

INTERVIEW WITH JONA KLIMOWITZKY

First, Barbara Taufar announces that the interview with Mrs. Jona Klimovitzky took place in Yafo in June 1997.

BT: Jona, you were the secretary of prime minister Menachem Begin in times when the relationships between Israel and Austria were rather tense, when chancellor Kreisky was criticising Israel's ...

JK: Policy.

BT: ... policy of the Right. But not only. Also the Labour party. I would very much like to know when did you hear for the first time the name Kreisky and in what context?

JK: Well, I come from a very politically left orientated family. My father was a communist. So Kreisky was very well-known in our house. But when I started working with Begin in '73, Kreisky came for the first time to Bet Jabotinsky (headquarter of Link Party). That's how I remember the first meeting, not while Begin was prime minister, but still was in the opposition. He was invited and he prepared him to meet the whole committee of the party.

BT: It was after the Yom Kippur War?

JK: Yes, after the Yom Kippur War. Now, there was a great tension) there, because some of them wanted to boycott the meeting - like the late Chaim Landau. I mean, there are always some extreme, more extreme than the extreme. But Mr. Begin said, „No, I want him to come here, because I want to listen. He is a Jew after all and I want to hear what he has to say. To criticise is one thing, but to listen to the person is another thing.“ And you know, Begin with all this façade of being extremist, he was a great democrat at heart, and he always respected the other side's opinion and it does not matter what they were. He said, „I will kill myself, to hear my opponents having the last word to say.“ So it happened that Kreisky was almost three hours there. It was a very hot, very intense debate, but it was very fruitful, because later on we had the Lebanon war, and we needed to save our soldiers, who were in prison or we did not know their whereabouts. Begin sent Lowa to Kreisky, because Lowa was a very close friend of Kreisky.

BT: But to this we will come later. I would very much like to go back to this very first meeting with Menachem Begin. Kreisky, of course, knew who he was. From his political point of view he disliked the Revisionist movement. He was not a Zionist. So, I suppose, for Begin the point that he was Jewish must have played quite an important role. Maybe more than for the Socialists here?

JK: Yes.

BT: Did he tell you afterwards something or did you hear opinions after this meeting?

JK: Yes. I think. First of all, you know, Begin had this thing of self-hated Jew, you know, Jews like Kreisky or even Kissinger at that time. Those were Jews who hate themselves and they were more dangerous for Israel than the others. But he always respected their intelligence, their achievements, because it wasn't easy for somebody like Kreisky to become chancellor of Austria.

BT: Was that a disturbing factor?

JK: It wasn't ... No, no.

BT: I mean, if he would have been chancellor of, let us say, Portugal ...

JK: The same! The same! It particularly stood out, because this was the example of all places, Austria... Well, you see: „we made it, the Jew is the chancellor of Austria.“ This was the image. Does not matter the bitter debates he had with him or the bitter opponents they were. But for Begin it was also a point of respect that „Look, we made it“. The achievement.

BT: Which means Begin respected the fact that Kreisky had made it? Because many Jews in Israel were, I would say, almost jealous about the fact that a Jew, like Kreisky, had made it.

JK: It is not only that they were jealous, that they ..., some of them even admired him for this. Because, you see, amid all this hate-love there was great admiration, because Kreisky was a person, you could not help but admire. And even Begin had a lot of respect for him. Otherwise he wouldn't dare to invite him to Bet Jabotinsky to appear for the committee of Cherut (Likud).

BT: That was, after the Yom Kippur War, after the affair of the glass of water with Golda, ...

JK: Of the glass of water, exactly.

BT: ... which was not true. Was there any chemistry, if you remember, between the two men?

JK: It couldn't be. I mean, they were) so ..., first of all, very stubborn, very ideological, very strong in their ideology. It could not work even if they wanted to. Because they were strong personalities. They fought for what they did. So they were so strong in their

opinion that they just could not divide it from them. So there was this admiration-hate and admiration-hate, you know, this relationship.

BT: But it was, nevertheless, a meeting which ended without a terrible quarrel?

