



# VA, VIS ET DEVIENS

*a film by*

Radu Mihaileanu

*cast*

Yael Abecassis Yoram - Schlomo's Israeli mother  
Roschdy Zem - Schlomo's Israeli father  
Moshe Agazai - Schlomo (boy)  
Mosche Abebe - Schlomo (teenager)  
Sirak M. Sabahat - Schlomo (man)  
Roni Hadar - Sarah (Schlomo's bride)  
Meskie Shibru Sivan - Schlomo's real mother

*crew*

writer / director - Radu Mihaileanu  
collaborator, screenplay - Alain-Michel Blanc  
music - Armand Amar  
cinematographer - Remy Chevrin  
editor - Ludo Troch  
sound - Henry Mollek  
sound editor - Eric Devos  
mixer - Bruno Tarriere  
art director - Eytan Levy  
costume designer - Rona Doron  
production manager - Yorick Kalbache  
producers - Denis Carot / Marie Manmonteil

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- Amsterdam (Tuschinski, Cinecenter)  
- Den Haag, Utrecht, Eindhoven, Haarlem



One boy dies. Another takes his place. To survive, he must pretend to be what he is not. His mother commands him: "GO. LIVE. BECOME." He obeys, though he does not understand.

*Live how? Become what?*

**From writer director Radu Mihaileanu maker of the acclaimed TRAIN OF LIFE a new film about mysteries of survival, identity, and the healing force of love**

## **VA, VIS ET DEVIENS**

*synopsis*

The year is 1985. "Operation Moses" is at its peak -- the massive airlift of thousands of "Falasha," Ethiopian Jewish refugees, who are fleeing oppression in their native country. One Jewish boy, marked for a rescue-flight to Israel, dies as the story begins. Another boy, a Christian (Moshe Agazai), secretly takes his place. He does so with the tacit cooperation of both the dead boy's mother, and his own mother.

At age 9, "Schlomo" (as he is renamed; we never learn his earlier name) is too young to realize his life is being saved. He knows only that he is being cruelly separated from his real mother, and that

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he must never ever reveal his true identity to anyone. Israeli authorities are very severe about deporting pretenders they discover among the rescued. His adoptive mother dies, apparently of tuberculosis, very shortly after their arrival. Schlomo is now completely on his own. He proves a gifted but difficult student. He learns Hebrew easily, but refuses to eat. In his heart, he speaks to his mother in Africa each night by addressing his thoughts to the moon, overhead. He picks fights with schoolmates. He finally even flees the dormitory one night, headed south to Ethiopia wearing little more than a bedsheet. The authorities overtake him. They then arrange for Schlomo to be adopted by a liberal, French-Israeli couple, Yael (Yael Abecassis) and Yoram (Roschdy Zem).

And so begins the most hopeful, and healing journey of Schlomo's young life. The way is still fraught with difficulty. He not only has new parents, but new siblings. (He also has a warm, droll new grandfather, played by Rami Danon.) They all adjust to one another by stormy degrees. However, a deep and mutual love is gradually forged, especially between the boy and his new mother, Yael. She becomes his ferocious protector when the parents of Schlomo's schoolmates recoil from his color, or what they pre-judge to be his lack of intellect, or what they imagine to be the diseases he may have brought with him from Africa. Yael will have none of it. She curses their pettiness, and wins the confrontation.

His adoptive father Yoram is no less fierce in his love, especially when a group of fundamentalist clerics at the Chief Rabbinate of Jerusalem manhandle the boy in a misguided effort to ritually "cleanse" him (attempting to take a drop of blood from his penis), in

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tandem with every other Ethiopian they can lay hold of. Through this episode, which triggers a riot and afterward sparks vigorous marches of protest, we become privvy to rich layers of conflict and nuance in Israeli society which are seldom communicated in the American news media.

Around this time, the boy pays a visit to a prominent Ethiopian rabbi he sees on television, Qes Amhra (Yitzhak Edgar). Qes agrees to write letters to Africa for the boy. If the old man suspects that his new young friend is secretly a gentile, he lets it pass.

