JOHN F. KENNEDY AND ISRAEL

Herbert M. Druks



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PREFACE

My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you—ask what together we can do for the freedom of man.

Thus spoke President John F. Kennedy at his inauguration. He hoped to encourage the nations of the world to work with him for the peace of planet Earth so as to save it from man's destructiveness.

As for the Middle East, he hoped that the nations of that part of the world would work for peace. He tried to encourage good relations with all of the nations there, and he changed America's relationship with Israel. Instead of following the trail blazed by FDR and adhered to by Truman and Eisenhower, he strengthened America's friendship and support of Israel. Kennedy made sure that the Arabs knew that he would not permit Israel to be endangered by them or by such major powers as the Soviet Union. Face to face with Golda Meir he firmly declared on December 27, 1962, that America's relationship with Israel was as important as its relationship with Great Britain. He worked with Israel and the Arab states to resolve the Arab refugee issue, and to foster cooperation between Israel and its neighbors in helping to develop and to share the water resources of Israel and its neighbors—however limited those resources may have been. He tried to persuade all the parties concerned to resolve their differences at the meeting halls of the UN rather than the battlefields of the Holy Land.

Kennedy, despite the views of such individuals as Ambassador Adlai Stevenson, Robert Komer, of the National Security Council, and Secretary of State Dean Rusk, realized that Israel would not be able to accept all of the Palestinian refugees and that they would have to be admitted to other states, including various Arab states.

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All this was well and good, but it did not go far enough for Israeli leaders like Ben-Gurion. Kennedy's words, ideas and sentiments were good, but the promises and commitments given in private were not backed up with an open and declared alliance or arms that would restore the balance of power in the Middle East. From 1959 to 1962 Ben-Gurion had tried to persuade President Eisenhower and then President Kennedy to make the Hawk anti-aircraft missiles available to Israel. Finally as President Kennedy learned that Egypt would receive missiles and a large number of jet bombers from the Soviet Union he decided to make the Hawk anti-aircraft missiles available to Israel. But the sale of the Hawks to Israel did not establish a balance of power in the Middle East.

Israel faced the combined forces of such Arab states as Egypt, Syria and Iraq. Israel faced certain annihilation unless it could obtain equivalent, if not superior arms and a certain established alliance with the United States. Neither prospect seemed realizable even though President Kennedy was supportive of Israel. But he could not agree to a dual alliance with Israel and possibly lose all chances of good relations with the Arab states. Prime Minister Ben-Gurion realized that Israel could not rely on others to defend Israel, and he chose to develop Israel's best resource: the genius of its own people. Through scientific research it would seek to find the way to secure its existence. One of those scientific paths was its research into nuclear fission. This went counter to President Kennedy's effort to reduce nuclear proliferation. He was "haunted by the feeling" that by 1970 there might be ten nuclear powers instead of four and that by 1975 there might be fifteen or twenty nuclear powers. For Kennedy this was "the greatest possible danger and hazard." Ben-Gurion and later Prime Minister Eshkol pursued their nuclear card. Whether or not Israel worked to develop nuclear energy or nuclear bombs was Israel's secret and it might help discourage Israel's neighbors from trying to annihilate Israel as Hitler had annihilated six million Iews.

Israeli leaders would remind Kennedy again and again that Israel would not permit its enemies to do to Israel what the Nazis had done to the Jews of Europe. Never again!

Most of Israel's leaders and most of its people were, in one way or another, survivors or relatives of survivors of the Holocaust. John Kennedy was well aware of that history. He had lived it while a son of Ambassador Joseph P. Kennedy who preferred a bad peace with Nazi Germany rather than a war. John Kennedy had studied England's unpreparedness and appeasement of the Nazis and he wrote about it in *Why England Slept*.

While he sympathized with and supported Israel, he could not agree to an open alliance with Israel, nor could he promise them a steady source of arms. The arms kept on coming to the Arabs, but not to Israel. Even France changed its pro-Israel policy as President Charles De Gaulle of France tried to reestablish good relations with the Arabs of North Africa and the Middle East.

