

**Joseph Russo Oral History Interview – JFK#1, 6/02/1964**  
**Administrative Information**

**Creator:** Joseph Russo

**Interviewer:** Edward Martin

**Date of Interview:** June 2, 1964

**Place of Interview:** Boston, Massachusetts

**Length:** 8 pages

**Biographical Note**

Ed Martin (1905-1986) was a Massachusetts political figure. This interview focuses on Russo's campaign against John F. Kennedy [JFK] for Congress in 1946 and JFK's 1952 campaign for Senate, among other topics.

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Joseph Russo, recorded interview by Edward Martin, June 2, 1964 (page number), John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
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John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library

In accordance with Sec. 507 of the Federal Property and Administrative Services Act of 1949, as amended (44 U.S.C. 397) and regulations issued thereunder (41 CFR 101-10), I, \_\_\_\_\_, hereinafter referred to as the donor, hereby give, donate, and convey to the United States of America for eventual deposit in the proposed John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, and for administration therein by the authorities thereof, a tape and transcript of a personal statement approved by me and prepared for the purpose of deposit in the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library. The gift of this material is made subject to the following terms and conditions:

1. Title to the material transferred hereunder, and all literary property rights, will pass to the United States as of the date of the delivery of this material into the physical custody of the Archivist of the United States.
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Oral History Interview

with

JOSEPH RUSSO

June 2, 1964

Boston, Massachusetts

By Edward Martin

For the John F. Kennedy Library

MARTIN: The following interview is with Joseph Russo, long time active in Boston politics, a former Boston city councilman. The interviewer is Ed Martin. The date is June 2, 1964.

Joe, your career in politics begins way back, perhaps in the. . .

RUSSO: 1937.

MARTIN: 1937 in the West End of Boston, where you were well known.

RUSSO: Yes. It represents the North, West, and South Ends of Boston. I ran for the City Council in 1937. As you well know, that was the stronghold of the Martin Lomasney organization.

MARTIN: Was that the eighteen member council at the time?

RUSSO: Twenty-two member council. There was a councilor elected from each district. Mine was comprised of the North, West and South Ends of Boston. I was defeated by John I. Fitzgerald in 1937. But I defeated him and the organization in 1939. I was elected and reelected; I served continuously up through 1947, which made eight years on the City Council.

MARTIN: But it was in 1942 you decided you'd bid for Congress?

RUSSO: Yes. In 1942 I announced as a candidate for Congress. At that time it was the Eleventh Congressional District, as you well know.

MARTIN: Who was Congressman then, Joe?

RUSSO: At that time it was. . . .

MARTIN: John P. Higgins?

RUSSO: Higgins. John Cotter then took his place, as you well know, when he was appointed to be Chief Justice. So I announced for Congress, and I had a little advertising already going and campaigning. You know how strenuous that is. Gee, out of nowhere that time, came good old James Michael Jim Curley came along. Of course, he had been Congressman; he had been Mayor for four times; and he had been Governor of the Commonwealth. Naturally, that dimmed my prospect, because you had to give the man credit, he was well known. He had his pros and cons like we all do. Anyway, I became a candidate. I put up, I thought, a real fight, but the people chose, elected Curley. Naturally, I waited then for four more years. Then I announced for Congress again.

MARTIN: In 1946.

RUSSO: In 1946. I had run previously for senator of the senatorial district. The same thing happened, you know. Italo-Americans put in there and all and so forth and so on. That's part of the game. But in 1946 I announced myself for Congress again. I had gone right along. I was organizing. I had a very nice organization, and I thought that I had a good shot at it. And lo and behold, I'm in a campaign with Jack Kennedy. Of course, I didn't know Jack at that time, but I felt that here is a young man and he runs into my district. And there I am. I knew what I was confronted with, but we went to bat, so-called, at the election time. Of course, as you well know, Jack defeated me.

MARTIN: Who else was in that fight, Joe, that you can recall? There was another Russo.

RUSSO: There was another Joseph Russo that they had put in there. Of course, I was pretty well liked in those days, and they put in this other Joseph Russo in order to complicate the names.