As a teenager, circa 1989, Schlomo (now played by Mosche Abebe) grows tall and princely. He falls in love with a local beauty Sarah (Roni Hadar). She is as much in love with him, but her father vehemently, even brutally, opposes the match. Racial prejudice is a factor. Yet Sarah's father also intuits something we and Schlomo know to be true -- that deep down, he is inauthentic. Schlomo counteracts this by mastering the Torah. He enters a steep intellectual competition known as The Controversies, in which he must debate profundities of Scripture with no margin for error. Qes tutors him in nuances of spiritual law, but advises him to understand it from his heart.

Schlomo is obliged to debate the skin-color of Adam. The very topic is a pointed insult aimed at him by Sarah's father, one of the judges, yet Schlomo speaks to it beautifully. Nevertheless, her father remains unmoved by his triumph. Sarah still loves him, but as he becomes an adult (played by Sirak M. Sabahat), Schlomo keeps her at arm's length. However deeply he has assimilated, however passionately he has embraced the spiritual and intellectual rigors of Judaism, there is no one he feels he may trust with his secret.

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Moreover, he longs to be reunited with his biological mother.

The eventful, surprise-filled climax of Schlomo's journey centers on the reconciliation of these particular sufferings, and his bold actions toward healing ...

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# VA, VIS ET DEVIENS

## *production history*

Turn a corner, and be surprised by your next project.

This was the experience of filmmaker Radu Mihaileanu in 1999, when he unveiled his film *Train of Life* to resounding acclaim and honors all over the world --including the Audience Award at Sundance 1999, and that year's Donatello (the Italian Oscar) for Best Foreign Film. That picture was a bright feast of magical folklore in which the witty inhabitants of a Rumanian Jewish village save themselves by creating a bogus "death train." They shave their beards, expertly tailor themselves a set of Nazi uniforms, and navigate a dangerous gauntlet of closely guarded borders in an effort to reach Jerusalem. It was an exhilarating tale which veered unforgettably into tragic catharsis when Mihaileanu reveals that it's being recounted (even imagined out of whole cloth) by Schlomo, the wise fool who addresses us from behind the wires of a concentration camp.

Mihaileanu showcased *Train of Life* at the Los Angeles Jewish Film Festival, and at the celebratory dinner afterward, an African man took him aside. "You've told *my* story in this film," he declared, "For I, too, am a Jewish refugee."

At first Mihaileanu thought the man was joking -- but no. He was a *Falasha*, one of the Ethiopian Jews who were airlifted out of the Sudan in 1985. That night, Mihaileanu dropped everything to hear this

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man's tale. "I cried all night, listening. I didn't know anything. Of course, I had heard about Operation Moses, but only from the Israeli side. That night, for the first time, I truly understood, through this man, the reality of the Ethiopian Jew, going out from Ethiopia to Sudan, and all they lived through, after, in Israel. How they lost half, or all of their families. *Train of Life* brought me to that guy, and through him I found *VA, VIS ET DEVIENS*."

He spent the next five years researching the Ethiopian experience in depth. "We met everybody," recalls Mihileanu. "We documented everything in detail, myself and my cowriter [Alain-Michel Blanc], to be very sure that, historically, the film is completely right. There are so many sensitive points, especially regarding actions by the superfanatic religious right in Israel. We didn't want to make any mistake about that, or any event. We met a lot of Ethiopians of course, and people from the Mossad, who were exceptionally generous, and opened their files. People from the Israeli Air Force, the Belgian guy who provided the planes. Pilots, stewards, everybody. Analysts, sociologists. We took a lot of time and were very very precise."

Israeli intelligence agents, the fabled Mossad, carried out the 1985 airlift under a highly effective (and life-saving) shroud of secrecy. Mihaileanu was impressed by their humility in relation to the bravery of those they rescued. "Time and again they told me, 'The real heroes were the Ethiopians -- not us.'" Mihaileanu's own research, and encounters with the *Falasha*, would in turn bear this out: "Even if what the whites did was hard, and complex, creating this vast, crazy, clandestine operation, everything the Ethiopians lived through is so

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much more incredible, so much more tragic by comparison. Yet they each have so much light and life and brightness in their eyes --after all those tragedies."

Mihaileanu decided early on that he would make his young hero a Christian passing himself off as a Jew -- for a variety of reasons. For one thing, disguise is one of his great themes: "In all my movies there are what I call the 'positive imposture,'" he says. "Sometimes, in order to survive, people have to invent something else."

