

Rest in Peace, Uncle Jackie

Personal Reflection on the Passing of Lt Gen JFR Jacob

On 13 January 2016, Lieutenant General JFR Jacob passed away at the age of 92 in Delhi. Living as I do in Calcutta, I was unable to get to Delhi in time for my granduncle Jackie's funeral. I eagerly read all the eulogies in the press and online, and was heartened by how tributes poured in from India and abroad. His military service to the nation, his governorship of Goa and Punjab, and his impeccable character were widely acclaimed. Most of India's political leaders, across party lines, noted his service to the country and were lavish in their praise of his accomplishments and the decisive role he played in the subcontinent.

President Pranab Mukherjee stated: "His distinguished services to the nation and the Indian Army shall always be remembered." Prime Minister Modi eulogized: "RIP, Lt Gen JFR Jacob. India will always remain grateful to him for his impeccable service to the nation at the most critical moments." Sonia Gandhi's tribute was: "A brave son of India, his role in the Bangladesh War has a special place in the war history of the world."

Prime Minister of Bangladesh Sheikh Hasina wrote: "The nation with profound respect would remember his contribution to our Liberation War." Israel's Ambassador to India Daniel Carmon averred: "A proud son of the Jewish community of India...supporter



of India-Israel relations...he shall forever be remembered as a human bridge between two peoples."

Uncle Jackie lived an extraordinary life. When I last visited him in Delhi a few months ago, he was frail but still mentally alert as he sat down with me for a cup of tea in his small apartment filled with his life-long collection of art, carpets, and antiques. He had sent greetings via email for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and I had called to wish him the same. Up until just two years ago, he had been travelling around India and the world to deliver lectures, meet with family and friends, and receive awards. His suffering was brief, and that is a blessing.

What was particularly poignant was that my uncle's passing did not just mark the death of a family member but the end

of an era – that of the Baghdadi Jews who had made an important mark on Asia. Today, most of these Jews of my diasporic community that once extended from Basra to Shanghai no longer live in the Asian port cities whose destinies they helped to shape. There are some 19 Jews left in Calcutta, and Bombay, too, has just a handful of Baghdadis. Even in cities such as Singapore and Hong Kong, there are mostly Jews who have come from the West for business opportunities; very few Baghdadis remain.

On 20 January, I attended a memorial service held at the Judah Hyam synagogue in Delhi. It was a much more intimate space than the funeral that had been held a week earlier, where ministers, ambassadors, and the top brass of all the armed services had come to pay their respects. His friends and colleagues spoke of their memories of him and we read some of his favorite psalms.

Lt General P R Shankar, Director General (Artillery) spoke of how General Jacob was a legend in his unit. He mentioned how Jake, as he called him, was best known for the war strategy he deployed and the deft way in which he transformed a ceasefire into an unconditional public surrender, thus averting further humanitarian crises. Bangladesh's independence was guaranteed, and this changed the course of the subcontinent's history. Uncle Jackie recounted his role

in this war in his controversial book, *Surrender at Dacca*.

Israel's Ambassador to India Daniel Carmon told us that he had come straight from the airport to the synagogue. He had just accompanied Foreign Secretary Sushma Swaraj on a trip to Israel to prepare for Prime Minister Modi's upcoming visit. He said that at each official meeting with Israel's political leaders, General Jacob's contributions were hailed and condolences were conveyed. Ambassador Carmon spoke of how Uncle Jackie had played a critical role in building the relationship between India and Israel. I then learned that he had founded the Commonwealth Jewish Council and that he is much admired in Israel. His uniform hangs in the Yad LaShiryon, the Armored Corps Memorial Site and Museum at Latrun. The Israeli paratrooper Motta Gur, whose forces had captured the Old City of Jerusalem in 1967, had written Uncle Jackie a letter. It stated, "...Your performance is, without a doubt, one of the best in modern warfare."

I then recalled how, at sixteen, I had visited Uncle Jackie at his official residence as Head of Eastern Command in Calcutta. I innocently headed towards his bedroom and study to greet him and had barely opened the door when I was commanded sternly to get right back to the living room. The walls of that sprawling and banned room were covered with detailed maps of Bangladesh bearing the names of small mofussil towns, ponds, and rivers and studded with pins, flags, and other notations. It was his war room.

Growing up we always knew that Uncle Jackie was a proud Jew, but he never proclaimed his religion – he did not think it was necessary for any Indian do so. He identified as being Indian through and through. I remember how we all laughed to learn that it was only after the war in Bangladesh that people learned



General Jacob with a friend, Jayesh Mathur

about his Jewish identity. Radio Pakistan peevishly insinuated that India had picked a Jew to negotiate the surrender in a bid to humiliate an Islamic nation.

