

Jacqueline P. Hirsh Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 02/17/1966
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Biographical Note

Hirsh was the French language instructor for John F. Kennedy's [JFK] children in 1963. In this interview Hirsh discusses working at the White House as the French instructor for the Kennedy children; taking Caroline Kennedy on outings; interactions with President JFK; JFK's secret French studies; the Kennedys' pride in their children; difficulties for Caroline after JFK's death; JFK's effect on Hirsh; and JFK as a French student and his Boston accent, among other issues.

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Jacqueline P. Hirsh – JFK #1
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Oral History Interview
with
JACQUELINE PROVOOST HIRSH

February 17, 1966
Washington, D.C.

By Ronald J. Grele

For the John F. Kennedy Library

GRELE: Mrs. Hirsh, when did you first come to work in the White House and how did you come to work there?

HIRSH: Well, it was through friends. One day somebody said, "Would you be interested in teaching French to a private school where they only have ten children?" And at the time I was doing volunteer work for needy children or in hospitals with teenagers that had problems or accidents, because teenagers in hospitals are only allowed, as a rule, one hour a week of a floating teacher. That covers four subjects: English, history, mathematics, and one foreign language. So that's what I was doing. And I said, "No, I'm not interested. I don't have the time." And they kept insisting. So, when the teacher of the private school called me, I went out of curiosity.

GRELE: Who was this teacher?

HIRSH: At the time it was Alice Grimes, who is now Mrs. Gaither. The reason I accepted was because I liked her instantly. She seemed well balanced. She seemed to like children. And I thought since I had never taught such small children--pre-schoolers--I thought I would give it a try. The interview was in her house and I asked her, "Is it here in the house every morning?" So she told me it was the White House--this was in April '63--and two days later she took me to the White House and I saw the whole outfit.

GRELE: Had anybody been teaching the children French prior to your arrival?

HIRSH: No. It was through Mrs. [Donald] Wilson, Susan Wilson--her husband was Deputy Chief, I think, at USIA [United States Information Agency]-- and she had gone to Madame Paul [Saint Aubin de Paris], who is the designer for most of the Kennedy family's clothes. I had met her there, and when she knew I was a French teacher she asked me, "Would you be interested?" And that's how it came about. So it was purely accidental. They had thought about it before because of Mrs. [Jacqueline B.] Kennedy's extreme love for French and anything cultural in French.

GRELE: How often did you conduct classes at the White House?

HIRSH: For such small children the attention span is so small that I thought it would be a good idea to have it four times a week. Rather than have it Monday, Wednesday, Friday, for instance, during which time they can forget, I figured that if we had it for 15 or 30 minutes depending, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, by then whatever they knew they would remember enough to have three days in between of rest.

GRELE: What was the technique you used in teaching?

HIRSH: I had a friend and we drew a game, a Bingo game--that's how you say it in English, "Bingo?"

GRELE: Yes, "Bingo."

HIRSH: And instead of using numbers we used pictures, drawings, and watercolors. It had to be very colorful. I took things that are used in everyday life like gloves or handkerchiefs, or milk, or breads or slides. They seemed to love slides too. Anything they used everyday. The idea was that as soon as we knew enough words we would be able to fill a card. And of course each time one knew--the first one that raised their hand because they knew the word were able to hold the picture in their hand. And of course that was quite an honor for the children. And then everyday I trained them, for instance, to understand about the weather. I would ask, "What is the weather today?" And after three months they were able to answer the weather correctly and they were also able to say complete phrases. If I asked, "How do you do?" they would say, "Very well, thank you and you?" which so is important. And they would also say, "What is your name?" in case they were lost. They would answer, "My name is such and such." Once they knew enough to answer, I had them come in turn to ask a friend their question. They could be teacher in turn. And of course it was really throbbing. It was very exciting. At the end of the class we would learn a song and numbers. I had told them that once each one knew the song correctly and the phrases correctly, I would tape record them. I have the tape recording at home, with the children and Caroline singing in French.

GRELE: What were your impressions at that time of Caroline Kennedy, compared to her peers in the school group?

