

Joseph P. Kennedy, his sons, Jewish Issues and Israel.

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Joseph P. Kennedy, son and grandson of Irish immigrants aspired to the highest office in the land achieved great wealth through investment and real estate, boot-legging and Hollywood movie-making. He took a personal interest in the studies of his children and often encouraged them. When John wasn't doing well he advised him not to waste his life, and to make use of his talents. He managed to have them educated in the best of schools including Harvard and the London School of Economics. Although JPK was an isolationist he wanted to run for President of the United States on the Democratic ticket. but the Democrats preferred Roosevelt and reelected him four times. F.D.R. did appoint JPK to various posts including that of Ambassador to the Court of St. James, London, England. When the Germans bombed London JPK sent his family back to America.

JPK's private letters and correspondences reveal that like many others of the wealthy and established Americans he did not care for Jews. He thought they had too much influence in America. But while he did not advocate their being admitted to

America he took a personal interest in trying to find other possible places for them. He tried to persuade the British to make one of their colonies available to the Jews. He tried to persuade some of the South American states to make room for the persecuted Jews of Europe. He found that only a few countries were willing to help save some Jews, and only if the Germans would permit the Jews to take their wealth with them. Joseph P. Kennedy found that disappointing. He observed that there can be "no real appeasement as long as large numbers of people are kept in fear of their lives. . . ." At one point JPK said that he wanted to speak with Hitler to persuade him to change his ways. But that seemed to be just talk.

In 1934 Ambassador Kennedy asked his son Joe P. Kennedy Jr. to visit Germany, Austria and Hungary and to report on conditions in those countries. Joe Jr., traveled there and wrote to his father that the Jews had too much power in those countries and that many were lawyers, businessmen and Judges. Nationalists and Nazis planned to change all that. Joe observed that it was unfortunate that innocent Jews would be hurt because of the guilty.¹

In 1939, at his father's behest John F. Kennedy traveled to the Holy Land to report on conditions there. John was impressed by the progress of the Jewish communities, cities, towns and villages; their farms, factories; ports and newly planted forests. He noted that the Arabs were jealous of the achievements of the Jews. They claimed that if they had the money of the Jews they too could be successful, but John

¹ A. Smith, editor, *Hostage to Fortune: The Letters of Joseph P. Kennedy* (New York, 2001), p. 110

thought that no amount of money would do the trick. He believed that they could not make much progress unless they freed themselves from their medieval ways and conditions.² He observed that the "important thing is to try to work out a solution that would work and not to present a solution based on two vague, indefinite and conflicting promises." He made reference to General Henry McMahon letters to Arab potentates and Foreign Minister Balfour's letter to Lord Rothschild. Balfour gave with "one hand what he took back with the other." The solution, according to JFK, was two independent entities that would not interfere with one another and that Jerusalem should be an independent entity. Unlike his father, John was not a pacifist nor was he an isolationist. He realized that one cannot avoid war through isolationism nor by appeasement. He was an independent minded man and he tried to make his constituents realize that he was his own man. "Look, I am my father's son, I don't disown him, but I have a mind of my own. I am going to do that which is right."³ In 1951, as part of a world tour, John and his brother Robert visited Israel again. John was inspired by the progress the Israelis had made since 1939. He was impressed by the "toughness, ruggedness and cockiness of the Israeli soldiers. You can feel a sense of dedication . . . and a willingness to endure hardships." But then it was a "very hard" life in Israel. Philosophically it matched his own outlook: "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." He greatly admired and appreciated the democracy and

² Jack Kennedy to Joseph P. Kennedy, 1939 (no other date is given to the letter) President's Office Files, 135, JFKL.

³ Phil Fine interview, JFKL.□

dedication of the Israelis and the Americans for their patriotism and love of country.

