Yale-UN Oral History Project

Mordecai Kidron
James S. Sutterlin, Interviewer
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JSS Mr. Kidron, I want first of all to thank you for participating in this Yale history oral history project related to the United Nations and if I might I'd like to begin by asking you to indicate what you were doing - I believe you were in New York - at the time of the 1956 Suez crisis?

MK I was in New York from 1953 to 1958 and I was the Deputy Head of the Israeli Permanent delegation to the United Nations, deputy to Eban.

JSS And did you have any particular role, how was it organized? Were you covering one part of political development, or were you more or less the alter ego for Ambassador Eban at that time?

MK I was more or less the alter ego since he spent most of his time in Washington. He came to the U.N. in New York for important occasions, such as the first week or so of the General Assembly major meetings of the Security Council, non-routine meetings with the Secretary-General and so on.

JSS Just to begin with, could you describe the atmosphere at the United Nations, as you recall it, in the months leading up to the Suez War - that is, the period during which there were incursions, quite a few fedayeen.
incursions, across the borders? What was the atmosphere then at the United Nations as you saw it?

You’re asking me to go back to something that I haven’t thought about now for over 30 years. There were two phases. I’ll deal with the fedayeen incursions first. At the beginning of these incursions, which started really in 1953, the atmosphere was — let’s say, "these poor devils, they’re coming to pick fruit out of their trees, or, all they’re doing is coming to cut some sheaves of grain that once belonged to them." Going back — harmless, innocent people. Later, I think it began to be realized that this was a much more serious matter than simply that it was refugees stealing across the borders at night to pick up their property, that it was part of a concerted assault on the borders and I would say the atmosphere rather changed. What I’m talking about is really the fedayeen incursions and the reprisal raids. The atmosphere when the reprisal raids started was wholly against us. It’s quite possible that we sometimes overreacted in our reprisal raids — I know I had arguments about it, so did Eban have arguments about it with military people at home. But later there began to be a realization, without any evidence of approval or support, that this was a very serious matter, that Israel had to do something about it. And that the Egyptians were using these infiltrations definitely to weaken us.
I remember one reprisal raid - reprisal raids were normally followed up by meetings of the Security Council in which - this was practically a ritual - the Arabs, either Jordan or Egypt, put in their complaint about the Israeli raid and Israel put in a counter claim against the incursion. But there was one reprisal raid which sticks in my memory - against Gaza in early 1956, I believe, which passed without a murmur in the United Nations, that was a major operation. It passed without mention because what had preceded it was a series of vicious and murderous attacks in a big area of southern Israel. They went nearly as far as Tel Aviv, I think they got to Rehovoth. And so the delegation at the United Nations was able - we saw that this was going to lead to a reprisal - to prepare the ground by making clear what had been happening. As a result, this raid passed without reaction from the United Nations. It was part of the atmosphere, the atmosphere was a growing understanding that the position was becoming intolerable and that it was not as harmless and innocent and humane sounding as it had been in '53 and '54.

And generally, did you identify some people within the Secretariat as being especially understanding, sympathetic, some who were hostile, or did you...

Well, Bunche understood more than anybody else what was going on. He had experience of the area and he showed
greater understanding of what was going on than anybody else but he was rather bereft of influence at that time. At the early part of it he was exiled to some job in the Trusteeship Department where, when I went to visit him, he was delighted and we would talk for hours because he was more or less put in cold storage. Later Hammarskjold brought him up to the 38th floor. But besides consulting with him and Andy Cordier, Hammarskjold really kept things to himself. But I would say that Bunche was the man who understood let’s say the atmospherics more than anybody else and was sympathetic. Hammarskjold it’s difficult for me to describe his attitude. I’ll say this about him though (I think I told it to him himself) that if he’d been Secretary-General at the time of Israel’s foundation I doubt if anything would have gone through the General Assembly.

JSS That’s interesting, could you elaborate on that a little bit?

MK He adopted a very very legalistic attitude, a very United Nations attitude, very formal - within the four walls of the Charter - and while he was not unsympathetic, he was also not overly sympathetic. It was a very Swedish attitude. Later when I was ambassador to Sweden I learned to understand what the Swedish attitude was. Idealistic, neutral - even as between right and wrong, somewhat self-righteous, detached. But he had personal
contacts with Israel and with Israelis which tended to mitigate his rather formal, cold attitude toward the whole thing. He was fascinated by Ben-Gurion. I was the go-between - the letters from Ben-Gurion to Hammerskjold and vice versa came through me. They corresponded actively. He was also a great admirer of Martin Buber and he and I were on terms of personal friendship. You could say there were two people from the Middle East in whom he confided - one was Fawzi of Egypt and the other was me. He didn't get on very well with Eban.

JSS That comes through in the literature.

MK The trouble was that both of them liked to talk, neither of them liked to listen, so... quite often when Eban and I went up to see Hammarskjold on the 38th floor I would have to explain to Eban on the way down what Hammarskjold was trying to get across. And then go to Hammarskjold to explain to him Eban was trying to get across. There was simply no meeting of minds at all. The same thing with Golda Meir. She couldn't tolerate him and he couldn't tolerate her. So that in addition to this rather formal Constitutional Charter-directed view of the world and also his sense that the Western world owed the Third World - by which he meant the non-European world - a great deal of consideration, there was also these personal relations that he had with certain people. He was a very complicated man.
JSS And this particular crisis was I believe emotionally very difficult for him (MK: It was, it was) and that's one of the questions I wanted to ask you because both on Hammarskjold's part but also on the part of the United States government there was a great feeling of disillusionment that they had no advance knowledge of what was being planned by the French, the British and Israel.

MK Well neither did we, I must say, .......

JSS Well that was my question. Whether you had any knowledge ...