HIRSH: Well, she was a very bright child, extremely bright. She had, for her age, a power of concentration that was simply unbelievable. She was simply interested in everything. While she was being explained something she really objected politely and shyly if anybody interrupted or if she were not able to ask a question at the time. She was very keen with questions and her questions were very intelligent and very mature for her age. I was most impressed. She would ask very mature questions. She was thriving to be the best all the time. There was just Kennedy competitiveness there in the most obvious way. She just had to be the best. She wasn't happy until she was the best. For instance, if every now and then one knew a word better than she knew it, she said nothing. She just set her mouth very tight. And you could see that she had decided that next time she'd know first.

GRELE: Did you ever discuss with Mrs. Kennedy her progress in French?

HIRSH: Well, Mrs. Kennedy was asking her almost every day, "What did you learn today?" It was at that time that Mrs. Kennedy had decided that maybe it would be a good idea if I could take Caroline out every Monday afternoon so that she could enjoy a normal outing. It was very difficult for Mrs. Kennedy to take her out and not be recognized and it spoiled the fun. She was a very good mother and everything interested her about her children. She was keen on Caroline knowing French. So the fact that they were both so known, if she went out with her mother, made it very difficult. So Mrs. Kennedy asked me if I would please take Caroline out every Monday afternoon, and said, "Just take her anywhere, just anywhere." So I took Caroline out on bus rides.

And it was a very funny incident because she was sitting--it was one of the oldest buses on Pennsylvania Avenue with high windows. All seats were occupied so Caroline was sitting on my lap with her little toy rabbit and looking out of the window. And some teenagers coming out of school were sitting around us. And one of them said, "You know, I think I'm sitting next to Caroline Kennedy." And the other one snapped back, "Oh, don't be silly. What would she be doing on a bus like this?"

But all during this time I would say 'bus' in French; I would say 'the street' in French and even though we were having fun. . . . For instance, I would tell her a whole phrase in English and I would say the one word in French like a puzzle. I would say, "Well, what do you think it means?" And she would guess. And of course she had to repeat it ten times. And then if she remembered she could repeat it to her mother or her father. And at the end of the day I would teach her to say, "Well, we went on a bus ride." And of course it was hard work for a child because it's difficult to know that even though we loved each other very much, she knew that primarily it was for French. So, I thought that the children were unusually well disciplined and most unspoiled.

And then we would go grocery shopping, or to museums or my house, or we had decided to pick up my child in school and watch his school football game or to go anywhere. Mrs. Kennedy was most eager to have the child have as normal a life as possible, which is good sense.

GRELE: Did you ever have any problems with newspaper people or photographers?

HIRSH: I worked unusually hard not to be known, not to be recognized. I would never go to the press room. I knew a lot of newspaper people there. And being a mother myself, I knew exactly what Mrs. Kennedy must have felt when her child was being interrupted in anything or deprived of something. The fact that she could hardly go out in a public place with her own child must have been very hard. So I decided right then and there that I wasn't going to give in that. And every now and then I could see people sort of recognize the child, but by the time they did we were off already or whatever. So it was no problem, really.

GRELE: When did you first meet the President?

HIRSH: From the very beginning.

GRELE: Did he pop in the classes or what?

HIRSH: No. It was through accident in the corridor of the White House. He wanted to know who I was, which proved that he really knew almost everybody there because he hadn't seen me before. So he wanted to know who I was and what I was doing there. And that was how we met.

GRELE: At that first meeting, did he seem happy that Caroline was learning French?

HIRSH: Extremely so because he told me. . . . As a matter of fact, he repeated on the 11th of November in front of all the daddies--it was father's visiting day. I was so proud. He said, "I suppose you have all met Mrs. Hirsh, the French teacher. Let's all tell her how many miracles she has worked with our children." I felt ten feet tall, that he was so impressed, because I knew it was difficult to impress any of the Kennedys, especially the President.

GRELE: Would you mind telling us about the day you took Caroline to the zoo?