MARTIN: There was a Bevilacqua, I think, and Catherine Falvey.

RUSSO: Yes. Gee, I don't recall just all the candidates there were at that time, but there were quite a few candidates. I think that Michael J. Mike Neville was a candidate, and John Cotter was a candidate.

MARTIN: Joe, the primary that year was in June, I believe. What was the reason for that? Why would they have it in June instead of September?

RUSSO: Gee, I really don't remember.

MARTIN: Did it have something to do with the veterans coming back? Or absentee ballots?

RUSSO: It might have had.

MARTIN: I understand, too, that in that first fight Jack Kennedy didn't take the North End. I'm not sure what he did in the West End.

RUSSO: No. I carried the North End. If I'm correct, I think that I carried the North End. I did pretty good considering all these candidates that were in there.

MARTIN: In your campaign speeches at the time, what tack would you take against Kennedy, who appeared to be the front runner? The fact that he was not familiar with the district?

RUSSO: I took the stand that he was not a real resident of the district, and therefore, he did not know the fundamental necessities of the particular district that I represented at that time. Of course, naturally, I don't hold it against him. Believe me, I didn't hold it against him at that time--neither do I now--but the money end of it entered into it. After the election, of course, I congratulated him.

As a matter of fact, in 1958, I believe, after he had gone after the nomination for Vice President of the United States-- I think we were at the Hotel Sheraton Plaza. I believe the Fourth Degree Knights [of Columbus] were having some kind of an affair. My wife and I were present there. Jack was at the head table. When he got through, he came down from the head table. He came over to me and said, "Hi, Joe. How are you? Hi, Mrs. Russo." "Oh, fine, Jack. How are you?" We talked about it. I said to him, "Jack, you know, when I reflect back, I'm thankful that you defeated me for Congress." He laughed and he said, "What do you mean, Joe?" "Well," I said, "I would have never been able to be President of the United States because, first of all, I wasn't born here even though my family goes back seventy-odd years. But you will be President of the United States someday." And he laughed; he grinned. I said, "But there's one thing you or anyone else cannot deprive my children of, boasting that once upon a time the President of the United States was a candidate against their father." Gee, he had a great kick out of that one.

MARTIN: That's true. Can you recall during that particular campaign any amusing incidents that occurred, Joe? Did he, for example, draw any of your workers to him? You had a pretty good organization.

RUSO: I had what I called a very good organization, although then he was able to draw some of my organization. Or, should I say, you know what it means when I was confronted with another Russo, I was confronted with four other Italo-American candidates. You know that discourages the ordinary voter. They say, "Well, he isn't going to win." So, why waste their vote? You have those kind of voting individuals that think that way. That's what really did the job. As a matter of fact, in order to defeat me in another contest--I was defeated for the Council--they had two other Joseph Russos, and I was there in between. I could not advertise myself as Joseph Russo. I had to advertise myself as the "Middle Russo", because I had a Joseph Russo above and a Joseph Russo below.

MARTIN: Who do you think put in the other Russos?

RUSO: Well naturally, I'm not to say who put it in. I don't know.



MARTIN: You've got pretty good ideas, though.

RUSCO: Some one of my opposition must have thought of that.

MARTIN: Joe, what was the West End like back in early '46?

RUSCO: Well, I have always boasted about my district. It was one of the most cosmopolitan districts. I believe that we have American citizens of every racial group. To my knowledge, in fifty years we've got along so fine. We've all had our ups and downs; we had discord. But, after that was ironed out, I think everything ran smoothly. It was a very nice place to live in and to work in. We really enjoyed ourselves. As a matter of fact, I reflect back in my years that my dad. . . . By the way, my father crossed the Atlantic Ocean seventeen times before he finally decided in 1912 to get all his family in here.

MARTIN: But how about after that first congressional fight? Did you have any associations with the President?