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In effect, Israel was cornered by the diplomatic and military developments in the Middle East during the Kennedy and Johnson years. Ultimately the Arab threat to Israel led to the preemptive action of June 1967 wherein Israel took on Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, among other Arab states, and defeated them all.

Kennedy provides us with a fascinating study of a president who had the best of aspirations and high ideals. He was a man of great insight and intelligence as well as humour, charm, and charismatic leadership ability, but with all that he could not fulfill his goal of leading America in the direction of a more peaceful and secure time. He realized the awesome responsibilities of the presidency and his was not a thirst for power or glory. He wanted to be president because he wanted to serve his country. He believed that he could lead his country and "his fellow citizens of the world" to a New Frontier of democracy, freedom and equity. He believed that he could lead America to a more responsible diplomacy. He fought for nonproliferation and disarmament, assisting the community of nations in their struggle to keep their independence. But with every passing moment there seemed to be another major confrontation that Kennedy had to deal with in South America, Europe, the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Somehow he had hoped that he could persuade other world leaders to further "the freedom of man," but in the end his primary concern was to keep planet Earth from being destroyed by war and nuclear holocaust. This was especially so after the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962.

Israeli leaders realized how important it was for Kennedy to keep things under control, but uppermost in their mind was the survival of Israel. They could not entrust their survival on private assurances of a well-intentioned urbane American president. They continued their search for an alliance with the United States and to insure their security, but when that seemed unrealizable, they pursued other ways of securing Israel's survival regardless of the obstacles, regardless of the burden and regardless of the cost.



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This is a study of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Israel during the 1000 days of John F. Kennedy's administration. It is based upon published works and documents as well as the papers of the John F. Kennedy Library as well as the Harry S Truman, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Lyndon B. Johnson libraries, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, Yale Library and Archives, the Israel State Archives and various private collections including the Zionist Archives of New York and Jerusalem.

In addition to consulting the archives, interviews were conducted with various participants in the making of this history. Among those interviewed were Moshe Arens, Eytan Bentsur, Benjamin V. Cohen, Rodger P. Davies, Simcha Dinitz, Eliahu Elath, Mordechai Gazit, Israel Goldstein, Mordechai Gur, Raymond A. Hare, W. Averell Harriman, Avraham Harman, Dr. Reuben Hecht, Professor Charles Hill, Samuel Katz, Dr. Emanuel Neumann, Richard H. Nolte, Benjamin Netanyahu, Yitzhak Rabin, Gerhard Riegner, Samuel I. Rosenman, Yitzhak Shamir, Ovadiah Soffer, Robert Szold, Harry S Truman and Ezer Weizmann.

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CHAPTER 1

JPK and His Sons

Joseph P. Kennedy, the father of John F. Kennedy, was not particularly fond of Jews even though some of his business associates may have been Jews. But apparently, when he saw what the German Nazis were doing to the lews of Europe, he may have tried to help save some Jews. In November 1938, Ambassador Kennedy proposed a settlement plan whereby some 600,000 Jews of Europe were to be admitted to a sparsely inhabited part of Great Britain's African empire, but the idea was rejected by the British, Secretary of State Cordell Hull, and President Roosevelt. At this time such Jewish leaders as Nahum Goldmann and Louis Lipsky found Kennedy interested in the problems of the Jewish people. They heard him express interest in the discussions of the Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees (ICPR) as to whether Palestine should be considered as a place of refuge for the Jews.² In his report to the Secretary of State on November 14, 1938, Ambassador Kennedy made note of the attacks on the Jewish communities of Germany and the indifference of world public opinion as to the plight of the Jews. This reflected a most critical situation, and he recommended that some sort of presidential initiative had to be taken to help save the Jews. After communicating with representatives from various Latin American republics, the British Dominions and various colonial empires, he concluded that the doors were closed to the Jews. Some governments claimed that they were willing to consider admitting some refugees if Germany would permit them to take property. But they would not even begin to consider admitting refugees if they were without property. Kennedy concluded his report by observing "that there can be no real appeasement as long as large numbers of people are kept in fear of their lives and uncertain as to their fate. . . . "3