MK No, no knowledge at all. Eban was called back home a day or two before and he was told but he didn't tell any of us and we sat listening to the British and French speeches in the Security Council and Eban said "pinch me" - he turned back to me and said, "pinch me". He couldn't take in what he was hearing. For the first time in the Security Council we had unlimited support from the British and the French.

JSS Apparently the British ambassador at least did not have knowledge either ..

MK No, Dixon wasn't it?

JSS Sir Pierson Dixon, right.

MK I don't think he knew either...

JSS And there was some question as to whether Selwyn Lloyd himself was aware.
MK That I don’t know. These are spheres in which – I know that Dixon, Dixon claimed he knew nothing, he was furious too.

JSS But one interesting thing – and that is that actually the head of Israeli military intelligence, whose name was General Harkavy, he actually came to New York during the period of that Security Council session and met with Pineau and with General Challe who were there also. Were you aware of...

MK I knew that Harkovy was in New York, I saw him, but I didn’t know anything about his meeting with Pineau and with Challe. I don’t believe any of us knew. Eban might have known but, as I say, he was in Washington and I was not let into that.

JSS Well, it’s a great question. Again, the British apparently were not aware either at that stage of the extent of planning that had been going on.

MK I know that Dixon complained, not to me but I heard he complained that he knew nothing. Who was the French representative at the time? Was it Georges Picot?

JSS No, the French had an unfortunate development. Their representative collapsed. He had a nervous breakdown because, again, he had not been informed and when all this happened it was too much for him. So they brought Alphand up from Washington for a little while and then Picot...
And then Georges-Picot.

Right, right.

I want to go on, as a result of this meeting of the Security Council, Dag Hammarskjold organized a private meeting between the British, the French and the Egyptians in an effort to reach some kind of an understanding. Eventually 6 principles were discussed. Israel was not included (MK: no). My question is whether you were informed, whether you were kept aware of what was going on in those meetings?

Possibly, I don’t remember. We knew pretty well what was happening and we were fairly well tuned in, I would say, but obviously there must have been quite a lot of things that we didn’t know.

But there again, you weren’t being briefed by the French or the British as to just...

We might have been but I have no particular recollection of it.

I come back again to the atmosphere, because there’s a difference here. According to Brian Urquhart’s understanding of Hammarskjold, for example - Hammarskjold was rather optimistic at this point when the Security Council meeting ended, the informal meetings ended, and felt...

What Security Council meeting? The Security Council was meeting practically 24 hours a day and for weeks on end.
This was the one that began on October 5 which was at the instigation of the British. The Americans were quite unhappy that the British had asked for the Security Council to meet and the British had asked for the Council to meet to complain about the Egyptian threat to the Canal. But the meetings did take place and then in that connection, the informal meetings took place where Hammarskjold got Fawzi together with Pineau and Selwyn Lloyd. Now, the question here really goes back to the atmosphere and to how you interpreted Hammarskjold’s feelings at the time because according to Brian Urquhart, Hammarskjold was somewhat enthusiastic, somewhat optimistic at that point and then was all the more disillusioned to find that the British and French sent their ultimatum very shortly thereafter to the Egyptians. Do you recall what this changing of mood in the...

MK
No, not particularly.

JSS
What was your feeling at the time - that there was a chance of a settlement, a reasonable settlement, without war?

MK
We were living in a swirl of events, one followed rapidly on another and the Security Council never ceased sitting and the consultations among the various delegations and with Hammarskjold never ceased. So that swirl is what I remember. So I can’t think of any point which would have caused Hammarskjold to be more optimistic or less
optimistic, or whether he said anything about it at the time. He was a man of infinite optimism, he really believed that all was going to be good in the best of all possible worlds.

JSS But nonetheless, well again there are differences here but he seems from the record to have been extremely unhappy to find that two Permanent Members of the security Council...

MK Oh yes, he regarded that as treachery.

JSS He regarded that as treacherous, that was your impression? Because it's interesting, Mr. Pineau has rather a different impression.

MK No, no, no. It was a breach of the international law which as far as he was concerned was represented by the United Nations and the Charter.

JSS Did you have contacts, fairly close contacts, with the Americans in New York at that time?

MK Yes, who was there in New York at that time - Cabot Lodge was extraordinarily active. (JSS: and Jim Barco) Yes, Jim Barco I saw a lot of. I would see Cabot Lodge closeted in corners of the United Nations building with Krishna Menon, who loathed him and whom he loathed.

JSS And yet there was a certain cooperation among...

MK They cooperated right from the beginning to the end.

JSS They did? So you had that impression at the time?

MK Oh yes, you'd see them standing in a corner, talking -
sitting in a corner, talking for hours on end.

JSS Whereas as far as the British were concerned Krishna Menon was playing a very negative role...

MK Of course, Krishna Menon was a very very able operator.

JSS What was your impression of Krishna Menon?

MK Well, I'd known Krishna Menon for years and years. I knew him in London and I always got on very well with him. Krishna Menon regarded me for a long time as the "representative Israeli". In London and in New York - once I was in New Delhi for some United Nations conference and I saw in the paper that Krishna Menon was going to give a lecture on the United Nations at the Indian Association of Foreign Affairs, or something like that. And so I went. He was shocked when he saw me sitting over there and he told me later he changed his whole address because I suppose it was going to be blisteringly critical of Israel and he didn't want to hurt my feeling...

JSS What was the basis of Menon's cooperation with Lodge at that particular point?

MK Well, Menon was the premier representative of the Third World. You can say that if triangle of Nehru, Nasser and Tito, Menon was the foremost spokesman of that lineup.

JSS Which was, in this case, a lineup against the action taken by the British and the...

MK Oh yes, he was absolutely vindictive. If he could have
slaughtered all three - I don't know what to call them - not allies, because in no sense were they allies - but all three he would have done it. He was passionate about it and Lodge, also - maybe affected by him, but Lodge also got passionate.

JSS Yes. In your contacts with Lodge and Barco did you find that passion which was against the British and French extended to the Israelis, or not?