HIRSH: No, not at all. That was on daddies day, the 11th of November, the day he had to go to Arlington Cemetary. All the daddies had been invited to watch the children. And the President didn't show up. Of course, the child was disappointed but, again, was disciplined, and she really had an understanding of what went on. So, all the daddies had left. And the President came during the recess to talk to the fathers and to see the children because he often came out at recess to see the children. He really lit up when he saw the children. He loved all children. He didn't come to the class, but he saw recess. And then as I was leaving school, because I had to come back in the afternoon. . . . It was 12 o'clock by then and school was about to be dismissed. And I knew I had to be back by 1 o'clock to pick up Caroline or 1:30, I don't remember. As he was driving up with the car, I figured "Well, I'll run on out." But he called me back. He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "Well, I have to rush. I have to come back this afternoon." He said, "Well, I didn't see the class." I said, "I know it. Your child was disappointed." So he said, "Well, let's do it now." I said, "Well, school is over." He said, "Well, let's stretch it a little bit." He was most interested in the technique. And a couple of times while I was showing the pictures to the children, I popped a picture on him, one of them he didn't know. It was 'the watermelon!!' And he didn't know it was 'la pastèque!!' So he felt pretty sheepish about it. [Laughter] When one of the children remembered a new word instantly, more so than the others, I had the whole class clap for them. He thought that was a very good idea.

It was then that he said, "I really think something should be done for TV. Would it be possible?" So we discussed; he said, he asked--but that was later, that was not that morning. It was in the afternoon. He asked me what I thought about the in-school program in French. And I thought that the idea was tremendous. But, the fact that there were no children on the show was a mistake because nobody was really able to check if it was going too fast. In a class one can't expect every children to be of the same speed.—And I firmly believe that for small children, learning a language has nothing to do with intelligence. It's a matter of repetition. And some children pick it up fast, some don't. So I thought the best idea was to maybe have some children on the show and being able that way, you know, to use the same technique.

GRELE: Did the President appreciate your arguments?

HIRSH: Yes, very much so. He was most interested. He said, "I had never thought of that." And he said, "Well, I would like you to do something about it. Let's wait until I come back from Dallas and then maybe something can be done for preschoolers." So I pointed out to him, I said, "Yes, but if you want your daughter to be happy maybe it would be better if I were not known. And at the beginning I wouldn't want anybody else to do it on TV." So he said, "Well, I'll discuss the whole thing when I come back from Dallas." And of course he never came back.

Mrs. Kennedy also had thoughts that it would be good for TV because the tempo was very fast. The children didn't have the time to be bored. And originally the classes were supposed to be fifteen minutes. But many times it ran half an hour and sometimes more. And then of course, after a while, I would tape the lesson and I would let the children hear it all over. So every Wednesday for instance, they had a "show and tell" period. And we would use, when there was nothing special, that time to let the children hear themselves on tape. I just wish you could have seen their faces.

GRELE: On that same afternoon you took Caroline to the zoo?

HIRSH: Yes, yes. I'm sorry we got off the subject.

GRELE: That's all right.

HIRSH: That afternoon my child Mike had no school, of course. And we took my boy and Caroline--and the Secret Service man was always following in another car because Mrs. Kennedy was most insistent that this was one time where it should be as every normal children do. So we went to the zoo. By then Caroline knew a lot of the names of the animals. And each time she knew something, she would just--first her face was very firm and then she would start laughing. She was so happy from the sense of achievement she had that it was just a pleasure to see. And I had told her, "Suppose we learn one small phrase every week? One week it will be a phrase for your father and the next week it will be a phrase for your mother. And each time it will be a surprise." She thought that was marvelous. So we had decided that we would surprise her father this time by saying, "We went to the zoo." And we would say it rather fast--not too fast, but rather fast. So we came back at 4 o'clock, and the President was there. And we went into his office, and he said, "What did you do today?" And of course we came with balloons, one for John and one for. . . . And she also said, le ballon. He said,