Some British officials were concerned with Kennedy's approach to the refugee question and British Ambassador Sir Ronald Lindsay went to see Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles to complain. The British ambassador offered to relinquish Britain's portion of its immigration quota to America in favor of the Jewish refugees. Welles explained that quotas granted by Congress were not the property of the nations to whom they were granted. Ambassador Lindsay was concerned with Kennedy's warning that Anglo-American relations would be prejudiced by the refugee question because the feeling in America against the treatment accorded Jews and Catholics in Germany would become so intense as to provoke even more vehement and widespread criticism in America against the policy of appeasement being pursued by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Welles assured the British Ambassador that the United States still relied on the Intergovernmental Committee and it hoped that Britain would open portions of its dominions or colonies for refugee settlement.⁴

Ambassador Kennedy asked Malcolm MacDonald, "why in heaven's name England did not show more interest in intergovernmental relief as she had all the land," and if the British government would offer some of it, the Intergovernmental Committee might then have something to work with. Kennedy observed that it seemed as if every one was feeling sorry for the Jews, but nobody offered any solution or help. British officials claimed that they were helping the refugees, and in confidence they advised Kennedy that they were admitting seventy-five Jews a day. Apparently they did not want the British people to know that because they were afraid that many might object.⁵

Nahum Goldmann and Louis Lipsky believed that the events in Germany had rendered Zionism a "great service," and they were impressed by Kennedy's own determination to bring about British-American cooperation in "an effective solution."

Others were not persuaded that Kennedy was a good friend. One of the skeptics was Justice Louis Dembitz Brandeis, who wrote to his friend Robert Szold that Kennedy and Chamberlain were giving the Evian project and the Jews "the run-around." Brandeis and Kennedy made reference to the Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees which had been established by the Evian Conference of July 1938. Only the Dominican Republic offered to rescue some 100,000 Jews. Ultimately only a few hundred Jews found refuge there. There seemed to be no funds available within the American and European coffers to help rescue any more than a few Jewish people. Those individuals who attended the Evian Conference and ran its Intergovernmental Committee on Political Refugees refused to use the word Jew in their official statements or documents. They referred to the Jews endangered by the German Nazis as "political refugees." The word Jew was taboo within those so-called "diplomatic" circles. The ICPR was

a front used by the states of "western civilization" for doing nothing to help save the Jews.

Various plans of settlement were bandied about, but little came of them. By December 1938, more than fifty such plans or projects had been discussed, but there was no place of refuge for Jews. When the governors of Alaska and the Virgin Islands agreed to offer asylum, Roosevelt opposed. Roosevelt and the State Department insisted that the admission of refugees to those U.S. territorial possessions represented a circumvention of the quota laws and they warned that all kinds of "enemy agents" might enter the country by the back door. FDR apparently said that he sympathized with the refugees but he refused to "do anything which would conceivably hurt the future of present American citizens." He advised that the Jews find other places of refuge.⁸

While Ambassador Kennedy may have had an interest in rescuing Jews, a search through Joseph P. Kennedy's diary for the years 1933 to 1945 reveals hardly any reference to the persecution of European Jews. On November 15, 1938, he wrote that at "King Carol's dinner he had a long talk with the Prime Minister, urging him to do something for Jews."

JOSEPH, THE ELDEST SON

Ambassador Kennedy had hoped that his eldest son, Joseph P. Kennedy Jr., might enter politics and become president of the United States. Joe Jr. was regarded as handsome; he was well liked and shared the conservative views of his father. Ambassador Kennedy hoped that his son could achieve that which he had not been able to achieve: the Presidency.