MK No, not to the same extent. I think they thought that we were sort of misguided, that we were tools in the hands of the British and the French. After all, Israel is a very small country, and the British and French were big countries and Permanent Members of the Security Council. So obviously the attitude toward us wouldn't be the same as the attitude toward them. But Israel became a whipping boy there, we were definitely a whipping boy.

JSS In the Security Council and in the General Assembly...

MK In the Security Council and the General Assembly, very much a whipping boy.

JSS And were you concerned about the utilization of the so-called Uniting For Peace procedure in order to transfer action from the Security Council to the ..

MK Well, we didn't like it. We had support in the Security Council that we had never had before. The British and French were prepared to veto anything that was unpleasant. We had no interest in the uncontrollable
General Assembly hopping in.

JSS And let me ask there whether you had any contact with the Russians at that point?

MK Sobolev was their representative then, wasn't he?

JSS Yes.

MK We did have contact but it was just like talking to a wall. However Sobolev was a really nice chap, very courteous, always gave one an ear. We had contact, as I say. But it had no beneficial results as far as we were concerned. We were able to explain our position, it was not like later Russians representatives, like the man in '67.

JSS Federenko...

MK Federenko, Federenko was uncomprising hostility.

JSS In that connection I'd like to ask a broader question because at the time of the founding of Israel the Soviets were very positive - in some sense more positive than the United States. And that lasted until the early '50s but at just about the time you arrived in NY...

MK It lasted until 1953. I remember the first time the Soviets raised their hand in the Security Council in veto of a resolution which was a more or less balanced text on, as far as I recall, a Syrian complaint against Israel and our courteous complaint. Something to do with an irrigation project on the Jordan, I think. That was towards the end of 1953. That was the watershed, the
turning point. But we continued to have good personal relations with the Soviet representatives. In those days you could talk to everybody; it later became very difficult. From 1967 on you couldn’t talk to the Russians, you couldn’t talk to the Chinese.

JSS: That’s precisely the question I was going to ask. There was then this change in atmosphere between 1956 and ’67.

MK: There was...

JSS: In terms of communication...

MK: In ’56 you could talk to everybody, get a hearing and one could say it was more traditional diplomacy where ambassadors of enemy countries spoke civilly to one another. Whereas after ’67 that didn’t exist.

JSS: What did you think, looking back, or what did you think then were the main factors in the change in the Soviet attitudes toward Israel?

MK: You mean, from 1953 on?

JSS: From the very positive attitude in the ’40s to this very notable change...

MK: I accept the explanation which has been given by people better qualified than me, that they were disappointed that we were not the revolutionary force that they’d expected we’d be. That we’d done our job in ejecting the British from Palestine but then we were not really on their side. When the Korean war came along and we were on the point of participating - we recommended strongly
from NY that we participate at least in a token manner, but be there. I think they saw there was nothing to do with us, we had definitely gone over to the other side.

JSS They had misinterpreted Israeli socialism?

MK Oh entirely, entirely. Sharett played for a couple of years at the very beginning with a policy of nonalignment. Ben-Gurion but particularly Sharett was trying to hold a balance between the big power blocs but it lasted until the Korean War.

JSS But then that was the turning point - that's an interesting question. I didn't know that, no one else has mentioned that before. I want to go ahead now...

MK That is, it i.e. the non-alignment policy, lasted until the Korean War you could say in a formal way. After the Korean War it was obvious where we were. Prior to the Korean War we were perfectly obviously on the side of the West but we mouthed these slogans of nonalignment.

JSS I want to go on to the end of the war and the negotiations about the withdrawal of Israel from the Sinai, and particularly from Gaza and from Sharm el Sheikh. Because these negotiations took place in NY, also in Washington, and I wonder again what your role was - were you involved in this at all?

MK Not in Washington, in New York.

JSS In NY. And again, the French apparently had a particular role, having been, according to some of the literature,
delegated by the Israelis to negotiate for them. Were you aware of this, or is this your impression?

MK

Not at all, I would have known it. I certainly would have known. The withdrawal was discussed in NY by a delegation of the Secretariat, headed by Hammarskjold, and a delegation of ours, headed by Eban. The first meeting was entirely informal, that is, there were no notes taken except notes that I took myself and here came a diplomatic blowup. Eban suggested I go to see Hammarskjold and compare (before I sent the cable) his memory of the proceedings with mine. And so I went. Bunche was there and my notes were unusually full - I mentioned everything that happened, every statement made (whether inadvertently or with malice aforethought) went into my notes. I had a very retentive memory at the time: I could remember conversation practically verbatim. This set Bunche and Hammarskjold off - they didn’t like that at all, that I was reporting not only the strict business in hand but also their views because these views, particularly Hammarskjold’s, were not, let’s say, very comfortable for the Secretary-General of the United Nations if they were to be made public. And so at the next meeting they had a stenotypist there.

JSS

And how did these meetings go, what was the problem essentially?

MK

The hand over [of Sinai and the Gaza strip] to UNEF
because in Israel, Dayan was dealing with Burns and Dayan was a tough nut. Burns was complaining all the time that he couldn’t get anywhere with Dayan and so the pressure was put on us in NY, and the pressure was put on Eban in Washington, to be more forthcoming. It was a very difficult and I would say a rather unpleasant negotiation and it lasted some two or three months, as far as I can remember.

JSS That’s when Mr. Dulles was the Secretary of State.

MK Yes. It was not pleasant, it was not pleasant at all.

JSS But in your meetings with Hammarskjold in NY, were you ever able to come to an understanding with regard to the procedure for the Israeli withdrawal and the replacement?

MK Well we did obviously because the decision had to be wrapped up in NY. Whatever was done in Washington, whatever was said in Washington, whatever was said in Israel, the formal signature on the bottom line had to be a New York affair.

JSS So that fed into you then from Washington...