JK: Oh, no, no, on the contrary, no, no, no, no, contrary. First of all the step! You see, I don't know how many people know, but for Begin to make such a step. To say, „I want him here.“ He invited him! Only he could have done it. I mean, someone stubborn, you know, not open-minded without respect for other people's opinions or beliefs: Such a person would not have done it. What was Begin! He was in the opposition at that time, yes. It was after the Yom Kippur War. I mean, in fact, the Labour party was very deep in trouble.

BT: But it seems that also Kreisky was curious to meet this opposition.

JK: Very much so, why shouldn't he. I mean, look those people, they are open-minded people, people with ideology, clever people, strong people. It's different, it's a breed you don't have today.

BT: When Begin came to power, Kreisky continued to be active in the Socialist International. He was very active as chancellor of Austria in the Arab world. You remember that Dayan met Sadat through the offices of the Austrians?

JK: Of course.

BT: Do you remember how this came about from your memories in the office of Begin?

JK: Well, first of all, the meetings were suggested through Tohami, They met in Morocco. But, you see, I don't know the details, but I know one thing, that Begin never hesitated to mention Kreisky as a person to go to, when either we had trouble or we wanted peace. He always referred to him, and you can ask Lowa, Lowa will tell you even more in details.

BT: I spoke already to him and we know, we know what he has to say. But, I am coming to you, because you knew the office. What I would like to know is: on the one hand Kreisky did a lot for Israel, which means 300,000 Jews from Russia who came only through Austria. Later on, he helped Begin or the Begin government to get the boys out from prison, the prisoners of war. Nevertheless, he did not want to have Begin's thanks, because he was very furious about the policy of the Israeli army in the occupied territories.

JK: Typical, typical of him.

BT: Did Begin understand him, even if they were politically totally different?

JK: You see, Begin understood him very well, he just could not overcome his emotions. You see, Begin had a terrible, terrible ... not complex - we should not call it complex - Trauma about the Holocaust. Now, he couldn't imagine a Jew - not only in Austria, a Jew in all places, doesn't matter if it is Kissinger or others - that did not have as a first priority the interest of the existence of the Jewish people. And this was his deep conflict. From this stems everything. The attitude to Kreisky or other things. First of all, he wanted Kreisky to identify himself as a Jew. But he could not get it. Could not grasp it that, first of all, he is an Austrian who made it in Austria! He is a chancellor of Austria. He could be someone else like an Armenian or...

BT: What did it mean meant for Begin that Kreisky should be like a Jew. What did he expect from him?

JK: He expected, for example, ... First of all, in that time Kreisky was the first one who started talking to the PLO. For Begin it was like speaking to another Hitler. That was, what finished him, that was, what really made him furious, because how dare he! A survivor of the Holocaust! He (Kreisky) fought against the Germans and now to go to speak to another Hitler who wants again to destroy the people of Israel, you know! That's what made the conflict bore, you see. He could not understand it, he would not grasp it that today a Jew can be also ..., a Jew is a ..., just a ...

BT: Didn't Begin understand - and I suppose he read newspapers and read all the interviews of Kreisky in the big newspapers here - did Begin understand or could he just not accept the fact that Kreisky thought, if he speaks to Qaddafi and Arafat, that he would slowly move them: „If you speak to your enemy, then you can move them away from terrorism.“ Or was Begin so focused on terror that he could never believe that peace was possible?

JK: He was focused on terror, you see. He is focused on terror, because he had this, this subconscious terrible fear that we are going to be destroyed again, ever by this enemy, and we have to defend ourselves. That is why he liked generals. He liked, I mean, this strong macho thing. This was very much so, even before he became prime minister. It lessened a lot, when he came later to reality. So he was not always detached, he was also a realistic man in a way. But he was also a very emotional person.

BT: Would you say that Kreisky could maybe not understand this sort of emotion of Israeli politicians?

JK: I think both were very stubborn and refused to give up. I am sure in their mind they understood each other, with the heart they could not help it. They could not help doing it to each other - you understand? - I mean, because they were strong. Kreisky was also a

very emotional person, so was Begin - terrible. I mean sometimes, you see, they burst out of him: the anger.

BT: Yes, the outbursts and the words they used against each other!

