

“This is my Story”

By Gwynne Robins

Whenever Tamrat Tizita, an Ethiopian Jew, came to Cape Town, he would pop into the Gitlin Library.

One day he gave the librarian Dr Ute ben Yosef a complimentary day pass to Aquila Game Reserve where he worked, and she invited me to accompany her. Aquila is only two hours outside Cape Town, so we took a day off, and had a wonderful game drive and buffet lunch. I enjoyed it so much, I subsequently took my children and grandchildren for the night.



Tamrat kept them enthralled with his experiences. He had escaped from Ethiopia to Israel and some years later when conditions deteriorated, had gone back to rescue his mother, only to be arrested as it was illegal to go to Israel. In 1991 when the Ethiopian regime was on the verge of collapsing in a civil war, Mengistu agreed to sell their Jews to Israel for much-needed money, giving Israel less than two days to carry out Operation Solomon, during which time Israel flew out more than 14300 Ethiopian Jews, including Tamrat, his mom and eight extra passengers born on the flights.

Some years later Searl Derman, Aquila's owner, met Tamrat in Israel, was impressed with him and brought him out to work at Aquila. Whenever the Israeli ambassador was in Cape Town, Tamrat would join the CSO. No one would have suspected that this dark man ambling along the pavement behind the ambassador was a Hebrew-speaking Israeli.

One year I arranged for Tamrat to be a keynote speaker at the Jewish Board of Deputies Interfaith Freedom Seder, talking about his Exodus from Africa to Freedom in Israel. He was in tears, as were many in the audience.

Some years ago I got a phonecall from a film company asking if I knew any Ethiopian Jews. They were in Cape Town to film *The Red Sea Diving Resort*, about the false diving operation Mossad set up on the Sudanese coast to rescue Ethiopian Jews.

I suggested Tamrat and they were thrilled when they met him. He was tall, good-looking and impressive and spoke good English — just perfect for a role as one of the main actors. Tamrat was also thrilled — he told me, “This is my story.”

Just before filming was to start I learnt that he had died tragically, driving by night in a heavy mist on a mountain pass, returning to Aquila. I went to his funeral at Pinelands. There was a large contingent of emotional game wardens and staff from Aquila.

He was supporting family in Israel but no-one knew where he banked, nor who they were. I contacted the Israeli embassy but they could not trace them either.

Recently Aquila contacted me. Tamrat had saved his ten and twenty cent pieces. Searl thought the money should go to a Jewish communal organisation. I suggested the Zionist Council because it was Israel that had rescued Tamrat