MK Yes, we were aware of what was going on, it was difficult because Burns and Dayan didn’t get on well.

JSS They did not? But your relationship with Hammarskjold was positive at this point, at least your own relationship?

MK That was all OK. They had been cross with me for the
notes I took at the first meeting but things recovered after a while. After all, Hammarskjöld was a very experienced diplomat, and as I happened to be the front man in NY he couldn’t not have a good relationship with us because of personal pique.

JSS Now there were, as we were saying, extensive negotiations in Washington which involved Dulles and Eban, and I think, many messages and calls even to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv at that point. But it came to a climax, if you will, in a meeting of the General Assembly when statements were to be made by Mrs. Meir, I believe, and Ambassador Lodge...

MK At the meeting at which I raised my hand and said "no"?

JSS Exactly, yes. I wonder, can you describe that little rift? ..... 

MK I’ll tell you what happened. I told Eban about the scheduled meeting of the General Assembly – he said he’d come down from Washington for it. He asked me to prepare a speech since he wouldn’t have time. So I sat down and prepared a speech. I went to meet him at La Guardia and in the car coming in he read what I’d written. And he said - oh no, I’m mixing up two occasions, I’m mixing up the occasion when I was alone in the General Assembly about 2:00 in the morning and a voice vote was taken on withdrawal. I said "no", loudly, and a gasp went up in the General Assembly, I was the only "no", the only
negative vote. An absolute gasp, and everybody looked at me. Well, that was that, I think Eban describes it in his book.

JSS I don’t recall that being - he describes this series of meetings in the General Assembly and when...

MK Yes, well on that particular occasion he wasn’t there, the occasion when I gave the negative vote. But the other thing that I was talking about earlier, that great speech of his in November, 1956 in the General Assembly. Well as I said, he looked at my notes and he said, "no, this is an occasion for a great speech" which he delivered late at night, without notes. I saw him going up to the podium with a piece of paper, that big, with three lines on it and he delivered one of the most remarkable orations I have ever heard.

JSS Yes, that he does describe in his book.

MK Well, close to that he mentions that I had told him about the vote. The reason I voted no was that I had had no instructions to do anything else. I did not have instructions to vote "no" but certainly I was obviously not going to vote "yes". I obviously didn’t think it was fair or sensible to abstain.

JSS Yes, yes. As a matter of fact, according to my notes, that must have been around November 4, or something like that. (Kidron: possibly). That’s my notes here, and then it was later, actually there was a meeting of the General
Assembly after the negotiations had gone to a successful completion in Washington, they thought about the withdrawal, that there was the further session of the Assembly where Mrs. Meir spoke.

MK Yes, that was when she spoke about the agreements that Eban had arrived at with Dulles. Hopes or expectations, and assumptions was the key phrase.

JSS It had to do with the freedom of passage...

MK Yes and there was a particular catch phrase, used in the agreement between Dulles and...

JSS Yes, that's right. I don’t have here the actual phrase but apparently Ambassador Lodge did not use it.

MK It was a rather stiff occasion because this was supposed to be a choreographed thing. It didn’t go quite according to plan. Lodge didn’t play his part as we thought had been arranged in Washington and on the basis of which Mrs. Meir gave that speech.

JSS So, Mr. Kidron, I want to go back to the first peacekeeping operation which was done very quickly at this point in 1956 and 1957 and there were a few major figures here, I believe - Lester Pearson from Canada and Dag Hammarskjold, and perhaps others as well. That’s why I want to ask you, to what extent were you involved - the Israeli mission and you personally - as plans were developed for this operation?

MK I don’t think that we were involved in the actual
planning of UNEF or that we had any input in it. We were rather in the doghouse at the time and Hammarskjold was hostile. But Lester Pearson used to come over and discuss matters with us. You could say that he was one of the few bright features of the whole atmosphere. He was friendly, he was decent, he was completely honest, too. He didn’t come along with moral lessons or homilies to us. And so we knew what was going on but as for having a formal or informal role in the actual setting up of the force, we didn’t. This was, you can say, a result of discussion between Pearson and Hammarskjold and that masterly document that Hammarskjold produced.

JSS

And were you at all aware that the Americans, for example, had some role in developing the idea of peacekeeping?

MK

No, I can’t say that I did, but it was obvious that nothing could have been done in the United Nations at that time without the Americans, without American involvement.

JSS

The United States influence was so great at that point?

MK

Yes, it was. Nothing could have been done there without the U.S. And since the United States had taken a leading role in any case in, you could say, the liquidation of the Suez adventure, it was obvious they had a leading role in the formation of the aftermath of which UNEF was a principal feature.
JSS  And did you yourself sense any degree of American pressure directly on you in NY?

MK  All the time.

JSS  All the time.

MK  American pressure was unrelenting. I would not want to say that there was a cutoff of contact with the American delegation at the United Nations but it was not cordial; relations were not particularly cordial.

JSS  So it did have that effect?

MK  Oh yes. But there - Eban has probably told you more about that because he was conducting all the talks in Washington, and where American pressure was brought to bear was principally Washington.

JSS  Yes, but the question is whether American pressure was ever brought on Israel to the extent that it was on the British, for example.

MK  Well it came in stages. The American pressure on the British and French was to get them to stop what they were doing. The pressure on us was to get us to withdraw.

JSS  And again, just to go back. There is the indication that Dulles worked with Pineau in developing the actual plan for you to withdraw from Gaza. But it was your understanding at that point in NY that when you withdrew from Gaza that UNEF would take over?