Joe senior believed that Hitler's anti-Semitism was a means by which he aimed to win control over Germany. Anti-Semitism seemed all right to Joe Senior and Joe Junior, but they could not understand why the Nazis picked on the Catholics.⁴

Joe Jr., was much more direct about his anti-Semitism. Do we really want the Jews coming to our shores when we have "18 million unemployed?" asked Joe Kennedy Jr. He admitted that it was "terrible" that the Jews were being persecuted, but then the Chinese were being bombed by the Japanese and that Catholics in Spain were being killed. Should the U.S. be concerned with everyone's troubles? asked Joe Jr.⁵

One of the Ambassador chief concerns was his children. He did not wish to see them sacrificed to the dogs of war. "I hate to think how much money I would give up rather than to sacrifice Joe and Jack in a war." He advised the British Prime Minister that the United States "Must not be counted upon to back Great Britain in any scrape, right or wrong." Roosevelt tried to reassure individuals like JPK that he meant to keep America out of war and "out of any and all involvements or commitments abroad." As early as September 27,1938, Ambassador Kennedy argued that "ships should be made available for our wives and children." In the midst of all this turmoil JPK could not understand why Jews did not like him, especially Jewish journalists like Walter Lippman.⁶

⁴ Joseph P. Kennedy to Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., May 4, 1934, A. Smith, JPK letters, p. 133.

⁵ Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., (23 years old), Notes, June 10, 1939, A. Smith, JPK Letters, pp. 338-340.

⁶ Joseph P. Kennedy Diary entry September 27, 1938, JFK Diary Box 91, File 1938, JPK Papers, JFKL.

On December 1, 1940, after consulting with Roosevelt JPK resigned his post as ambassador to England saying that he would work to keep America out of war. He would meet with FDR on August 2, 1943 and complain that Roosevelt had surrounded himself with Jews and that their thinking dominated his thinking.

Personal tragedies would hit JPK and his family .

On August 2, 1943 John F. Kennedy's naval craft, PT 109 was attacked by Japanese destroyers off the Blackett Straights in the Pacific. Lieutenant Kennedy and the other eleven men tried to save themselves. Despite his injured back Kennedy was able to save himself and other members of the crew.

His family was informed that John was reported missing. On August 13, 1943, almost two weeks later, the family was informed that JFK and his crew had been saved. John wrote home: "They misjudge the durability of a Kennedy." Not as fortunate was Joe Jr. He had been assigned to drop some 22,000 pounds of explosives over Germany's north sea military installations. On August 12, 1944, the explosives ignited while Joe's plane flew over Nazi Germany. Not a trace of the young man could be found. The family was struck hard. Ambassador Joe Kennedy had envisioned great things for his tall and handsome, Joe Jr. He had hoped that he would become the next President of the United States. But that was not to be. Ambassador Kennedy came to believe that his family was cursed. In his book A Jew in America Arthur Hertzberg reported that when a rabbi had tried to see Ambassador Kennedy at the American embassy in London in order to get his help to rescue his American family stranded in Europe. He had

spoken to embassy officials, but they claimed that they could not be of help. The rabbi did not give up and he finally got to see Kennedy who told him not to be "a pest." As the rabbi left Joe Kennedy he cursed him: "May God have as much compassion for your children as you have for mine."⁷

In 1946 John ran and was elected to Congress and in 1952 he ran for the Massachusetts Senate seat against Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. and won. As Senator he co-sponsored the Senate resolution of February 1953 condemning Soviet persecution of the Jews of Russia. He called upon Eisenhower to "remove all cause for fear that had arisen throughout the world concerning the future security of the Jews residing within Russia. JFK joined other senators and congressmen in criticizing the Eisenhower administration's Near East policy that seemed to forever favor the Arabs. He asked that Eisenhower lift the arms embargo against Israel. The Arabs got weapons from Russia, the U.S. and various European states. He joined other legislators in criticizing the Near East military imbalance sponsored by the U.S. and U.S.S.R. that favored the Arabs. He asked Eisenhower to lift the arms embargo against Israel.

In 1956 Kennedy joined other senators and congressmen in demanding that the U.S. not acquiesce with Saudi Arabia's discriminatory policy against American Jewish G.I.s based in Saudi Arabia.

During 1956-1957 John Kennedy joined other senators and congressmen in criticizing and condemning the United Nations for its one-sided condemnation of Israel for the 100 hour Sinai war against Egypt's armed forces backed up by the

⁷ Arthur Hertzberg, *A Jew in America* (New York,), p

Soviet Union and the United States.

On February 13, 1957, Kennedy firmly supported Israel's right to defend itself "with any means at her disposal." A week later, he called for a permanent settlement of the Middle East conflicts. But of course that did not bring peace, it was just a sentiment expressed by many people.