During a 1934 trip to Europe Joe Jr. saw the Nazis in action. He sympathized with their sterilization program which he saw as a means of "doing away with many of the disgusting specimens of men which inhabit this earth." Joe Kennedy Jr. was about eighteen at the time, and he regarded National Socialism as "a remarkable spirit which can do tremendous good or harm, and whose fate rests with one man alone." In a letter he wrote to his father on April 23, 1934, he observed that the German "dislike of the Jews was well founded." He accepted the Nazi German claim that the "Jews were at the head of all big business, in law etc. It is all to their credit for them to get so far, but their methods had been quite unscrupulous." Apparently in this instance Joe Jr. accepted hearsay as fact:

A noted man told Sir James the other day that the lawyers and prominent judges were Jews, and if you had a case against a Jew, you were nearly always sure to lose it. It's a sad state of affairs when things like that can take place. It is extremely sad, that noted professors, scientists, artists etc. should have to suffer, but as you can see, it would

be practically impossible to throw out only a part of them, from both the practical and psychological point of view. As far as the brutality is concerned, it must have been necessary to use some, to secure the wholehearted support of the people, which was necessary to put through this present program. It was a horrible thing, but in every revolution you have to expect some bloodshed. Hitler is building a spirit in his men that could be envied in any country. They know he is doing his best for Germany, they have tremendous faith in him and they will do whatever he wishes. This spirit could very quickly be turned into a war spirit, but Hitler has things well under control. The only danger would be if something happened to Hitler, and one of his crazy ministers came into power, which at this time does not seem likely. As you know he has passed the sterilization law which I think is a great thing. I don't know how the Church feels about it, but it will do away with many of the disgusting specimens of men which inhabit this earth. In all, I think it is a remarkable spirit which can do tremendous good or harm, whose fate rests with one man alone.¹³

Joe Kennedy Jr.'s report was that of a youngster influenced by the racism and anti-Semitism of his time and surroundings. In a letter to his Mother and Dad dated August 25, 1942, from the U.S. Naval Air Station, Banana River, Florida, he confided as to how upset he had been by "a red headed Jew, who answers to the name of Greenberg." The young man had brought a saxophone and a trumpet and he fancied "himself as one of Benny Goodman's best. I stood it for about an hour and then we went in, and made known our feelings toward him and his instruments. He hasn't brought them out today, but I've got my fingers crossed." 14

His father was more circumspect in his evaluation of Hitler. But Joe Sr. still held to his conviction that young Joe had "a very keen sense of perception" and that his "conclusions are very sound." Then he added that it was "still possible that Hitler went far beyond his necessary requirements in his attitude towards the Jews, the evidence of which may be very well covered up from the observer who goes in there at this time." But he was concerned for the fate of the Catholics in Germany. He asked if Hitler wanted to reunite Germany, and he picked on the Jews, why was it "necessary to turn the front of his attack on the Catholics?" ¹⁵

Joseph P. Kennedy realized that the German Nazis used the Jews as a scapegoat; but he could not understand why they attacked the Catholics. Such was the nature of Joseph P. Kennedy and his son Joe Jr.

Joe Kennedy Jr. spent the summer of 1939 traveling throughout Europe and on June 10, 1939, he was in Hungary. He wondered what advantage it would be for the United States to get involved in the European difficulties:

Would the break up of the British Empire in itself be most dangerous for us or could we still retain our trading position to Germany after such a break? Do we want to get frightfully aroused by the treatment of the Iews when Catholics and others were murdered more cruelly in Russia and in Republican Spain and not a word of protest came? Do we want an increasing anti-Semitism in our country brought about by the production of forty thousand Jews and political undesirables in our country from Europe . . . ? Do we want these people when we have eighteen million unemployed and a budget whose relief expenditures have made for a deficit of billions of dollars? I know it is terrible the way the Jews are being persecuted but the Chinese are being bombed and Catholics were killed in Spain, but as far as I am concerned that is none of my business unless my country wants to dominate the world and impose its conditions of justice on all people and be prepared to support its laws at any time so that freedom and justice will be assured.16

After the German and Austrian atrocities against the Jews on November 9–10, 1938, known as *Kristallnacht*, Roosevelt recalled the American ambassador to Germany, and America's interests remained protected by its *chargé d'affaires*. Young Joe seemed undisturbed by the German atrocities against the Jews. What disturbed him was that the United States had withdrawn its ambassador from Germany. This did not seem right to young Joe Jr., and he asked:

Why have we kept our ambassador at home when the English have sent theirs back so that he at least may have some influence. Why did we send an Ambassador to Germany a few years ago who did nothing but criticize the country to which he had been accredited to when the real job of the ambassador is to keep his government informed and he must be on good terms with the government and pretend that he likes them?¹⁷

Ambassador William E. Dodd, an American historian, had protested against German Nazi anti-Jewish pogroms. Joe Jr. believed that America should "stay out of war and that being a rich nation we can live by ourselves. . . ." He thought that America should have "a real policy in Europe entirely fitting for the greatest power in the world rather than a half hearted mamby pamby policy skipping one way then to the other no one knows what will happen if there is a war." Those were some thoughts of Joe Kennedy Jr. in 1938–1939.

Ambassador Kennedy was greatly concerned with the well-being of his children. Even though he would send them to such private schools as Choate and hire tutors for them, he would not always be satisfied with their

progress. When he wrote to George St. John, JFK's tutor, on November 21, 1933, he said that "the work (JFK) wants to do he does exceptionally well, but he seems to lack entirely a sense of responsibility" and that "must be developed in him very quickly, or else I am very fearful of the results. . . . The happy-go-lucky manner with a degree of indifference that he shows towards the things that he has no interest in does not portend well for his future development. He has too many fundamentally good qualities" and once he would get "on the right track he would be a really worthwhile citizen."19 Ambassador Kennedy was concerned with his children's mental and physical well-being. He was especially troubled by the frailness of John F. Kennedy. As he would write to Dr. Sara Jordon on November 4, 1938: "I worry a good deal more about him than I do about international affairs or anything else. . . . "20 In a letter to Jack he wrote: "After long experience in sizing up people I definitely know you have the goods and you can go a long way. Now aren't you foolish not to get all there is out of what God has given you and what you can do with it yourself."21

For a time Ambassador Kennedy seemed to appreciate such Jews as Felix Frankfurter. He believed that his son Joe Jr. would some day show the letters from that "great man Professor Frankfurter, or Judge Frankfurter" to his grandchildren. JPK found that America was in a state of "confusion." He thought that Father Coughlin, the priest from Michigan, was nothing more than a demagogue who had "his own Bishop on his side and the Catholic Hierarchy are unable to do anything with him whatsoever." Roosevelt seemed to be taking all that "criticism smiling." That was December 5, 1933.

JPK did not always reject Coughlin. On August 18, 1936, he wrote a thank you note to Father Coughlin "for all the kind things you are saying about me. I feel like the fellow on his vacation who sends the postal card back to his friends saying, 'Wish you were with us.' "23 Apparently the *Boston Sunday Post* had reported that Coughlin had described JPK as "a shining star among the dim 'knights' of the present administration's activities." ²⁴

Joseph P. Kennedy was an isolationist and noninterventionist as many Americans were in the post–World War I era. Some Americans rejected his isolationist views. Former Wisconsin Governor Lafollette observed that Joseph P. Kennedy was too sympathetic to Chamberlain in order to represent America's best interests in Great Britain. From a very personal standpoint JPK did not wish to see the lives of his children sacrificed to war. "I hate to think how much money I would give up rather than sacrifice Joe and Jack in a war." He would note in his diary entry of February 22, 1938, that President Roosevelt "indicated his firm intention of keeping our country out of any and all involvements or commitments abroad." FDR considered "the situation too uncertain for the United States to do anything but mark time until things have settled down." The president "did

not seem to resent the position Chamberlain has taken of trying to make deals with Germany and Italy in order to fend off a crisis."²⁶

During Kennedy's March 4, 1938, interview with Neville Chamberlain 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." Chamberlain said that he was "making his plans for pacification or fighting, as things might develop, without counting on us, one way or the other." Kennedy "talked to him quite plainly and he seemed to take it well." He observed that the dictators had gotten their way by mere bluff.