MK  Oh, that was a formulation which was handed to Ben-Gurion on an open telephone line. We were at the Savoy Plaza in
Eban's suite and there was an open line to Ben-Gurion. We were discussing what to do, as Ben-Gurion realized that the pressure to withdraw was becoming overwhelming. That is what we were going to tell him, that the pressure on us to withdraw was - he made a speech the day before in which he said, "wherever an Israeli soldier's foot has trod, it remains forever Israel", or something like that. And he had to climb down from that tall tree. I was sitting opposite Eban while he was talking to Ben-Gurion on the telephone and it suddenly struck me that the way out was to tie the withdrawal to a phased take-over by UNEF. And this is what was said to Ben-Gurion, that we would withdraw to the degree that UNEF could take over the areas that we withdraw from.

Then what happened was somewhat different. It became a bit of a clear-out and eventually the end of it, the actual withdrawal from Gaza, the first part of this was orderly - that is from the Canal up to the Gaza Strip. But once we got into Gaza things went out of hand.

But it was, as we said, your understanding that when the Israeli forces withdrew from Gaza they would be replaced by UNEF, by administrative as well as ...  

Absolutely, that is, the jurisdiction would be that of UNEF. That was the definite understanding and we banked on that and we felt terribly let down. We felt that we'd been fooled.
JSS And you felt that you'd had an American guarantee on that?

MK I think it was an American guarantee in which the United Nations acquiesced. Hammarskjold acquiesced in that, or at least we thought he'd acquiesced.

JSS The same was not true with regard to Sharm el Sheikh, I believe. What you understood was agreed was in fact what was done. (MK: yes). Now I have, again, a larger question. Certain specific objectives were articulated by Mr. Eban and others as to the Israeli objective at the time of the Suez War. But later Ben-Gurion, in letters to President Eisenhower and others, said that the objective really was peace, the achievement of peace. How did you interpret, what were your instructions at the time, what were you seeking?

MK We dealt with the nuts and bolts issues. The nuts and bolts issue then was to stop the fedayeen raids on the southern borders of Israel. And although in every one of these wars that we've had with the Arabs we've always said that the objective was comprehensive peace in point of fact we didn't really believe that it was attainable so soon. I'm talking about the working level of diplomats. We were dealing with hard facts, we didn't believe that peace was in the offing. Whether in the higher reaches in the Israeli government, Ben-Gurion and the Foreign Minister, I don't know. But as for the
people on the ground we were going for the limited objective of trying to get us peace on the borders.

And you didn’t have any great guidelines from Jerusalem that this was in Ben-Gurion’s mind because the record does not show it as something which was motivating the initial Israeli action but it is expressed in his letters, as I say, to Eisenhower? (MK: no) How long did you feel it took to restore relations with the United States side, at least within the United Nations context?

Well you see, I left New York in ’58, and at the time I left the relations were pretty well OK, more or less as they had been before. How long was Cabot Lodge there?

He was there until the end of the administration. He must have been there through ’59.

Lodge was a rather remote figure, he had other fish to fry. The people that one dealt with on a day to day basis were Gerry Wadsworth and Jim Barco and relations were very good with them.

With Wadsworth in particular....

Wadsworth was a very nice chap and I was terribly sorry when he died.

Now there’s one person I want to ask about on the British side but he was in London rather than in NY who was allegedly was quite anti-Israel..

Nutting, you’re talking about?

No, there’s another man. I’ll have to come back to it
later, it's in my notes. Nutting, I don't know - how did you characterize him?

MK He was very very anti-Israel.

JSS Very anti-Israel. But would it be fair to say at that time that there was general suspicion in the British Foreign Office of Israel?

MK There had been all the time. I'd spent a couple of years in London immediately after the foundation of the state at the first Israeli embassy there. The personal relations were good enough but the Eastern department of the Foreign Office was, let's say, markedly unfriendly.

JSS So Mr. Kidron if we could I'd like to go from 1956 up to 1967. I believe you were not assigned to NY at that point but you were later assigned there. If you could explain that.

MK I was then Permanent Representative to the United Nations and other international organizations in Geneva and before the outbreak of the 1967 crisis when Nasser was making threatening noises all over the show, he had threatened to close the Straits of Tiran. As I had dealt with this issue in 1956, and had written papers about it and was regarded as a minor authority on the subject, very minor subject, let's say, in global terms. I got a cable to go immediately to New York so within four hours I was on a plane without a visa. And that trip which was supposed to be for 1 or 2 days in order to give our
delegation at the U.N. some advice on how to deal with the problem, lasted for the whole extent of the '67 crisis, which went on for months. I didn't return to Geneva home, to my young son's extreme anger (because I didn't even say goodbye to him when I left) until I had to come to Geneva in July to attend the annual session there where I dealt with the aftermath of 1967. And then I just had to go back to NY. So I was in this 1967 thing from the beginning to the end.

JSS Now one of the characteristics of 1967 was the number of mistakes that were made in assessment around the world. Nasser apparently was told by the Soviets that the Israelis were massing on the Syrian border (MK: on the Syrian border) and intended to invade...

MK Prime Minister Eschkol invited the Russian ambassador to go there and have a look. He refused to go.

JSS My question here is, were you active in trying to get the truth across in NY at this point?

MK Yes, of course we were because it was so obviously nonsensical. It was obvious that there was no point in it, as far as we were concerned. We tried to put it across. I don't think anybody believed the Russian allegation except - I don't know if Nasser believed it but he certainly exploited it.

JSS And what was, again I asked you earlier about the atmosphere in the United Nations in 1956, how would you
MK

describe the atmosphere in 1967 in the United Nations with regard to Israel, with regard to the situation in the Middle East?

I find that very difficult to answer because, as I said, in 1956 we were sitting all around the clock and in 1967 it seemed to be worse. One never knew day from night - you ate your lunch about 4:00 in the morning, something like that. It was a complete - I used the word "swirl" before, it was a swirl of time, of words, of sleeplessness, and it's rather difficult for me to answer that question. Israel was very much more firmly established in 1967 than in 1956. In 1956 we were only eight years old. In 1967, because of the large impact that anything Israel did or didn't do had on the attention of the world - there were always these masses of foreign correspondents over here - Israel occupied a larger place in world consciousness than its size and population appeared to warrant. There's no need to go into the reasons for all that, there are historical, religious, all sorts of reasons. So that at the beginning of the 1967 crisis I would say that sympathy was largely with us except in the Soviet bloc an large parts the Third World, but the attitude of the West - that is, Western Europe, United States, Canada, Latin America, the British Commonwealth - was positive.