JK: The outbursts! So they understand ... I am sure. Rationally, I am sure he understood it. I have no doubt at it. Because he was a logical person, you see, when he came to power and made peace with Sadat and he knew we had to do it and it doesn't matter. You understand? Because they said Sadat collaborated with the Nazis. It didn't matter to him much. And when he had to accept, for example, the ambassador of Germany here, he accepted the representative of Germany! He was very rational. But inside again the emotions.

BT: If Kreisky would not have been Jewish, but would nevertheless have made the same politics, how would have been the reaction here in Israel? I mean, did they react so sharply, because he was Jewish?

JK: Yes, emotional, has nothing to do with logic.

BT: Which means, if a Jew does the same thing like a non-Jew, the Israeli politicians or even the Israeli media will judge the Jew ten times stronger and more aggressive than the non-Jew?

JK: Not anymore.

BT: Not anymore?

JK: Not anymore.

BT: But in that time, yes?

JK: In that time, yes.

BT: Why? Why in that time and why not now?

JK: Because most people went through the Holocaust...

BT: It is a different generation today?

JK: A different generation, exactly. This is a different generation

BT: Were there discussions, if you remember, in the cabinet about certain things Kreisky said in interviews about Begin and his politics? Or was he never discussed? Begin sent,

for example, once Joseph Burg to Kreisky to Vienna to see if he could calm down the situation. Why was he interested to calm down?

JK: Very simple, because he knew - after he became prime minister - how valuable Kreisky was, when we needed him. So, I mean, he was there for us.

BT: Even if there were quarrels?

JK: It doesn't matter. Because then he applied, Begin would say: „You see, he is a Jew after all.“ You see, this is the consideration. We are looking at it differently, our generation. Because we are more cosmopolitan and don't forget the bigger horizons. I mean it was than more personal, and again this has to do a lot with the personality of the people.

BT: So, Begin sent Joseph Burg to Vienna. To calm down? What, what did he mean by that?

JK: First of all, don't forget, Begin was after all a statesman, not a politician, and he knew to make the difference, again after he became prime minister, between emotions which he could permit himself, when he was in the opposition, because blahblah does not influence, and here it is something different. He is a prime minister, and Kreisky is a chancellor. These are two things. They are both statesmen and should be respected mutually, because both of them may be of interest and that Begin knew: to make the difference at the time.

BT: But did it help something?

JK: Of course, it helped, because when he was in trouble he always turned to Kreisky. And then you see, a friend in need, is a friend indeed. And there is nothing to do with it, you see. Otherwise I don't want his help! I don't want anything!

BT: How did Begin get the idea to send Lowa Eliav to Kreisky for getting the boys out of the prisons after the war.

JK: Because he knew about Kreisky's good relations with Arafat and with Assad and all the others. And he asked him to do it, and he knew he would help.

BT: Which means in that time the Israeli government knew that Kreisky had the best relationships to the Arab world?

JK: Absolutely, absolutely.

BT: And even if they hated his attitude towards their politics ...?

JK: It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. They knew they could count on him to help us. And this is very broad. I mean, it's not the words, it's the deeds that do. The fact that he sent Burg to calm the situation, the fact that he always turned to him through Lowa Eliav to help us in trouble, when we needed the Arabs, proves that ... He always said, „I don't want to hear from him. I don't want his help. I will try and find and do it with somebody else.“ But he didn't. He turned to Kreisky.

BT: How did he personally react to Kreisky's efforts, who was in that time already quite a sick person, when all these exchanges started?

JK: I think he respected him a lot. He did not say it in so many words, but the fact is that he appreciated him. He sent, again and again he sent Lowa to him. You don't do it with a person whom you do not respect and not expect.

BT: But there was never a telephone call you remember or any ...?

JK: Personal, no. He did not get over the emotions. He couldn't. Kreisky the same. They could not get over the personal ..., those are emotional people. At that time ideology was so strong, it is not like today, „Okay, you know, we will get over it. We will go on.“ No, at that time ..., because both had gone through hell. Because they were Jews.