Nobody is prepared to talk turkey to Messrs. Hitler and Mussolini, and nobody is prepared to face the risk of war by calling their bluffs. The British will not do anything to check either one of them unless they actually fire guns. If that guess is correct, I am sure . . . none of these various moves has any significance for the United States, outside of general interest.²⁹

In a private conversation of mid-February 1938, Roosevelt had informed Kennedy that he intended to firmly keep America "out of any and all involvements or commitments abroad." The president "did not seem to resent the position Chamberlain had taken of trying to make deals with Germany and Italy in order to fend off a crisis."³⁰

Kennedy was strongly in favor of advising "our British cousins that they must not get into a mess counting on us to bail them out. We might or might not. But it hardly seems fair to let them assume that we will be ready, as last time, to come to their rescue if they get in a jam."³¹ As to the situation regarding Hitler's demands on Czechoslovakia, Jan Masaryk had informed Kennedy that "his country will make its deal with Germany, unpalatable as it may be, unless it is assured of British protection. It does not consider the proffered French assistance as valuable enough to justify putting up resistance against Berlin."³² Ambassador Kennedy believed that there would be no war and Germany would get "whatever it wants in Czechoslovakia without sending a single soldier across the border. The Czechs will go, hat in hand, to Berlin and ask the Fuhrer what he wants done, and it will be done."³³

But when war seemed inevitable on September 27, 1938, JPK "argued that ships should be made available to get our wives and the wives of men in business here out as soon as possible." That same day the King of England confided with Joe Kennedy that he was rather downcast because of the possibility of war. He found it "inconceivable" that there would be "another war twenty years after the last one." The following day Kennedy was notified that Hitler had called for a meeting the next morning. There would be further negotiations rather than the war Hitler had threatened to undertake because of the Sudetenland. As Joe Kennedy put it: "I never was

so thrilled in my life."³⁶ That night a feeling spread "all over London that this means that war will be averted." Kennedy believed rather naively that "these four men around a table and with the President always willing to negotiate," might mean the "beginning of a new world policy which may mean peace and prosperity once again."³⁷

Did Ambassador Kennedy sympathize with Hitler and his ideas? Joe Kennedy denied having any sympathy for Hitler.

I have no more sympathy with Hitler's ideas than anyone in America, but I asked myself, what am I going to do about it? If I am going to war with them to stop them, fine, that's one thought; if I am going to cut them off economically fine, that's another thought, but, if I am going to stick my tongue out at them, then I am not with it at all.

And he observed that so much of the mail attacking him came from Jews. "Seventy-five percent of the attacks made on me by mail were by Jews and yet, I don't suppose anybody has worked as hard for them as I have or more to their advantage."³⁸ The German Nazi attacks on the Jews disturbed him insofar as they interfered with "the whole program of saving western civilization." He was

hopeful that something can be worked out, but this last drive on the Jews in Germany³⁹ really made the most ardent hopers for peace very sick at heart. Even assuming that the reports from there are colored, isn't there some way to persuade them it is on a situation like this that the whole program of saving western civilization might hinge. It is more and more difficult for those seeking peaceful solutions to advocate any plan when the papers are filled with such horror. So much is lost when so much could be gained.⁴⁰

Kennedy thought that the Germans were doing themselves a disservice by attacking the Jews. Despite the grimness of the situation Joe Kennedy tried to introduce a light note. He observed that FDR had told Bernard Baruch that "... if there was a demagogue around the type of Huey Long, who took up the cause of anti-Semitism, there would be more blood running in the streets of New York than there was in Berlin."⁴¹

Ambassador Kennedy would advocate "getting along with the dictators" and at times he asked permission to enter into peace discussions with high-ranking German Nazis. In June 1938, German Ambassador Herbert von Dirksen would write to his foreign office that he found Kennedy sympathetic to the Reich and to its racial policies. Kennedy's friendship with Charles Lindbergh and his dim view of Allied air power further promoted the impression that Kennedy was pro-Germany and that like Lindbergh, he, was a defeatist. But according to Amanda Smith, JPK's granddaughter