JSS

So in general then, yes, I think you've stated it very
well that Israel basically was more established at this point. Now there had been very substantial changes in the UN itself between 1956 and 1957, different Secretary-General's with largely people around him. What was your assessment of that, how was your relationship with U Thant and with those working with him?

Well I knew Thant quite well, personally. When he came as representative of Burma to the UN sometime in the 50's, I got a note from the Director General in the Foreign Ministry, that U Thant was an assistant to U Nu, that U Nu was a very close friend of Israel, had visited Israel and to please help U Thant as he knows nothing about the UN. So I did my level best for him and actually wrote two or three of his early speeches. We remained on a fairly close personal level. I never thought he was much good; I couldn't for the life of me conceive why he was considered suitable to be Secretary-General of the UN. But when you consider that he was succeeded by Waldheim, it's perhaps not so surprising. He was a hesitant man, and he didn't have that quickness of grasp that, for example, Hammarskjold had. Hammarskjold had an amazingly quick understanding of what was going on. U Thant was unpolitical. He was unfamiliar with the whole atmosphere of politics, of international politics. But he was a decent man, decent and as honest as he could possibly be in that position.
But he was Third World, of course, and so when he suddenly removed UNEF from the borders because Nasser threatened them, we were absolutely astonished because our understanding from 1956 onwards (and it’s actually written down in Hammarskjold’s words) that it would require the Advisory Council, or the Security Council, to make any changes in UNEF’S mandate. We were absolutely astonished and terribly disappointed because the whole 1967 thing could have been avoided if he’d only stood firm on what we, and everybody else, understood was a commitment by the UN.

Which had very extensive repercussions, lasting well beyond the war.

Of course, of course. And Brian Urquhart’s passionate defense of U Thant’s actions, which I’ve heard from him and I’ve read in his book, to my mind is simply misplaced loyalty to his chief.

Now as far as the rest of the UN is concerned other than U Thant, did you have the sense coming back in 1967 that the UN was functioning well? That the advisors were well chosen?

I didn’t have so much to do with the UN as a machine in New York as I had had in 1956. In 1956 I was stationed there, this was my job. In 1967 I was far away from them. I don’t think I had very much contact with them except for U Thant, Brian Urquhart and Bunche there at
He was still there but not as active.

JSS

Not active. He was wearing very strange looking glasses. I saw a lot of Bunche but he had slowed down immensely.

MK

He already had health problems at that point.

JSS

I think I once went to the his home. But otherwise I don't recollect having had very much contact with the Secretariat people. If you mention some names I could possibly tell you about them.

MK

Let me go to another broader question, the same one again that I asked with regard to '56. At that time Ben-Gurion apparently, at least ultimately, was thinking in terms of peace as the objective. In the case of '67 this theme also came up. To what extent did you see Israeli policy at that point as developing toward the idea of peace in exchange for territory?

MK

Much more so than in '56. In 1967 the idea of peace was not so to speak an afterthought of Ben-Gurion's, it was a central theme of policy. I remember Eban talking about it eloquently in the Security Council. Thinking back, of course, it was misplaced and I don't think it had a hope. But it was definitely a central feature and we really believed it possible, we really believed that once all this, so to speak the table had been cleared, one could sit down and come to a peaceful agreement.

JSS

And how did this affect your attitude as resolution 242
MK: Was being drafted? You were presumably very much involved with that on the sidelines and that...

JSS: More than you?

MK: Much more. He was the Permanent Representative in N.Y. For about 10 days Raphael was called back to Israel for consultations, and I became the temporary head of the permanent delegation. But that was before 242 began to be dealt with. I was in it, but I was not deep in it.

JSS: I'll ask him about that, then.

MK: He really knows it well. He wrote an article about it recently in the New York Times, I think, last week.

JSS: So we were talking about resolution 242 and there is this controversial question of the language, as to the absence of the "the" — were you conscious of this at that time?

MK: I spotted it. I was sitting in the Security Council when the draft came up and Eban was sitting at the table, and I read both texts automatically because, as a former UN professional, one looks at documents probingly. I spotted the difference and showed it to Eban, not trusting my French. So he asked me to go and show it to the Americans. I showed it to the Americans and they said, "yes, apparently the translator says there's no way of translating it properly. You can't have an indefinite article, it has to be a definite article" which, grammatically, is correct. The Americans also said "in
any case the English text is the original text, it was the negotiated text. Everything else is a translation, although formally equally valid. But if you are going to argue about it, you are going to go to the intentions of the drafters, which is the English text." Nevertheless, I went to speak to the translators and they said exactly the same thing because the Americans had heard that there was no way of translating that indefinite form of English into French. But they said, "there's nothing to be done about it, but the English text is the original text". With that I went back and I said, "that's what they say". And so there the matter dropped.

JSS

And there it stays. Now again, the Russian attitude in 1967. Ambassador Federenko was the Soviet representative at this point. What were your relations with the Russians?

MK

None. Federenko was a rude and arrogant man and I remember that whenever the Israeli delegate spoke, he took off his earphones turned around and spoke to his assistants behind him. He did that when I was making a speech in the Security Council, at which I got annoyed and more or less addressed the next few sentences at him. He had spread the story (which may be true or may be not) that we'd been negotiating with Western Germany for gas masks. And he accused us of, so to speak, collaborating with the Nazis, "just as they did during the war", 

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something like that, which infuriated me. Fortunately that morning we had a cable from Jerusalem or from Geneva giving the text of a statement produced by the Red Cross representative in Yemen about poison gas used by the Egyptians against the Yemenis. And so when Federenko finished I asked for the floor and read out this International Red Cross statement adding, "that's why we're buying gas masks." He was a very unpleasant man, very unpopular.