"The Mideast needs water, not war. . . . Tractors not tanks." Bread not bombers. . . ." JFK in 1956. During his three years as President Kennedy would try to encourage the Arabs states and Israel to make progress towards peace, but very little success.

In 1957 JFK won a Pulitzer Prize for his book entitled *Profiles in Courage* , which was a study of U.S. senators who had the courage to vote independently of their political parties even though it might cost them their political career.

Three years later in 1960 when he ran against Richard M.Nixon for the Presidency his book *The Strategy of Peace* was published. In that book he wrote of the importance of Israel's survival and acceptance by other Middle Eastern states.

As with President Truman he sympathized and supported Israel, but he pursued that policy which was best for the United States and that which would further freedom. Kennedy tried to avoid the mistakes of the past like Eisenhower's attempt to placate and appease President Nasser of Egypt, and the rulers of Saudi Arabia and Iraq. President Kennedy tried to pursue a balanced approach. He tried to keep good personal relations with Israel and the Arabs.

What did Kennedy know about Israel and the Middle

East? At the start of his presidency he knew very little, but he tried to maintain an open mind and objectivity. Throughout his public service career whether in the House, the Senate or the White House he tried to learn as much as possible and to be his own man. He supported the establishment of an independent State of Israel and to keep the doors of that land open to Jewish immigration. He tried to encourage cooperation between Israel and the Arab states. "He believed that the true enemy of the Arab world was "poverty and want." "The very sands of the desert would rise up to oppose the imposition of an outside control upon the destinies of these proud peoples." In May 1952 JFK supported a \$76 million package to help Israel absorb its immigrants and become an inspiration for all free men. In 1957 he supported an end to the blockade of Israeli shipping through the Suez Canal. He believed that a secure and safe Israel would be easier to live with than an insecure Israel that might "undertake unpredictable adventures such as the 1956 Sinai war. A "strong Israel might even be a deterrent against Soviet expansionism."

While Kennedy was supportive of Israel some members of his government and cabinet were not. On July 12, 1962 Secretary of State Rusk claimed that the U.S. government did not recognize Israel's rights in Jerusalem as paramount and he called for the establishment of Palestine as a trusteeship. Israeli foreign minister Moshe Sharett would observe that Rusk had not changed much since 1947-1948. At times Rusk would blame Israel for all the problems the U.S. seemed to have with the Arabs. Kennedy learned not to rely upon the establishment officials when it came to such major issues and

confrontations as the the Berlin wall; the Bay of Pigs; the Missiles crisis of October; and Russian opposition to American missiles in Turkey.

Kennedy believed that once the states of the Middle East would get firm guarantees there would be no need for an arms race there, but the State Department advised against such guarantees. President Kennedy agreed to provide Israel with security guarantees, but he would not agree to establish an alliance with Israel, Nor would he agree to establish a NATO type commitment to Israel, because he was concerned that such a commitment would result in the U.S. losing the Arabs.

Kennedy decided to provide Israel with the Hawk missiles in order to help establish a balance of power in the Middle East. The Hawks would enable Israel to shoot down some of its enemies' jet bombers.

According to Israel's intelligence sources Egypt was conducting research into atomic weapons with the help of outside sources like Russia and some 300 German scientists and technicians. As Ben Gurion explained it to Kennedy "we are the remnant of a people struggling for its last hold of its existence. Israel is our last stop." Kennedy agreed to provide Israel with the Hawks to counteract the hundreds of planes which the Arabs possessed. But while JFK agreed to sell Israel the Hawks he wanted Israel to reciprocate by : 1. agreeing not to make atomic bombs 2, permitting inspection of the Dimona atomic energy facilities 3. help settle the refugee problem and 4. give up its policy of retaliation. Ultimately Israel agreed to inspection of its Dimona facilities, but only once a year, not twice a year as Kennedy had requested.

John F. Kennedy and Israeli leaders like Ben Gurion, Golda Meir and General Yitzhak Rabin achieved a "Special Relationship" between Israel and the United States. It was not the dual alliance which some Israelis had requested, but it was a special relationship, as Kennedy explained it: Israel's survival and independence was as important to the United States as the survival and independence of Great Britain. "The United States has a special relationship with Israel, but at the same time the U.S. has to maintain its friendship with the Arab states." "No other country has such a relationship with us," said Kennedy to Golda Meir. It was "a Special relationship but not an alliance." While the U.S. and Israel were friends, the U.S. has to maintain its friendships with various Arab states.⁸

General Yitzhak Rabin,, asked Kennedy to establish a liaison of military/staff coordination over such questions as the right to fly over certain Arab territories in case of a military confrontation.⁹

JFK was open to new ideas and considered them seriously. Ambassador Gazit recalled that Kennedy had told him the story of the gardener who had worked so hard to plant some trees that it would take twenty years for the trees to grow. "But why do you work so hard, after all, it takes some 20 years for the trees to grow."

