

France and Israel: They'll be Together Again

by Michael Curtis



Shimon Peres and Francois Mitterrand in 1993

On April 13, 2010, when chestnuts were in blossom in the charm of spring, the Israeli politician Shimon Peres, accompanied by the Mayor of Paris, Bertrand Delanoë, unveiled the David Ben-Gurion Promenade in the 7th arrondissement of Paris in front of the Musée du Quai Branly on the border of the Seine near the Eiffel Tower. The Promenade is dedicated to the memory of Ben-Gurion who was, according to the Mayor, a true friend of France as well being a man who worked for peace and the primary founder and the proclaimer of the establishment of the State of Israel on May 14, 1948, and the first prime minister of the state..

At the ceremony, Peres, the life long associate and disciple of Ben Gurion who had appointed him at age 29 Director General of the Israeli ministry of defense in 1953, naturally praised his mentor for the contribution to the creation of Israel, but he also praised France which he considered not only a country but also a culture, and one that was crucial for Israel. Peres expressed gratitude that France, right after the Holocaust,

did not adhere to the embargo of arms to Israel but sent aid in the form of tanks and arms, and saved the State of Israel from destruction by Arab forces.

It is timely that in his last book, *No Room for Small Dreams*, completed a short time before his death on September 28, 2016 at the age of 93, Peres reminded readers not only of this valuable aid given by France to Israel in its early years but also of France's role in building the Israeli nuclear reactor, and of the close relationship between the two countries.

Shimon Peres in 1934 came from a shtetl in Poland to the land of Israel at age 11 and with large dreams held all the Israeli major political offices, President, Prime Minister twice, foreign minister and many other ministries, and member of the Knesset 1959-2007. He was a Francophile who appreciated many aspects of French life and culture. In November 2013 near the end of his life he was delighted to meet Charles Aznavour, famous French singer dubbed France's Frank Sinatra, in Tel Aviv and sang the words of the star's song "She" during Aznavour's performance.

Shimon Peres was a complex human being, in both personal and political terms, whose major achievement was to link Israel and France and to make a major contribution to the Israeli military strength, defense, aviation, and nuclear industries.

Peres was a curious mixture, dreamer and pragmatist, poet and art lover, political intriguer and statesman. He was an early hawk and nuclear pioneer who became, if not a dove, a man of peace, chief architect of the Oslo Accords and advocate of peace with Palestinians. Peres was brilliant, a knowledgeable, cultured, well read, man of the world, but also self-centered, obsessed with himself, sometimes vindictive, a man who sought and wanted power. Many admired him but he was seen by some, as insincere and by his rival Yitzhak Rabin as a "tireless schemer." If he favored Israeli settlements in the West Bank, he was also friendly with Palestinian leaders.

The rendezvous of Peres with France began in the 1950s. In the early 1950s France was selling light weapons and then tanks to Israel. He and Prime Minister Ben Gurion realized that Israeli security could only be obtained by nuclear technology. In 1954 they understood that the arms Israel had been previously getting from Czechoslovakia were insufficient to ensure that security, and that aid was not forthcoming from Britain or from the US under President Dwight Eisenhower. Peres understood there was an "emotional connection with the French."

Three factors drove the relationship between the two countries. One was the mutual dislike of the threatening policies of Colonel Nasser, directly against Israel, and indirectly against France because of his support of the Algerian FLN (Algerian National Liberation Front) at war with France since 1954.

The second was the fact that this was the moment in France when the Radical Party was in power, some of whose leaders had been members of the Resistance during the Vichy era or been in concentration camps. French and Israeli scars and the anguish both sides suffered were caused by the same evil.

The third was the secret alliance between Britain, France, and Israel over Suez. For various reasons the countries wanted to regain control of the Suez Canal, to reopen the Straits of Tiran to Israeli shipping, to stop terrorist raids from Egypt, and to remove then-Colonel Abdel Nasser who had nationalized the Canal on July 26, 1956, from power.

France had been supplying Israel with long range cannons, then other arms, and with fighter aircraft, including the Mirage, France's best combat aircraft. The initial step towards nuclear agreement was agreed on Sevres in October 1956 following the Protocol, the secret agreement between France, UK and Israel reached on October 22-24, 1956. At the same time Shimon Peres approached French foreign minister Christian

Pineau and Maurice Bourges-Manoury, then defense minister for help in building a nuclear capability, a reactor.

Peres was able to persuade the two French politicians, particularly Bourges-Manoury, who had become prime minister to approve and get the French Atomic Energy Commission to agree to the nuclear deal, though Bourges-Manoury resorted to a trick to do so the day after he fell from office. Construction began that led to Dimona, the Negev Nuclear Research Center, supposed to obtain water desalination since Israel lacked access to fresh water, and to make up for Israel's lack of oil.

This was Peres's moment of glory, his most important achievement. France, at the time Europe's most advanced country in nuclear research agreed to supply uranium and technical help to build the nuclear reactor for peaceful purposes at Dimona. For Peres, followed Ben-Gurion in holding that Israel's existence was guaranteed only by a deterrent: nuclear material is the first step to deterrence which was the first step on the path to peace. If Israel produces fissile materials, uranium and plutonium, for nuclear purposes, it is Peres who should get credit.

The entente between France and Israel has not always been cordial with political changes and developments in international affairs. Perhaps the lowest point was the policy of President Charles de Gaulle on November 27, 1967, and in March 1960 who wanted to free France from the "very special and very close ties to Israel." For a variety of policy concerns, his desire to increase closer relations with Arab countries with the end of the Algerian war, and personal pique at Israel's ignoring his advice not to attack Egypt, he imposed an arms embargo on June 2, 1967, stopped selling supplies of uranium to Israel, then called for international monitoring of Israel's nuclear facilities. Paradoxically, this then led to a closer alignment of Israel with the US, and the decision of President Lyndon Johnson to sell Phantom fighter

jets to Israel.

Differences between France and Israel still exist especially on West Bank settlements, and France is still interested in hosting a peace conference on certain conditions. But Gaullist animosity is over. It is well to remember that former prime minister Nicholas Sarkozy has said, "France will never compromise on Israel's security."