BT: How do you explain the fact that the Jews in Israel were judging Kreisky, the Jew, so tough and differently than a goy (Hebrew for Gentile) for example. I mean, what is there behind? A non-Jew cannot understand that. I suppose Kreisky understood it. But I know that many other people in the world could not understand this Jewish sort of an inside fight.

JK: I am going again to the Second World War. They couldn't not take it, because families were destroyed and annihilated. And Begin could not, they could not forget it, for them the Holocaust was very much in their minds. They lost families and that is why their emotions were so strong. Today not, second generation no problem with it.

BT: Which means, the point was not for Begin that Kreisky was not a Zionist?

JK: No, no. The emotional problem. Nothing to do with Zionism, with Judaism, but ...

BT: But Begin said that Kreisky is denying his Judaism. But he never did, you know.

JK: No, he never did, and I am sure. Rationally he ..., when he thought, rationally he knew it as well.

BT: But I remember that finally, when the second prisoner exchange happened, Kreisky was already not chancellor anymore. Together with the Center of Peace in the Middle East, with the universities in Israel and with the Palestinians in the occupied territories I tried to invite Kreisky for a sort of a last visit, so would be made peace between him and Israel. Through a secret chief editors' meeting with Mr. Tamir, who died in the meantime the Israeli government misled, the public concerning Kreisky. They said that Kreisky had requested the release of, I don't know, 1,500 Palestinians for five Israeli prisoners of war. And the government did not feel well with that exchange numbers, so they needed a black sheep and therefore said it was Kreisky, who demanded it. Why such a nasty game? I mean, if you say that Begin respected so much Kreisky's work? There was now an old man, very sick, he even travelled on a wheelchair to Damascus to Jibril to get the boys out. And then at the end they are lying to the public through the media telling them that it was Kreisky who demanded these 1,500 people. This is not the Begin you are describing!

JK: No, no. And I am not sure that he did it. I think, there were some people who got influence, they don't understand, you see, they thought that Begin was an extreme, and they took it even extremer than he did. They did not understand his logic, and they did not understand his democratic beliefs in law and free press and everything else. So they carried it one step further to the extreme. I am sure, this had nothing to do with Begin. I am sure. I don't know who did, who initiated it, but certainly it had nothing to do with Begin. They thought they understood what Begin wanted. But this is not the way he wanted it. You understand? Because there are a lot of people now using Begin's name now for things that Begin would not even dream of! Look what is going on now with respect of the high court! It would never have happened in Begin's time, never in a million years! So there is this bunch of people who thought they understand what Begin wants, and they carried it to this extreme!

BT: Could it be because Begin was in that time already in a difficult situation after the Lebanon war and he could not control anymore so well?

JK: Not only no control, he didn't react and he had his own problems. It was horrible, the loss of life every day, for him it was horrible.

BT: Both two men met once?

JK: Only once, yes. In Bet Jabotinsky.

BT: Did you hear Begin speaking to himself or speaking to a small crowd of people about what he thinks of Kreisky?

JK: No. What he had to say, he said always loud for everybody to hear, like, you know, when he used to comment. He never expressed something about somebody behind his back that nobody should hear. Never. What he had to say, he said it loud and clear,

BT I mean, was Kreisky and what he had to say sometimes discussed in any meeting?

JK: No. It was always loud and clear for both of them, yes? Very outspoken in this matter. It was like a duel, you know, like a match, who is going to be louder and extremer.

BT: Do you think that Begin would have reacted or that maybe the whole thing would have been differently, if the Jewish factor would not have played a role?

JK: I think in a way yes.

BT: Which means, if Kreisky would not have been Jewish, ...

JK: ... he would ...

BT: ... would Begin have reacted differently?

JK: Yes, because he said, „From a goy (Hebrew for Gentile) you expect it, but not from a Jew.“ That's the whole difference.

BT: Which means there was also a certain frustration about a fellow Jew there?

JK: Absolutely, deep frustration, deep frustration.

BT: Judaism for Kreisky was religion and not a question of blood. I mean, he said the Jews are sort of a historically grown community bound by religion and otherwise the Yemenites have hardly anything to do - besides religion - with the Poles, yes? So how did Begin define „he must react differently, because he is Jewish?“ I mean only the Holocaust consciousness?