Mrs. Sondhi spoke of his other achievements and read from an article where her late husband Mr. ML Sondhi, a formidable intellectual, parliamentarian, and diplomat had proposed Uncle Jackie for Vice President of India (2002): "Today, Dr. Kalam is the man of destiny and it will be widely hoped that India under his presidency will be less prone to conflict. For the vice-presidency, I would suggest that Governor JFR Jacob of Punjab can also become a man of destiny and would be credible to not only the Indian public but also the world to Governor Jacob won the surrender of the Pakistani forces in Dhaka by his superiority of strategic maneuver and later showed his skill at political conflict management in Goa in his gubernatorial assignment. His record in Punjab, in the context of the attendant political strife in the State, has been outstanding. Observers have

commented favorably on his ability to structure politics in an information age. His strategic and foreign policy analyses at several intellectual forums have been marked by his acute understanding of how Indian power can contribute to a more stable regional system and a more cohesive international order..."

Until the very end, Uncle Jackie was focused on the building of a secure and militarily strong India. He was writing and worrying about the Chinese breach of the Line of Control into his nineties. He was a voracious reader, kept up-to-date with political events, and enjoyed pronouncing his opinion on current world affairs. I knew it was best to simply listen and never to try voicing my opinion.

Ezekiel Isaac Malekar, Honorary Secretary of the Judah Hyam Synagogue, spoke of the tremendous service Uncle Jackie had provided as its President. I knew that he had also been very instrumental in getting Calcutta's synagogues registered as national monuments. He

had encouraged Ezekiel in his inter-faith efforts and secured funds as needed for the Judah Hyam synagogue. Ezekiel recalled how the General would shoot off a two-line request for support to his friends and colleagues and the necessary funds would arrive. I chuckled, as I had been the recipient of similar instructions and knew I could never say no to Uncle Jackie. He commanded respect and expected results.

Several others spoke of the many charities he supported and the way in which he took it upon himself to ensure that those less fortunate could have their needs met. I knew of the unstinting care he gave to all those who worked for him and how solicitous he was of their welfare. After the recent Nepal earthquakes, he was involved in rebuilding the homes of the Nepali men who worked for him. Whenever he visited our home in Calcutta for dinner, where he would ask for traditional Iraqi Jewish food, he would walk into the kitchen to see what was cooking and taste each of the dishes and give his stamp of approval to our Muslim cook. He always made sure that his driver and accompanying staff were well cared for.

I knew of Uncle Jackie's love of nature, his enjoyment of fishing, and the work he had done to save forests from the mining industries. He often spoke to me of the beauty of the Himalayas and his fishing trips to Bhutan. Upon his retirement, he had bought a house in Kalimpong that he later sold.

A few friends at the memorial mentioned his love of poetry, his knowledge of the arts, and his amazing collection of Indian and Chinese paintings and antiques. Uncle Jackie accompanied me when I bought my first silk carpet back in 1980. He showed me how to assess a carpet and to tell real silk from weaves that mixed silk and synthetic fibers. On



Photo credit: Roley Horowitz



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his many visits to New York, he would call with the enthusiasm of a child to tell me of an art find he had made in a thrift shop or of a great deal he made in the purchase of a Japanese woodcut.

When I was barely nine years old, we all spent a month at Flag Staff House in Devlali, when he was a Brigadier. His home worked with clockwork precision. We were summoned to meals with a brass gong and sat at an immaculately laid table replete with silver cutlery, crystal, and napery. It was the first time we kids had ever been treated to four course meals that were so elegantly served. The house was filled with Chinese vases, ornate furniture, and many sculptures. As we were a family of five boisterous and playful children, we were irreverent of what we called Mr. Ming, Ting, and all the little Pings! He was in trepidation of our knocking down some of his precious artifacts as we chased each other around the house. He would point to Lulu, his golden retriever, who knew she must weave carefully

between the antiques, and ask us to emulate her example. Needless to say, we did not heed his instructions.

At the end of the service, a few of us walked over to the cemetery as Ezekiel read prayers over Uncle Jackie's grave. I left Delhi thinking about his splendid life. He had been a great Indian patriot, a brilliant strategist, a diplomat, a proud Jew, an outstanding administrator, a lover of the arts and a knowledgeable art collector of discrimination, and – above all – a man of the utmost moral integrity. RIP, Uncle Jackie. 🕊

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