For another, he felt a need to go deeper than themes of Jewish identity, already so familiar to him, and ask -- What is human identity?

"That is all part of my story," he says. "My name is 'Mihaileanu' because my father had to change his name during the war when he escaped from a camp. His real name was Mordechai Buchman. There's no name more Jewish than that -- so he had to change, because there were Nazis all around. I keep Mihaileanu, because, if not, that's like killing my father's history. I know that inside, I am Buchman. Outside I am Mihaileanu. Again, a 'positive imposture.' Very early I escaped from Rumania, when it was under the Ceaucescu dictatorship. I had to survive alone -- first in Israel, later in France. No question, that is the reason all of my movies are about escaping, surviving, fighting, searching for identity, racial integration, and similar subjects."

"I also think it's the universal story. Think of all the people from all the countries and continents who come to the United States -- it is a nation of immigrants, of people who had to fight to integrate into another society, sometimes very far away from their native culture. In Europe today, people come up from Africa, or from Asia.

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In Asia today, you have Chinese going to Japan and Korea, or Koreans to Japan. We are a planet in movement. Even when we don't move, the movement is inside us. Through television, through the internet, through books -- we are all of us in a fight to become, let us say, adults? To answer the question of who we are."

"I had a peaceful confrontation, by comparison -- yet for a long time I had a conflict inside me. Am I much more Rumanian, or Jew, or French? Who am I on this planet? The answer, for me, is that today there doesn't exist a 'pure' identity. How fortunate! To say there *is* would even be a form of fascism. Like saying 'a pure race.' Fortunately, we are all a mixed identity. We each have some basic heritage -- like, I am a Jew, I am coming from Rumania. American people may be deeply American, but before that they are also African-Americans, Irish, Italians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and many other cultures. I think that's the richness, today. Everybody looks at the world, but still somehow we don't see this beautiful fact of our life. *VA, VIS ET DEVIENS* tries to speak of this richness -- even if it tells the story of a struggle. Because all of us in life have to go through a struggle -- to become bigger."

*Train of Life* helped give birth to *VA, VIS ET DEVIENS* in another unexpected way.

"I was very upset," Mihaileanu recalls, "When a journalist asked me after *Train of Life*, 'What happened to Schlomo? Did he survive or not?' Remember, the very last image of that film is Schlomo, inside a camp. So my answer was a little bit sarcastic. I told the guy, 'Listen, if you don't forget him, he will survive. That's the meaning of the movie."

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If you *do* forget him, he will die. It's a movie about memory.'

"But later I wasn't so happy with that answer. So I said to myself, 'Okay. I'm doing another movie? I will take Schlomo out of the camp.' That's why the name of the lead character is the same in both films, as a special unity between the two. In this movie, I *start* with Schlomo in a camp, and have him escape by pretending to be a Jew. This way, with a kind of poetic justice, that earlier Schlomo also escapes the *Train of Life* camp. He survives."

In both films, observes Mihaileanu, "Schlomo is an innocent. In *VA, VIS ET DEVIENS*, he is a young boy, but in spirit very much suffering the same question: How to be, at the same time, *himself*, on the inside as well as outside. He is in Israel, he becomes Jew, but at the same time he is outside the culture. Because he's Black, he is rejected by some Jews. Inside, he feels the rejection more painfully because he knows his own secret, that he is also Christian.

Once research was complete, Mihaileanu and his collaborator Blanc wrote the script quickly. The film generated strong interest, given that *Train of Life* had been a hit in Europe. The backers he found loved the premise and trusted Mihaileanu to deliver a great result, but they set a very steep condition: "We'll give you the money,'" Mihaileanu remembers them saying: "But *only* after you show us the three Schlomos.' They were skeptical that I could find three boys who not only look alike and are good actors but speak three languages."

An extremely tall order. "We spent five months looking at more or less 2,500 people in four countries," says Mihaileanu. "But we had the chance, and the miracle, to find several sets of boys whose faces were similar in the eyes, the nose. We had five teams of three, and

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worked together for another three months, getting them all ready for a "final exam." That was tremendous work, but a joy also. Each of the boys was required by the role of Schlomo to speak three languages, and some spoke only Hebrew. We brought in language professors. They lived together, each group under the direction of their eldest -- so the little kids would copy the bigger one, and learn to have the same behavior, same movements of the head, the hands, how they walk, how they react. We coached the five teams for the final exam, to see which three would best create Schlomo together. We chose the two Moshes and Sirak. I then rehearsed with them for the last month, twice a week -- the scenes, and the dances."