"Well, what did you do?" So she said in French, without cracking a smile--she said, "We went to the zoo." So he just looked and he said, "Is that the name of a bird?" So Caroline said, "No, it means 'we went to the zoo!'" And he said, "Well, I think it's time I learned French." So I said, "Well, I thought you knew it." And he said, "Well, not that well." So he said, "If you gave me a French lesson, how would you do it?" And then he teased. He said, "You have five minutes to think about it." Then I knew he wasn't teasing. So I suggested, "Profiles In Courage in French so you don't have to lose your time with the contents? You would know right away and then we could emphasize on speech, conversation and grammar. And each time, if you've been studying, I would ask you in French the contents of what you've been reading and studying. And you should be able to answer in French. Then we would take anything outside of the book to learn not only for political purposes." So he told me he wanted to know by June. I think he had to go over to France for Normandy Day or something--I don't remember. And it was never clear. And he said, "I also want to surprise my wife, Jacqueline. She will be pleased to know I can know French well."

GRELE: Before we move on to the President's lessons, would you mind telling us about the time your son and the President had their big discussion about the dentist?

HIRSH: Oh yes, yes. The day before, which was a Sunday, my son had been playing football with friends. And he fell down and he broke his front tooth.

And to protect the tooth, since every office was closed--all offices were closed--we took him to a neighborhood dentist. To protect the tooth all the dentist had was a silver cap. So he put the silver cap on the tooth. And when we arrived, the President looked at my son and he said, "My God Mickey, you look like a Russian with that tooth!" It was true. It was so funny--that silver tooth in front and just ten years old. It was just. . . . My son looked so disappointed. I said, "Oh well, let's not make. . . You know he's not feeling at ease that way." So he said, "Yes, I guess not." So the President bent down and he opened his mouth wide open and he said, "Mike, you look in my mouth and you let me know which one of my teeth are capped. I had an accident too." So it was really so funny to see that tall man bending and my son looking into the mouth of the President to see which tooth was capped. And of course it was one of the teeth next to the two front teeth that was capped. And he said, "You can see what a good job dentists can do now, so you don't have to worry about a thing." And he turned to me and said, "Was that better?" [Laughter]

GRELE: He really liked children, didn't he?

HIRSH: Well, not only liked them, but he really had a way with them, with the children. He knew what they liked to hear. He was quick to say, "We're coming to the office" and "Look!" and things like that.

GRELE: You also taught Caroline, I believe, a phrase for her mother when she returned from Greece.

HIRSH: Oh yes, yes. Mrs. Kennedy had gone in Greece. And while she was away you could see that Caroline was missing her mother. I told her, I said, "Well, what about learning a full-fledged phrase for your mother when she comes back to greet her in French?" So she thought that was a very good idea. So I thought that to say, "I'm happy to see you again" would be the proper thing. So I thought first to say, "Je suis heureuse de te revoir." And I was afraid that she would not remember 'heureuse' so I decided to say "Je suis contente de te revoir." The next morning she came to me and she said, "You know, my father thought that you were wrong about 'contente.'" I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, he thought 'contente' means 'contented.'" I said, "No, it means 'happy.'" So she said, "Well, he went to look for a dictionary and he looked for the proper meaning of the word to make sure that it was right."

So the next day, of course she had made a little dish for her mother out of pottery--you know, things that children make in kindergarten. And she got so excited about saying the phrase in French that she forgot to give the thing. And she said that Mrs. Kennedy said, "Jack, did you hear that?" She was so pleased. So that's when she asked, of course, to make sure to take Caroline out once a week. And she said, "Do absolutely anything you want." I have never seen two people so happy about children's achievement. And Caroline was so fast with it. You have no idea.

GRELE: Was the President as fast with his French?

