zarecki: Well, for some they weren't sure that they were going to go to Israel, and I think they clearly staying in Montreal, they compromised their intent to go on aliya. They were strongly Zionist. They're strongly Jewishly committed in their own way.

Cohen: Interesting. Now, I have to sort of see what the situation is like in Chicago. You said that thousands were brought out, I wonder if there are any still--

Zarecki: No, they didn't go to Chicago. They went directly to Israel but if you want to look for this Nate Shapiro. He was very affluent. I don't know even if he's still alive.

Cohen: Maybe he has son or daughter, or somebody would know. Oh, I see what you're saying. The ones in Boston and Chicago brought Jews directly to Israel.

Zarecki: We were the ones, the only ones that getting some people directly to Montreal.

But look up the American Association for Ethiopian Jewry, that's sort of the big one and NACOEJ, the North American Conference of Ethiopian Jewry that was the second large one.

Cohen: [writing down] American Association of Ethiopian Jewry and NACO

Zarecki: And Graenum Berger and Nate Shapiro were involved with the first and I forget the woman's name...worked closely with NACOEJ.

Cohen: I'm sorry I don't hear so well. What was Berger's first name?

Zarecki: Graenum Berger.

Cohen: Graenum.

Zarecki: But I'm sure he's passed away.

Cohen: It seems like it's a good place to start googling. You know what I mean...?

Zarecki: Yeah, Graenum had written some books on it. So if you google his name, you'll find them, but I suspect they're out of print because they're over twenty-five years.

Cohen: It's good because Pritzker has a good interlibrary loan service so somewhere, I can borrow them, and NACO was that group from—

Zarecki: And NACOEJ – N-A-C-O-E-J. I can picture the woman - I just don't remember the name. I worked more closely with the American Association of Ethiopian Jewry but NACOEJ was also very good.

Cohen: That was Boston based?

Zarecki: Yeah, and the Canadian Association for Ethiopian Jewry, was my buddy – I'm bad with names, you'll know him.

Cohen: Let me think about this. Was he also somebody who worked at Hillel, at any point in time?

Zarecki: No, not Hillel. He's a Montrealer and he lived in Toronto.

Cohen: And he lives in Toronto, now. Israel, probably.

Cohen: Israel probably.

Zarecki: [Indecipherable] and he produced a lot of movies.

Cohen: Oh, Simcha—

Zarecki: Simcha Jacobovici!

Cohen: That's right and he produced that early movie when he went... [indecipherable]

Zarecki: Yes. I have a copy of it, but he put the first movie [**Falasha: Exile of the Black Jews of Ethiopia**] together [indecipherable]

Cohen: I remember seeing the movie and -- was this the time when Jews were already brought over? Like yeah...they started to come.

Zarecki: Sort of like in the middle.

Cohen: Middle, right. Oh that's interesting. Did you know him personally?

Zarecki: If you ask me who I am, he would know me.

Cohen: Like was he a student—

Zarecki: In one of the movies, he put me in the acknowledgements.

Cohen: Acknowledgements, wow.

Zarecki: He's made many since.

Cohen: Yeah. I sometimes -- I bet that he's still interested in Africa, which is interesting.

Zarecki: He's done stuff in Israel on Christ and science and stuff like that. He used to live in Toronto, but I believe he's moved to Israel.