Other members of the cast were much more readily available. Nevertheless, Mihaileanu freely sought non-professionals as well as professional actors, interested above all in finding the right person for each given role. Yitzhak Edgar, who plays the crucial part of the Ethiopian rabbi who takes the boy Schlomo under his protective wing, "is not an actor," says Mihaileanu. "He's an agriculturalist, living in a kibbutz. About 20 years ago, he did a TV movie, very very bad, about *Operation Moses* for Israeli television. Even then, he was not an actor, but I saw him -- he had just a little part. Back then, and even now, once the filming was over he went back to his kibbutz. He's not a professional actor at all. But he's so talented, and such a generous person. And he has such a wonderful face. He helped create, as did everybody in the cast -- a feeling of family. All the actors were very often together, outside the work, having dinners in restaurants, or taking walks together on the beach. All of them."

Another non-professional in a pivotal role is Mimi Abonesh

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Kebede, who plays Hana, the Ethiopian Jewish woman who loses her own son in the film's first scene. She consents, in a silent look traded with a Christian woman (Meskie Shibru Sivan) to save her boy by taking him to Israel. "She's a nurse -- she's not an actress at all," says Mihaileanu. "Never appeared in front of a movie camera before. She had an extremely difficult part to play, because she is the one who opens the movie. A very difficult scene, even for a professional. To lose your baby boy, a scene of the most intense emotion, right at the beginning of a movie, in closeup, on a big big screen? To not do too much, yet show what that means? To let us experience the deaths of countless thousands of people, all dying on just one face, in just two eyes? That was Kebede's 'mission.'"

Actress Yael Abecassis, and actor Roschdy Zem, who play Schlomo's adoptive parents in Israel, were both professionals well known to Mihaileanu.

"Yael is Israeli," he says, "but she was born in Morroco, that's why she speaks French. But she lives in Israel, near Tel Aviv. She is one of the biggest Israeli stars. I met her 12 years ago, at the Haifa Film Festival, and I fell in love. I did not know her very well, but I rediscovered her five years ago through one of my producers. I wrote the script for her. That is why the character is named Yael. And we have been quite close friends since five years ago."

Her exceptional personal warmth provides the film a strong emotional backbone - one reinforced by certain incidental characters, like the good-hearted policeman Schlomo meets by chance in a moment of despair. Because the film's primary theme, beyond

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'identity,' is motherhood and sacrifice, Mihaileanu feels: "It's a story about four mothers saving one boy. His own mother, then the Ethiopian Jewish mother, then the Israeli Yael, and finally Sarah (Roni Hadar) the young Israeli woman who falls in love with Schlomo, and marries him. It is when she is pregnant with Schlomo's child, about to become a mother herself, that she understands, after trying to reject him, the importance of his mission to go back to Ethiopia and find his biological mother. If she wasn't pregnant, she couldn't send him."

"So," says Mihaileanu. "Here we have four mothers, giving to each other one child, to make him survive. With the first two, just one glance and they understand each other. It doesn't matter that one is Christian, and the other Jew. They never meet Yael, Schlomo's mother in Israel, but she has kids of her own, and understands the first mothers completely, without having to look into their eyes. It doesn't matter that Schlomo is Black and she is white. And when Yael goes to see Sarah at the climax to say, please don't abandon Schlomo, don't give his secret away, come back to him -- she is making an enormous sacrifice, for a mother. She is saying to another woman, his new wife: 'He's yours. He is not anymore mine.' The wife, too, then makes the same sacrificial gesture, sending Schlomo to his first mother."

In this aspect, *VA, VIS ET DEVIENS* is for Mihaileanu a dialogue between modern and ancient times. "Remember the story of King Solomon," he adds. "Two mothers come before him, both claiming a single child. So Solomon says, 'Okay. Get a sword. Cut the kid in two pieces.' Before anyone can strike the blow, one of the two mothers screams desperately, 'No! He's not mine! Let the other one have him!!!' King Solomon hears her cry and says, 'The baby is yours. Because

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you're the one who wants him to survive.' That, to me, is the beginning of the movie. The more beautiful mother is the one who can sacrifice her love, for the happiness of the kid. And of course, the boy is named Schlomo -- Solomon. In addition to being my 'Schlomo,' he is connected to King Solomon another way, because one version of the Judaic myth of the Ethiopians is that King Solomon fathered a child by the Queen of Sheba."