JSS So there was no contact with him?

MK None at all. Oh, I remember, I knew one of the Russian delegation, the present ambassador to London, Zamyatin. Well this was '67 or '56, I don't remember.

JSS '67, I believe.

MK He was still there? Because he had been Vishinsky's assistant. One day in that broad passageway between the delegates' lounge and the Security Council, he was sitting in one of the seats with a number of his sidekicks. I called to him as I passed and said, "say, Zamyatin, what the hell have you people got against us?" He replied, "not against you, Mr. Kidron, but against your country." But we had no contact with them. Zamyatin was the only one that I spoke to.

JSS And going from the Russians to the Americans, there was an American ambassador there in 1967, Mr. Goldberg, who was very different from the previous one.
MK: Oh yes, we were very close.

JSS: What were your relations with Goldberg, how did you assess him?

MK: We were in constant contact with Goldberg and in the negotiation of 242 he associated us completely. We were part of the negotiation of the text. I don't think we had an overwhelming voice because a lot of the texts in the resolution are not things that we would have written ourselves. But we knew what was going on and Goldberg was very helpful.

JSS: You did not stay in New York very long after the end of the 1967 war?

MK: I went to Geneva for ECOSOC, and that was July, and then I went back to New York. After that, yes, I had nothing more to do over there so I left.

JSS: My question here is a philosophical question and that is, looking back at those developments at that time, the outcome of resolution 242, how do you see that as affecting the longer range future of Israel and of the area here itself? Do you see that as having been a seminal development?

MK: Definitely. 242 is the Bible, which everybody quotes. Whatever interpretations are given it, the 242 is an incantation, much more so than the Camp David agreements which were, after all, between Egypt and us. 242 is something that affects everybody. It has become, as I
say, an incantation. Not everybody who makes this incantation has read the resolution. Nevertheless, you could say that it's a totem there. And nothing will be done without 242. I remember at the time when 242 was passed and there was quite a lot of correspondence going on between Washington and New York and Jerusalem, and there were many people who objected to 242. Begin resigned from the government over 242. Dayan objected to 242. It has remained ever since then a matter not only of the international aura over us, it's a matter of internal Israeli politics, the arguments over 242. By and large the leaders of the present government were opposed to 242 and I would say that in their heart of hearts, object to it to this day, whereas the Labor Party acquiesced without very much enthusiasm. Dayan at that time was a member of the Labor Party, and was doubtful about it, but accepted it. And that remains, you could say, the divide in Israeli internal politics to this day.

JSS

I'd like to go ahead now to the next war, 1973, when I believe you were in Geneva as a consultant, is that right? How was it?

MK

Oh, the Geneva conference, my recollections of that are not very clear or important. I remember that ridiculous argument about the placing of the tables. I was the first to come across it because I had been sent a couple of days beforehand to Geneva to see that the arrangements
were OK. Urquhart came up to me and said that the Arabs were making a lot of trouble about the seating. I couldn't conceive what trouble there could possibly be. You always sit together at the UN, for years we sat between Iraq and Lebanon in the General Assembly. It took actually half a day to get rid of that damn silly business until the last minute, until the conference was due to open. Waldheim came along in a state of alarm and said that "they used to sit with you, but now the Jordanians refuse to sit next to you". And he was ready to give in, of course, but we stuck out, we refused to accept any concessions. I've forgotten how it was, we were on one side of the Secretary-General, next to the Russians, and on the other side of the Secretary-General was the US and then the Arab...

JSS The Egyptians came next.

MK And then the Egyptians.

JSS And now again the question of peace comes up because this was called a peace conference and there were indications that Abba Eban came to the conference in the expectation that there really would be a peace ....

MK Oh yes, my God...

JSS Was that your impression too?

MK You've got no idea what expectations there were, or the phrase I was talking about in the 1956 __________, "expectations and assumptions", or "assumptions and
"expectations". With what expectations we came! We went so far as to pay rental for a whole year in advance on a building which we could use for our offices, for the continuing peace conference. A large building, we thought there'd be huge delegations from every department of the government, to negotiate with the Arabs. We had a whole establishment there which we were stuck with as soon as the conference ended. I used it as an hotel when I had to go to Red Cross conferences in Geneva.

JSS Because in fact it was never possible even to present your ideas...

MK No, no ideas were presented, except privately to Kissinger and to Gromyko.

JSS Yes, Gromyko was there.

MK Eban had a long talk with Gromyko.

JSS Because in fact it simply became an umbrella, would you say, for the continuation of the separation talks.

MK Yes, separation of forces agreement. The only one who managed to exploit it properly was Kissinger.

JSS We were talking about the Peace Conference in 1973. At that point there was yet another Secretary-General, Kurt Waldheim, and I wondered if you gained any impressions about his performance? You didn't have too much to do there but I mean, in general about his attitudes...

MK Nobody had too much to do there. To this day I don't know what I did. I bought myself a pair of shoes and I
wrote a letter to the London Times for Eban's private secretary. That's about all I remember doing there. But Waldheim I knew very well; I had known him ever since he arrived at the UN as the Austrian Observer. If I may be so indiscreet to say what was thought about him at the UN in those days, he was known as the "head waiter" because of his obsequious manner. It was an astonishing appointment, an astonishing selection, that Waldheim got it. Jacobsen who stood against him was infinitely superior and everybody knew that. The Russians also knew that. But they didn't want him. Waldheim had a very equivocal attitude toward Israel, I would say. Of course he came over here (he came here a few times, twice or three times) and he met with Mrs. Meir who was then the Prime Minister, and he was all sweetness and light. But nobody really trusted him. We didn't know, at least I didn't, know his past in the German army. I don't think anybody knew. It was obviously the duty of our intelligence to make inquiries. Whether they did and decided not to do anything about it or whether they didn't, I don't know. But it should have been fairly easy to check the past of the man, and nobody checked. When was he elected? Was it '68?