"That's why, I must work in haste."¹⁰

⁸ State Department Memo of Conversation with Foreign Minister Golda Meir, December 27, 1962, President's Office Files, 119A, JFKL. H.M. Druks, John F. Kennedy and Israel (Praeger, Wesport, CT.), pp.44-45.

⁹ Robert Komer Memorandum for the Record, November 18, 1963, JFK Presidential Papers, NSF, Komer 428, JFKL.

¹⁰ Interview with Ambassador Mordechai Gazit, Jerusalem, August 3, 1997

Kennedy believed that if the Israelis and the Arabs would work together it would help them find new avenues of peace and understanding. He believed that cooperation to use the Jordan River water would bring water to Israel, Jordan and Syria and that they would help them find new avenues of cooperation and peaceful development. It would be an important step to bring about cooperation among the nations of the area.

When Israel developed its atomic research in such places as Dimona JFK wanted Dimona inspected twice a year, but Ben Gurion insisted on only once a year inspections. He did not wish to see Israel become subservient to the United States or any other country. We are and will continue to be a free and independent state.

As Israel could not obtain that sought after alliance with the United States it chose to achieve greater independence through the settlement of the Jewish people in Israel, greater cultivation of its lands and high tech for peaceful and defensive purposes.

Robert and Edward Kennedy continued in the tradition of their brother John. They were pro-Israel and pro-Arab.

The study of Joseph P. Kennedy and his sons helps us to see how this particular family was diverse in its active participation in American politics. Joseph P. Kennedy, father and husband was patriarch of the family. The children of the family respected and honored their father and mother, but they chose independent lives and paths. As John Kennedy said, he respected and loved his father, but he had his own ideas, his own mind.

It is interesting to see the variety of paths and approaches writers and "historians" have taken in studying and writing this history. How some chose to study this history with care while others preferred to distort that history. While many books, theses, and articles have been done the story has not yet been written. There are still many unanswered questions.

As I sat composing this essay Edward Kennedy, the youngest of Joseph P. Kennedy's sons, died. Like John, and Robert he was a friend of the Jewish people and Israel. He traveled to Israel and Jordan and met with various groups including some Palestinian refugees in Jordan who continued to declare that the Israelis had to be driven into the sea. One old Palestinian yelled out: "The Jews killed your brother just like they killed Christ." Kennedy snapped back: "That's an inaccuracy."¹¹ Edward was with his brother Robert as he died from gunshot fired at his head by a Christian Palestinian named Sirhan B, Sirhan.

He traveled to the Soviet Union, met with Soviet leaders and urged them to be more flexible on the issue of Jewish emigration from Russia to Israel. and to understand it as an emotional issue for a nation of immigrants. He warned the Russians that their rigidity on emigration only strengthened Russia's critics on that issue as well as arms control. Edward and his wife Joan Kennedy brought up the issue of letting such Russians as Aleksander Solzhenitsyn and cellist Matislav Rostropovich travel outside of Russia. When Kennedy brought these matters up with Premier Brezhnev the later insisted that Russia did not discriminate against Jews.¹² Edward rejected President Jimmy Carter's March

¹¹ Adam Clymer, Edward M. Kennedy, a biography (New York, 1999) p/ 89.

¹² Ibid., 213-214.

1,1980, assault against Israeli "settlements" in the Jerusalem area and the so-called "West Bank."¹³

In the history of Joseph P.Kennedy and his sons John F.Kennedy, Robert F.Kennedy and Edward M.Kennedy it was evident that these three sons,were devoted American patriots and they were likewise devoted friends of the Jewish people and Israel. Robert F.Kennedy became a martyr, at the hands of a Palestinian assassin who resented Robert's devotion to the people of Israel.

Here was an instance in history where the sons did outshine their father, his views and his accomplishments.

¹³ Ibid., 304-305.