Mihaileanu had met Roschdy Zem socially in Paris, where both are based, "We were familiar with each other the way actors and directors will be, but I didn't know him very well before our work together. I needed somebody to make a very beautiful couple with Yael. Good looking, and a good actor, because he starts the movie being a very nice and even idealistic guy, but as the story progresses he becomes difficult and bitter, growing worse and worse because of all the economical crises. He's a kind of metaphor of Israel. The whole country starts to get worse and worse after 1982, with the Lebanon war."

The role of Schlomo's adoptive father required other specialties to which Zem was well-suited. "I needed somebody who can speak in French and Hebrew. A French actor. So, there are not so many. Roschdy is one of the biggest French actors, and very, very good -- able to express the inner character-development of Yoram, Schlomo's adopted father. Although Roschdy is French, his parents are from Morocco. He speaks Arabic. And I thought, 'Oh! If he speaks Arabic, he will easily be able to learn Hebrew, because two Semitic languages.' And, indeed, he did it. In one month, he learned very very well. On the very first scene we shot with him, all the Israeli crew applauded him.

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Because he had no accent. That was great.”

“Roschdy is not Jewish, you see,” laughs Mihaileanu. “But that friendship between him and the crew and the Israeli public, which embraced him too, has been wonderful to see. And that’s one of the funny aspects of the movie. Schlomo in the movie is Christian, but he is played by three Ethiopian Jews. And Roschdy is an Arab, yet he plays what is for me the metaphor of Israel, the very representation of Israel. That’s the beauty of cinema. That’s my way to fight against the stupidity which dominates the world today. People are what they are in their souls, without having to put them into categories, Black, white, Arab, Jew.”

Mihaileanu is particularly adamant on this last point. “All of the  
stupidity we live

today, in terms of fighting over religion, and the difference of skin color, is absurd. We can see that the human beings are close to each other despite our surface differences. When a kid is in danger, we don’t care about all that. Schlomo addresses this when he competes amid the Controversies, and says, “We are *Adom-adom* -- that is, just as ‘Adam is made of clay,’ we are ALL the color red.”

## **RADU MIHAILEANU**

*writer / director*

Born in Rumania on April 23rd 1958, Radu Mihaileanu emigrated to Israel and France in his teens. He studied filmmaking in Paris, taking a degree in 1983. Thereafter he worked as an assistant director on a number of large productions, most notably for American moviegoers on the James Bond film *A View To a Kill* (1987) before he established

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himself as a world class director with such acclaimed films as *Betrayal* (1993) and *Train of Life* (1998).

“With *VA, VIS ET DEVIENS* I hope to provoke a large question. What is it, to become? Which is the question the little boy Schlomo must ask, all of his life. His mother says to him, ‘Don’t come back before becoming.’ And so he is forced to ask himself, ‘What do I have to become? What do I have to do, to come back?’ And what she wanted all along was for him to become, simply, a human being.”

### **YAEL ABECASSIS**

*actress, Schlomo’s Israeli mother*

Born in Morocco, presently based in Tel Aviv, Yael Abecassis is one of Israel’s leading actresses in film and television. Mihaileanu wrote the part of “Yael” with her in mind. Her other films include: *Strangers in the Night* (1993), *Three Step Dancing* (2003), and *Life is Life* (2003).

### **ROSCHDY ZEM**

*actor, Schlomo’s Israeli father*

Devotees of French cinema have encountered Roschdy Zem in dozens of films, perhaps most notably in: *I Don’t Kiss* (1991), *My Favorite Season* (1993), *A Vendre [For Sale]* (1998), *Alice and Martin* (1998), *Alias Betty* (2001), *My Wife is an Actress* (2001), and *Chouchou* (2003).

### **MOSHE AGAZAI , MOSCHE ABEBE, and SIRAK M. SABAHAAT**

*actors: Schlomo as a child, a teenager, and a man, respectively*

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"The two Moshes and Sirak," as director Radu Mihaileanu affectionately refers to them, were first selected from among 2,500 other candidates, then finally chosen after an arduous series of studies as detailed in the production history. All three young men are Ethiopian Jews.

