



The Ransom of the Jews: The Story of Extraordinary Secret Bargain Between Romania and Israel

Radu Ioanid

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After 1948, the 370,000 surviving Jews of Romania became one of the main sources of immigration for the new state of Israel. With the exception of a period in the early 1950s, almost all Romanian Jews left their homeland in several waves to settle in Palestine and Israel. Behind Romania's decision to allow its Jews to leave were practical economic and political reasons: Israel paid for them, and Romania wanted influence in the Middle East. The trade satisfied both states and is still considered a highly confidential matter. In *The Ransom of the Jews*, Radu Ioanid of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum traces the intriguing story of this secret exchange. Drawing upon restricted archival records and interviews with agents and others directly involved in the operation, he describes how Israel—not without second thoughts—traded cash, agricultural products, and sometimes political influence to ensure the emigration of Jews from Romania. The price was \$2,000 to \$3,300 per head, and also involved trade and loan considerations. This privileged relationship between the two countries allowed Israel after 1967 to maintain in Bucharest its only embassy in the East European Communist bloc. It also permitted Nicolae Ceausescu, the anti-Semitic Romanian president, to emerge as a mediator in the Middle East peace process, in which he hoped to use Israel to improve his own relations with the United States. In 1978, during the Jimmy Carter administration, Mr. Ioanid reveals, Washington learned of the sale of Romanian Jews to Israel but turned its eyes for reasons ostensibly related to its policies toward the Soviet Union. In all, some 235,000 Jews emigrated from Romania to Israel under the agreement, which ended with the fall of the Ceausescu regime.

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