HIRSH: Well, first of all, he didn't want to tell me how much he actually knew. And there were only four meetings as the actual French goes. I had secured a book, of course, in French, Profiles In Courage. And as we were going on, he kept interrupting constantly, asking questions. And one question was leading to other questions. So, finally I said, "Well, if you're going to know it really well by June, it seems to me that you should stick to what goes on." He said, "Yes, of course." And then he wanted to know how we would operate so that he could remember. I thought the best way was to read it, since he didn't have to think about the contents. And then he could either write it on a piece of paper or. . . . And then I would give him. . . . For instance, if there was a verb, I would give it to him in every form--negative, interrogative, past, present, future, subjunctive. He thought it was a good idea, but he wanted to discuss it more and see how it was working out. He seemed extremely self-conscious, extremely. He kept fiddling with his tie and getting up and sitting down. But he seemed so happy to. . . . He said, "I can't wait to really surprise the world." So I asked him, I said, "Well, outside of surprising your wife and all, why?" He said, "Well, it's always good to improve anything, you know."

GRELE: Did he ever comment to you on French irregular verbs?

HIRSH: We never got really that far. Four lessons is not. . . . And there were interruptions by telephone calls or . . .

GRELE: Did he ever say anything to you about his experience in Canada with the attempt to speak French before the Canadian Parliament? He never mentioned anything about it?

HIRSH: I imagine he would have, but we never did discuss that.

GRELE: Did his French lessons remain unknown to Mrs. Kennedy to the end?

HIRSH: Yes. After the funeral I mentioned it to her. I thought that as a gift, you know, I would tell her that her husband had thought of giving her a surprise, and that obviously she was on his mind. So she was pleased, of course, to know that he had planned on surprising her. I can't think of any better gift than to know you want to improve to please your wife; that was one of the reasons of course.

GRELE: Where were you on the day of the assassination? Were you teaching school?

HIRSH: No. It was on a Friday and I was home. I was preparing new lessons and thinking of ways to improve. And I was thinking where would I take them. I had asked Mrs. Kennedy that for Christmas we wanted to give Caroline the impression that she was going to surprise her parents in French. And I had thought that I would teach her a French poem, a poem called "A Rose." It has no name, no author. I thought I would ask Mrs. Kennedy, "Why don't you give me new clothes of yours or nick-nacks of yours and of your husband's?" And then I would go to a friend of mine who is French and has a store. And I would ask her to clean up the desk and the whole room and hang the clothes there, so Caroline would really think that, you know, among other clothes that she was choosing. . . . So one day (I think it was on a Saturday) Mrs. Kennedy had a whole box--I mean a huge box--delivered at home. And in it were blouses of hers and scarfs, and brand new flats, shoes, and then there were the President's shirts and ties and what have you and boxes of candy and perfume, and men's toilet water and things like that. I kept it, of course.

And I had planned on taking Caroline to the store and have her choose and teach her each word. And then we packed it--you know, we would have packed it in my house. And she would have presented it, in French to her parents. And all this time she would have thought that she had really gone to the store. So Mrs. Kennedy thought that it was a marvelous idea and she would play. But it would have been a complete surprise for the President. And then of course it didn't happen. But I went through. . . . I kept the clothes for a while--until after Christmas. And we did go to the store. And Caroline was such a soldier. You know, she chose the things for her mother; she decided on a blouse she liked and a scarf that she liked. And the child was extremely thoughtful because she said at one point, "Would we have done the same thing for my father?" And then at one point she said, "And what about John?" So it was really thoughtful. And afterwards I took her to a restaurant--to the Hot Shoppe, as a matter of fact--to have hot chocolate, you know. And at the time they had those Christmas things where the children--there's a Santa Claus paper and the children are supposed to draw to see if there's a good Santa's helper. You go from one number to the chimney with your eyes closed. And there were, I think, twelve numbers to be filled, twelve chimneys. And when it was all over she said, "We forgot something." I said, "What?" She said, "Well, where is Santa Claus' gift?" She said, "Doesn't he deserve a gift?" I had told her before the President's assassination, I said, "What would you like to give to your parents?" So she said, "Well, my mother thought it's always a good idea not to buy things for people, but to either learn something from memory or do something with my hands. That has more value as a gift than something you buy." So that really impressed me.

GRELE: Did you continue teaching school after the assassination?