## A PEOPLE APART

Fellow Africans call them *FALASHA*, "aliens" -- "those who cannot own land." Their origins on the continent are unknown. They may be descendants of the ancient lost Israelite tribe of Dan. They may have come into being through the union of King Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, and their son Menelik I. Then again, they may simply be descended from those Jews who fled Jerusalem after the destruction of the First Temple, 586 years before the birth of Christ.

Whatever their origins, Jews in Ethiopia have for thousands of years maintained a strict pre-Talmudic biblical Judaism, keeping Jewish dietary strictures, laws of ritual cleanliness, and observing Jewish Sabbath and festivals. The Kesim (religious leaders) were respected as the rabbis of each community, passed down Jewish tradition orally and maintained the Jewish books and Torah scrolls that some communities preserved in the ancient liturgical Ethiopian language of Ge'ez.

Starting with Menelik I, the first Ethiopian kings and their realms are Jewish. Even the 20th century dictator Haile Salessie called himself "The Lion of Zion."

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4th CENTURY, COMMON ERA (A.D.). The Jews of Ethiopia are persecuted by Christians, whose numbers are on the rise. Many are forced to convert. Those who successfully refuse to surrender their faith withdraw to the mountainous region of Gondar. There they settle, make lives and build communities. These have weathered countless historic upheavals, to this day.

10th CENTURY (circa 920). The status of Ethiopian Jews changes drastically with the rise of Queen Judith, who leads them in a popular revolt which uproots and overthrows the Christian "Axum" regime. A new royal dynasty is established. The Jews of Ethiopia maintain influence for the next 350 years -- often acting as a balance between Christian and Muslim groups.

13th CENTURY (circa 1270). The Christian "Axum" dynasty again returns to the throne, ushering in 400 years of tribal warfare and bloodshed.

1624, COMMON ERA (A.D.). These wars end with a bloody final battle in which the Portuguese back the Axum Christians. This marks the end of Jewish freedom in Ethiopia, and begins a long period of oppression. Jewish captives are sold into slavery or forcibly baptized. Their lands are confiscated, their writings and religious books burned. Practice of any form of Judaism is forbidden throughout Ethiopia.

17th / 18th CENTURIES. Rugged communities nevertheless survive in the isolated mountain province of Gonder. Despite

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occasional encounters with explorers and missionaries, the Falasha manage to remain out of sight.

19th CENTURY. As news of their existence spreads, the Chief Rabbi of Egypt proclaims that, in terms of the Jewish legal code, the Ethiopian community is certainly Jewish. Throughout the nineteenth century, the majority of European Jewish authorities openly support this assertion.

1908. The chief rabbis of 45 countries make a joint statement officially declaring their recognition. This proclamation is largely due to the work of Professor Jaques Faitlovitch, who would devote the balance of his life to the Falasha cause, traveling there, building schools, and championing their welfare until his death in the late 1950's. Life is hard for the community, all the same. Jews have never been allowed to own land in Ethiopia.

1949 -- 1955. Following independence, Israel sends educational emissaries to Ethiopia, organizing travel and study to Israel for members of the Falasha community, in hopes they will later return to Ethiopia as teachers. These operations continue for many years.

1973. Chief Rabbi Yossef Ouadia declares in a letter the recognition of Ethiopian Judaism. He proclaims on the *Falasha's* behalf "The Law of Return," that from this moment forward the Israeli government is officially able to bring Ethiopian Jews back to the Holy Land.

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1974. Ethiopian monarch Haile Selassie falls from power, and this triggers a bloody persecution: 2,500 of the country's Jews are killed, and 7,000 are made homeless.

1977. The situation becomes so unbearable that many Falasha flee the country, establishing refugee camps in Sudan. Those caught trying to leave Ethiopia are imprisoned and tortured. Yet the exodus continues, and the squalid refugee camps steadily fill.

1980. Covert operations smuggling Ethiopian Jews into Israel begin.

1980 -- 1983. The administration of Marxist-Leninist dictator Colonel Mengistu Mariam forbids the practice of Judaism and the teaching of Hebrew. His notion is that such studies are no more than a ruse for emigrating to Israel. Falasha religious leaders are routinely harassed, even imprisoned as "Zionist Spies." Boys are forced into the militia at the age of 12, the threat of war is constant, and wretched health is so much the norm that infant mortality escalates.

