

## Where are they now? / A Jew jailed in Sudan is now a voice for Sudanese prisoners in Israel

Reda Melese was tortured in a Sudanese prison for trying to help bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel. Now the tables have turned: He mediates for African migrants detained for illegally entering Israel.

[By Leora Eren Frucht | 14:44 06.01.13 | HAARETZ](#)

Reda Melese never imagined the ironic hand fate would deal him.

The Ethiopian-born Israeli, who spent nearly seven months in prison in Sudan, now makes a living helping Sudanese and other African migrants jailed in Israel.

“Our roles are reversed,” says the slim, kippa-clad Jerusalemite with a thin moustache and polite manner. “Sometimes it doesn’t seem real to me that now they are the jailed ones, and here I am,” he says, looking around the cafe in the capital where he is seated, a free man.

Beginning in 1987, Melese, then a straggly 15-year-old, spent his days and nights smuggling Ethiopian Jews through the hostile desert of Sudan to be flown secretly to Israel from secret landing strips in the African country.

He was one of about 150 Ethiopian Jews the Mossad recruited for that mission because the agency’s regular white operatives would have stood out too much to work effectively in Africa.

“I was the youngest of the recruits,” recalls Melese, now a 40-year-old father of four. “I was chosen for the job because I was educated and spoke several languages.”

In addition to Amharic and English, these included fluent Tigre, the lingua franca of most people who hail from Eritrea, now an independent state and then a region of Ethiopia, bordering Sudan. Many Eritreans migrated to Sudan, fleeing war or seeking work.

So when Sudanese authorities arrested Melese in 1990, suspecting him of being an aliyah agent, he pretended to be an Eritrean migrant worker. He had in fact been spending his time bribing Sudanese bureaucrats and leading Jews to safe houses. “To admit that would not only mean certain death for me but would also have endangered thousands of other Jews,” he says. “I had taken an oath pledging I’d never talk.”

Melese was tortured by his captors, who included Sudanese police as well as Eritrean-born guards, who were convinced he was lying. “They told me they would gouge my eyes out and cut off my legs unless I admitted that I had been helping Jews leave,” he recalls. He was whipped, beaten, hung upside down with his hands and feet bound, and had burning objects sear his body.

But Melese stuck to his story. “My fluent Tigre helped convince them that I was who I said I was.” After six months and three weeks Melese was released and dumped near the Sudanese-Ethiopian border. Scarred, emaciated and suffering from malaria, he eventually joined a planeload of other Ethiopian olim on a clandestine flight from Sudan, and arrived

in Israel to start a new life.

Now, Melese's language skills are once again in demand.

Six years ago he was recruited to serve in court as a translator and mediator for the swelling number of Sudanese and Eritrean migrants detained in Israel.

"Suddenly the tables are turned. Then I was the stranger who infiltrated the border and was caught; now, it's them," he says.

Melese works for the court system in Jerusalem: From the district level to the Supreme Court, he interacts with a mix of Sudanese and Eritreans including migrant workers, asylum seekers, army deserters, criminals, abusive husbands and abandoned children. The first time he encountered the migrants in court, it stirred mixed feelings, he says. "On the one hand, I have memories of suffering and hatred for the country that captured and tortured me," says Melese, whose knees, shoulder, back and right hand all bear scars from his incarceration. "Some members of my community note that these very people who pursued us and caused us great suffering are now coming to our country looking for salvation. Do they deserve our help now?" Melese asks and pauses pensively for a moment.

"I say that we shouldn't look for revenge. Just as we were once refugees, now they are. But it's complicated for me," he adds, explaining that he was most likely betrayed by one of the Eritreans from his native village. "It could have been the father of one of those now seeking refuge here who turned me in."

At the same time, other cases Melese encounters pull relentlessly at his heart strings. He cites one involving a 9-year-old Eritrean boy who somehow walked from Sudan to Israel all by himself, in search of his father who was working in Tel Aviv, but didn't want him.

"The boy was locked in the cell of a paddy wagon and brought into court by four policemen," recalls Melese. "He asked me to beg the judge not to force him to be in 'the cage' again because he found it hard to breathe in there. There were tears running down his face. Everyone in court, including the judge, was shocked and horrified that this boy had been treated so insensitively, but the police just said 'those are the rules.'"

"How could I not feel heartbroken for that boy?"

"No matter how I suffered in Sudan, this boy doesn't deserve such treatment. It's a matter of basic humanity," he says.

As for his years working undercover in Sudan, Melese sounds sad and even bitter, in part because of the failure of the Mossad to recognize and compensate the Ethiopian operatives fairly for their work. (In the wake of an outcry and lawsuit by Ethiopian activists in the late '90s, a government commission agreed to pay each operative a small lump sum, which Melese rejected, calling it humiliating.)

He hopes to take up the case himself in a couple of years when he completes his law studies – a path he embarked on as a result of his work in court. Melese, who is already an accountant, sees law as a continuation of what he did in Ethiopia. "As a lawyer," he says, "I will be able to help my own people again, here in Israel."