JK: Absolutely, the persecution and the Holocaust, because he lost all his family there. And for him it was really like he was still persecuted by the Holocaust. You see in all the talks, for example, with Carter and the Camp David accords. When he was sitting there and talking in the Camp David, he always mentioned the security of Israel together with the Holocaust. He put it all together. I'll tell you what, I'll tell you what. For Begin ...

BT: Or were also here the emotions too big?

JK: For Begin, the Palestinians as an identity were non-existent. They are part of the Arab world - that was his conception. Look, then he came to reality. And look what he did when he gave autonomy in Camp David - in fact, he gave up the dream of a greater

israel. I mean he was the one, they don't like to hear it now in the Likud, but the fact is he put the ground for a Palestinian state. I mean, what you mean by autonomy?

JK: I will give them everything but self-rule. This way it is not a state. It doesn't matter, they mean, they have self-rule. Then that's it. You see, in fact, you know, although he recognised it, it was difficult for him to accept it emotionally. And for him, somebody who all his life fought for the greater Israel, the two banks of the Jordan river, suddenly he gives it all up.

BT: So, if I understand you right, we have here two politicians who are both extremely emotional, which is rare with politicians ...

JK: Very, absolutely.

BT: ... and on the other hand they are also intellectuals and there is a clash, maybe. As Shimon Peres said, „When you have these two qualities together, you cannot be a diplomat.“

JK: They were politicians ...

BT: They were both leaders, but not diplomats.

JK: Leaders, but not diplomats. As you said, Begin was polite always, but he wasn't a diplomat.

BT: Maybe, that is why Peres never became a real leader?

JK: Yes, because you see, when Begin called Arafat a walking waste to feed animals with - this wasn't a diplomatic expression. You see, it shows the emotion, that's what I said from the beginning. They clashed, because they were strong-headed, deeply in their ideology ...

BT: Stubborn.

JK: ... and emotional. God, they were emotional. You don't get it today, everything is called cool-headed and it's different. That's why they clashed, but, I mean, also respected each other very much, because that is what you expect from an opponent that you appreciate, to clash with him, head to head.

BT: I don't know if Kreisky respected Begin, because he was really ..., from his socialistic conviction he was really horrified by ...

JK: Yes, but he did, I mean, ask him to help.

BT: Absolutely. But here he ...

JK: He did it for humanitarian reasons, okay!

BT: He said that he always will do it for humanitarian reasons. And Minister Simcha Ehrlich thanked him, because it was such a „Jewish attitude and mitzwa“ (Hebrew for good deed), and so forth, and Kreisky did not want to hear about it. But here again Lowa Eliav called Kreisky a Zaddik (Hebrew for a just man). From Lowa he accepted that, but he would never accept it from the Right wing in Israel.

JK: Never, never, of course, not. Because the breach was so deep that he ...

BT: If both would have been a little bit different, a little bit more diplomatic, would you think that they could have worked together?

JK: Yes, Begin and Kreisky could have talked to each other. They did not even talk to each other, they screamed at each other! They never spoke to each other. I mean the meeting at Bet Jabotinsky, they never said, „Okay, let us see what we have to say.“ Scream until the roof is on the top. The emotions were so deep, they hated each other so much, because of the ideological ideas.

BT: In the Jabotinsky house, in the headquarters of the Likud, was there already then such a hot exchange of views?

JK: There was a hot debate, but it wasn't a personal talk. What I remember is that Kreisky came in, he went to Begin's room and sat and talked before us, he came straight up to the meeting.

BT: And I suppose Begin appreciated that, because he was as a opposition leader in that time, he was dispised by the left.

JK: He did not have to invite him and he did it and he did it. It shows that you know rational is one thing and emotional is one thing. That's the whole essence.

BT: Kreisky was extremely hated in the Israeli press.

JK: Not always. I mean ... not always.

BT: You mentioned before the Holocaust generation, which dominated Israeli political life. Was Kreisky's point of view really so painful because of the traumas they all had of the Holocaust?

JK: Absolutely.

BT: Which means, if he would have understood that or if he would have given in a little bit into that ...?