Extreme famine wracks the Ethiopian economy, attracting relief efforts in the form of foods and medicines from the United States and Israel, who apply pressure upon the Ethiopian government to release the Falasha.

By the end of 1982, some 2,500 Ethiopian Jews resettle in Israel.

Over the course of 1983 another 1,800 leave Sudan on foot. In order to act more quickly, Israeli agents begin using Hercules transport planes each with a holding capacity of 200 immigrants per

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flight.

1984. The large numbers of Jews crossing on foot into Sudan takes a horrible human toll. Over a third of their number die of starvation, or are murdered by bandits. Disease creates dangerous conditions in the refugee camps. Israeli agents realize that a large-scale effort is necessary

## THE RESCUE OF A PEOPLE

NOVEMBER 21, 1984. "Operation Moses" begins. Refugees are bussed directly from the Sudanese camps to a military airport near Khartoum. Under a shroud of secrecy established by a news blackout, they are airlifted to Israel by way of Brussels, Belgium. Between November 21, 1984 and January 5, 1985, approximately 8,000 Ethiopian Jews came home to Israel. It is estimated that at least 4,000 of their fellows and loved ones perished in the effort to reach Sudan.

JANUARY 6, 1985. News leaks end "Operation Moses" prematurely, as Arab nations pressure the Sudanese government to stop these migrations of Ethiopian Jews. About 1,000 Jews are left behind in the Sudan, and tens of thousands more remain in Ethiopia. These primarily include those unable to make the arduous, dangerous trek, women, children and the elderly. Babu Yakov, a Falasha community leader remarks: "Those least capable of defending themselves are now facing their enemies."

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1985. U.S. Vice President George H.W. Bush, after strong urging by the American Jewish community, initiates a CIA follow-up to Moses, "Operation Joshua," and brings 800 of the 1,000 remaining in Sudan to Israel. Over the ensuing five years, Ethiopian leader Colonel Mengistu zealously obstructs any international efforts to negotiate on behalf of those Falasha who remain in their native country, under his authority.

1990 -- 1991. At long last, Ethiopia and Israel reach an agreement under which the Falasha are allowed to leave under the auspices of family reunification. As word spreads, thousands leave Gonder for Addis Ababa. The Ethiopian government recoils, and reacts harshly by imposing arbitrary quotas. In Israel, covert plans are sketched for a massive rescue effort.

By early 1991, the political and economic situation in Ethiopia deteriorates. Eritrean and Tigrean rebels take control of Addis Ababa and Colonel Mengistu is toppled and flees. FRIDAY, May 24th, 1991. "Operation Solomon" begins in the middle of this civil war as the rebels close in upon the Ethiopian capitol. Over the course of 36 hours, a total of 34 El Al Hercules C-130s -- their seats removed to maximize passenger capacity -- fly nonstop. A total of 14,325 Ethiopian Jews are airlifted to Israel over the course of this day and a half. They are euphorically welcomed by thousands of their new countrymen, who greet them at makeshift immigration centers, hotels and hostels.

Once safely in Israel, the Falasha have since 1985 made a long,

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often painful transition away from a rural economy and into a highly technical, industrialized western society. After six months to two years being re-educated in immigration centers, painful barriers confronted them -- unthinkingly erected by social and cultural differences, even petty bigotry.

These challenges, and the healing affirmations time and justice make inevitable, are dramatized by filmmaker Radu Mihaileanu in *VA, VIS ET DEVIENS*. For further information about the History of Ethiopian Judaism, visit this website: [http://www.iaej.co.il/pages/history\\_operation\\_moses.htm](http://www.iaej.co.il/pages/history_operation_moses.htm)

## ***AWARDS FOR VA, VIS ET DEVIENS***

Audience Award European Cinema Award Ecumenical Award  
BERLIN FILM FESTIVAL 2005

Golden Swan (Best Film) Best Screenplay  
COPENHAGEN INT'L FILM FESTIVAL  
2005

Jury Prize (Best Film) Audience Award (Best Film)  
VALENCIENNES FILM FESTIVAL  
2005

Best Script  
FRENCH CESARS  
2006

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