JSS 1972, because Pérez de Cuéllar was '82.

MK As far as I could see at the conference (at which, as I say, I had nothing much to do) he was perfectly OK. I
mean, he opened the conference and called on the speakers, but then his attitudes toward what was going on were of no weight at all because he had nothing to do. The only people who could really say anything about Waldheim were those who met him over here and the permanent representatives who had contact with him in New York. Nobody was very happy with him.

JSS I've asked you several questions about how you assessed the atmosphere at the UN toward Israel. Now as a final question I'd like to ask you the opposite. Israel's attitude toward the UN changed substantially over the years and became negative. My question is, what do you attribute that to mainly, when did it begin, had it begun already in 1956 because of the Gaza Strip question?

MK No, it began earlier. It began with the Mixed Armistice Commissions because that was the UN as far as the public in Israel was concerned. The officers of the various armies that served as observers over here, who were chairmen of the Military Armistice Commissions, took obviously a very legalistic view of the matters in dispute - I was once head of the armistice apparatus over here in Israel, director of the armistice department so I was very close to the whole thing - they adopted a very legalistic view. They tended - I don't want to put any suspicion about their motives at all, there were only one or two cases I know of, where a man - a Swede - was
definitely hostile to Israel. The others did their job as best they could. We felt that we were defending ourselves against this constant infiltration over the borders which, in many cases, was murderous. Because of the absence of a particular piece of evidence which was formally required, the vote frequently went against us in the commissions. The commissions were set up with a UN chairman, an Israeli representative, and an Arab representative. That meant that a lot of the, or most of the, decisions were a 2 against 1 vote. The 2 were the U.N. Chairman and Arab and the 1 was Israel. So the animus against the UN started in the army because UNTSO was the UN as far as they were concerned. This was in spite of good relations that existed on a personal level with a large number of the observers. But that's where it started. Public opinion thus became very reserved about the U.N. After that it became obvious that an Israeli could not be elected to any position of any importance at all in the General Assembly, he could never be a chairman, he could never be a vice-chairman, at the most I think we had one or two rapporteurs in technical committees. Israel could never be, and never was elected to the Security Council or ECOSOC, whereas Jordan and Yemen for example have been there twice at least. You'll find the Fiji Islands will be there one day, but Israel can never be. And then of course the votes. With the
whole of the Third World and the Communist World packed against you, you have an in-built majority against Israel. Then there's that Zionism is Fascism resolution of the General assembly. I don't want to use the word hostility but rather a resigned attitude toward the UN - "well, what on earth can you expect in this place?" You can say that this is the basis of the refusal of the present government to accept an international conference because although an international conference doesn't actually mean the UN, it could conceivably be set up outside the UN - but then, in effect, it means the UN will be there and some of the Arab states, for example Syria, continue to demand an international conference under the auspices of the UN, or the Permanent Members of the Security Council, or the whole Security Council. So as far as Israel is concerned the U.N. is a negative factor on the field.

JSS

Let me ask you in that connection - of course the resolution on Zionism and racism had a great impact in the United States. Would you say that was greater there than in Israel?

MK

Oh no, no. Getting rid of it is a central feature of - I don't want to say of Israeli foreign policy - but it is a central demand of ours. Whether it's possible in practice I don't know, I would doubt it very much. I happened to be at the UN when this resolution was passed.
JSS Oh you were?

MK I was at that time the head of our international organizations setup and so I used to go to the General Assembly every year. I happened to be sitting in the gallery in the Third Committee chamber when it was introduced by the Iraqis, I think, and our representative on the Committee came along to ask me what to do and I told her to stall until Herzog could get into it. No, this is a central feature, although we tend to sneer in Israel at the power and validity and strength of General Assembly resolutions - and this is a General Assembly resolution, and this is a bad one.

JSS From the very beginning really, for better or worse, the UN and Israel have been very closely connected.

MK From the very beginning.

JSS And what you’re saying is that there is a desire to try to separate in a sense...

MK Yes, we - I would say that this is not only an official government position; this is a feeling held by the people of the country. I want to add over here that it is something that we deplore because the foundation of Israel was an idealistic act and the UN was born of an ideal, and the two idealisms came together. We found that the practice has subverted the idealistic basis of the UN and this is something which, particularly to those of us who spent many years at the UN, was painful.
JSS My final question there, and my final question really, is - now there have been changes in the world - the change perhaps, the whole nature of the UN - do you think this will change Israeli attitudes?

MK No, because I think it's going to get worse. The more power given to the UN the less happy our position is going to be.

JSS Even though that power now is in the hands of a less hostile Soviet Union and United States and...

MK You're an American, look what's happening now in the Gulf. The United States led a grand coalition to give effect to one of the principles of the UN charter, that is, getting rid of the aggressor in Kuwait. And despite the seeming dominance of the concept of human rights vis-a-vis national sovereignty which has become accepted in recent years, look what's happening inside Iraq now. You can say that the United States, which led that grand coalition, is condoning a massive breach of human rights. The Soviets have got their 50,000,000 Moslems, with intimate contact with the Arab world and Iran, and they still have some political influence in the Third World. They have none in Europe, so where are they going to go for their support? So I don't see any difference, I think things are going to get worse. I just don't believe in this Grand New Order.

JSS Well, that's a fairly pessimistic note to end on -
MK  I’m not optimistic.

JSS  Let me just ask there at the end then - is there any other thought - among all the subjects we’ve been covering, is there any particular thought you’d like to put on the record at this point as to...

MK  I don’t know, I think that last interchange was more or less sums up my view.

JSS  Thank you very much.
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