HIRSH: Yes. I went out every Monday on N Street. And then we moved to the British Embassy. And after the assassination, the child. . . . It was just. . . . For a while there it was very rough. She just looked ghastly. She looked so pale and her concentration. . . .

GRELE: What would you say her comprehension of the assassination had been?

HIRSH: Whoo, fully.

GRELE: Fully?

HIRSH: Fully, fully--absolutely. And of course it was very hard because the first week after I decided that it would be too much to have just Caroline alone with me. So I took along Sydney Lawford. I think she's a child that doesn't have one mean bone in her body. She really doesn't. She's very sweet. And she was just right for Caroline at the time. So I took them along and when the reporters saw that Caroline was in the car. . . . I knew they meant well and they have to do their job, but some of them--and they were not Americans. Some of them were just saying, "Hi, Caroline!" And so the child hid in the car--under--so that she could not be seen. And she said, "Please tell me when nobody's looking." So it was very hard. Or at times after--you know we would go somewhere and she would say, she would look and say. . . . You could see that it was on her mind, that it was rough on her. But she never did complain, never. Mrs. Kennedy, I could see sometimes that her eyes were red, or the child's eyes were red. But never one complaint.

GRELE: Can you think of anything that we haven't covered?

HIRSH: Well, there are so many things, I'm sure I'm forgetting something. But I think I said all the important ones.

GRELE: What about the things on your list?

HIRSH: No. What I had on my list is pretty much--of course what I want to. . . . I think I said I wanted to know how long it would be to teach children. And of course now I'm working hard to keep my word.

GRELE: Word?

HIRSH: To spread it to preschoolers on TV with children on the show. And I'm not going to give one inch to what I don't think is not excellent.

GRELE: Would you say this is the effect of John Kennedy on you?

HIRSH: Yes, I felt--and other people that knew him felt the same way. He had a way to automatically fish out of a person what was best to be brought out and thrive on it. And you knew that it would be appreciated and understood intelligently--because he made sure that it was done so. And somehow, because he stimulated you so much, you made it without effort. Suddenly I found myself feeling very important to myself and knowing that I was doing something for the good of children, for the President, for the country. And I felt everything because of his intelligence.

GRELE: Would you say he was still a good student?

HIRSH: Pardon?

GRELE: Would you say he was a good student?

HIRSH: I think he would have been because he really wanted to--he would have known by June. I can assure you of that. And it would have been flawless. Because each time he wanted to say something, he wouldn't--how can I say it?--he wouldn't come out with it right away; he would ruminate it. And at the beginning. . . . The first time I said to myself "Well, what on earth is he. . . .?" You know, his mouth was moving, and I figures, "What on earth is coming out?" Well, it was a French phrase. It was my name "Madame Hirsh." And let me tell you, it was good, but he sounded awful. So he said, "How is it?" I said, "Well, technically it's good, but your accent doesn't sound good at all." So he said, "I know. I want to be so. . . . Do you think I can manage to sound like a French person?" I said, "Well I don't know. How could I know? You sound like an American right now when you say something in French." So he said, "Well, I want to be able to do it just perfectly."

GRELE: Do you think that his Boston accent would have in any way hindered or helped his French accent?

HIRSH: I wouldn't know. I had never been exposed to Boston accent before or payed that much attention to be able to really tell you an answer to that. I don't think so.

GRELE: Broad 'a'?

HIRSH: No, no. The way he said 'Madame Hirsh,' it sounded when he said something in French very guttural. Is that the way you say it-- 'guttural?'

GRELE: Yes, 'guttural.'

HIRSH: It sounded harsh. And I told him that. I said, "You sound harsh when you speak French. And that's not good." He said, "Well, I'm counting on you for that." But somehow I was not afraid because he made it so easy. He always gave me the impression that he was the one that was self-conscious, rather than me, which was very generous, of course. And very clever to get results.

GRELE: Do you have any final comments that you'd like to make for the interview?

HIRSH: Well, we all miss him, don't we?

GRELE: I guess so.

HIRSH: Thank you.

GRELE: Thank you very much, Mrs. Hirsh.

HIRSH: You're very welcome.