JK: Not even give in, not reacting! Because he reacted immediately, you know, Kreisky did not hesitate, he reacted immediately.

BT: Do you think that Kreisky could have done more maybe for Israel, or influence more, if he would have been a little bit more tender with the Israelis?

JK: A little bit more calmer, not so emotional, not so outbursting, that's it. Because he said, „Ah, you can scream, I can scream better!“ You understand ...?

BT: Yes, but meeting Arafat, which was not to anger the Israelis, but he really believed in, in dialogue.

JK: It doesn't matter for them. For them Arafat was the symbol of a new Hitler. That's all.

BT: If there would have been a better relationship in advance, let us say, between the Israelis and Kreisky and he would have met with Arafat and then Qaddafi nevertheless, would there have been the same outburst or would it have been less?

JK: No, because you see ... I will tell you why: Because it is as if he angered them in the beginning. Everything he did, made us angry. It doesn't matter, if it's good or bad. We are angry at him. Point!

BT: Which means he had basically an image here...

JK: Of a provocateur.

BT: Of a provocateur ...

JK: Exactly, yes.

BT: Even by helping the Israelis in many important things he could not change the image anymore?

JK: Listen. ... Why? Because they considered his help for granted. He is a Jew, he has to help us.

BT: Is that with every Jew that way?

JK: Well, almost. Not this generation. I am then, I am going back. It is a whole difference. We would not expect it from somebody like Shimon Peres or the late Rabin or even, for example, Ehud Barak or Yossi Beilin. They are different now. This is a new generation. They understand what a statesman means in an independent country, who was elected democratically. Fine! They don't have this complex, they are too far away from the Holocaust, for they are too far away. They did not suffer, they personally. They have their parents. Their parents suffered, they and their families. They did not.

BT: In essence, what you are saying is that what the main problem between the relations of Israeli politicians and intellectuals and press in the seventies ...

JK: In the seventies.

BT: ... with Kreisky was ...

JK: Or the likes of Kreisky, yes.

BT: ... was the reaction they had concerning his remarks because of their traumatic experiences of being wiped out in the Holocaust?

JK: If you are not with me and helping me, you are against me. That's it. Black and white.

BT: But not that he was not a Zionist or ...?

JK: No, no, has nothing to do with. They demanded of him to fulfil his duties as a Jew to his people, to the Jewish people.

BT: If you look at Kissinger, I mean, Kissinger was also called bad names, but never so bad as Kreisky, of course, he was called a Jew boy?

JK: A Jew boy is even worse. I mean, Kreisky was never called a nickname and „Jew boy“ is very anti-Semitic even.

BT: But Kissinger was actually not as aggressive in his remarks as Kreisky and, nevertheless, he got so many ...

JK: His acts, his acts, you know in the Yom Kippur War, when he called the army all these things and his expression that „this I have to give up“, and the pressure and everything. This brought out from the right wing.

BT: Which means it was the same reaction as to Kreisky's remarks?

JK: Same reaction!

BT: A Jew is not allowed to be ...

JK: It does not matter, if he is Foreign Secretary of the United States or Chancellor of Austria, his first duty is to his people.

BT: To be loyal to Israel?

JK: To his people, to his people, to the Jews! Doesn't even matter to Israel! To the Jews, first of all. Not today, I am saying. This was the policy in the seventies.

BT: Do you think Begin was, ever hurt by Kreisky's open criticism of the occupation? Was he ever hurt by Kreisky's remark about him personally?

JK: Well, he did not show it, but I think in a way he was hurt. Of course, he was hurt.

BT: Yes. Kreisky was hurt, too, of course.

JK: Of course, he was hurt. I think everybody who says, he wasn't, he is lying. Because you can't help it. It does not come from somebody in the street, it comes from a statesman, an international personality, and it's in all the papers. And Kreisky was a respected person, it's not somebody like a small hooligan or small politician. Difference, he is a man with achievements, respected well in the international world. Of course, it hurts. Because even if you think, okay, they have a long rivalry, it sticks to you a little bit. It's natural.

BT: Thank you, Jona.

JK: You're welcome.