RUSCO: After my congressional fight with him, I supported him in my own way when he ran for the Senate. Of course, I was election commissioner, as you well know, for thirteen years in the city of Boston, and I served eight years in the City Council. I have had a great admiration ever since he defeated me for Congress. I could see and I could hear the great improvements that had taken place in this young man. I knew that he was a strong caliber. He had the making of a President. I don't know, when I made that remark before, I had a feeling that he would be President of the United States even though he was of the Catholic faith. In those days, they spoke about that a Catholic could not be elected. I had a great admiration for him although we were not too close. I had the greatest respect, and I think he had a great respect for me, too.

MARTIN: Joe, when he decided to challenge Henry Cabot Lodge for that Senate seat, Lodge, if I recall, had a strong pull with the Italo-Americans. I mean, on his wife's side there were Italians; he was married into an Italian family. I think there was a strong feeling for Lodge throughout the Italian communities all over the state. Did you think that he had a shot at tipping this? ~~that~~

RUSCO: Yes, I thought that he had a good shot at it. I thought it was a tough fight, a tight fight, but I knew the organization that Jack had. He had a tremendous organization.

MARTIN: Well, he had to build from the beginning on a state-wide fight as you know.

RUSCO: Yes. I did give him a chance. I thought that he would, although it was a hard fight on it. Of course, being a Democrat, naturally I voted for him.

MARTIN: Sure. But I know that Lodge was quite popular in the North and in the West End.

RUSCO: Yes. That was due, of course, to his brother, the Governor of Connecticut [John Lodge] who was married to an Italo-American girl [Francesca Braggiotti].

MARTIN: Did you ever go down to Washington while he was a Congressman or a Senator and have occasion to see him at all on any matter?

RUSCO: No, I never did. As a matter of fact, my daughter lives in Kensington, Maryland, which is only about seven or eight miles, somewhere around there. I go there pretty often, but I never had the occasion to request anything.

MARTIN: But you followed his career? Joe, how would you assess him as a senator and as a congressman? Do you think his interests were in the people?

RUSCO: I think that he had a great knowledge of humanity. I believe that he set himself out that he understood the little man, so-called. And he understood, naturally, the big man because he was financially a big man. He understood the middle man's problems. I really feel that, when that tragedy came along, the country lost someone who, I think, had great belongings. I never cried or my family never cried as much even when I lost my father and mother. Believe me when I say that. I think that that stands out not only here in America. I've had relatives from Italy write to me how they felt in the same manner. They had a great liking for him because, I think he was trying to do the right thing by the people.



MARTIN: He appealed to all age groups, do you think?

RUSO: Yes, I really think so.

MARTIN: Joe, if you were asked to name one single quality that he had that set him apart from many people, could you name it? What do you think there was about him that was different than most?

RUSO: I think that sometimes the people feel that the person who has been gifted so-called, being a millionaire, that they are above the ordinary individual. I think that what attracted him most to people was that he was not that type. He was really what we call a regular fellow and understood the problem of the little guy.

MARTIN: But you didn't see these qualities, perhaps, in the heat of the campaign when he was first running for Congress?

RUSO: No. Certainly not. I tell you that, at that time, there I don't believe that I was on a platform with him at the same time in order to debate any issues--I thought, "Well, he is a young fellow. I don't think he knows too much about it." But the tremendous improvement from that day on, it's unquestionable.

MARTIN: Can I stir your memory a bit? Can you recall now what were some of the issues in that first fight? Were there many particular issues that were debated or discussed in that? I should imagine the returning veterans had a lot to do.

RUSO: Well, naturally, the returning veterans and the . . . .  
Gee, my memory doesn't serve me right at this moment.  
I think there were issues on foreign aid at that time, too. I felt that the enemies of America were Russia and Communism at that time. Even before the war I had that opinion. I called to the attention that, as you recall, the government didn't want to give aid to Spain at that time. I said that I thought that we should give aid to Spain at the time for our own salvation, because that will be the point where Communism can be stopped. Of course, there was pro and con in those days. I really don't recall too much.

MARTIN: What would you say your best memory of the President is?

RUSCO: The best memory impressed in my mind was his Inaugural Address. I think that every word that he uttered was sincere. He had the grasp, the knowledge. It was tremendous. To me he was a great American.

Jack's grandfather--John F. (Honey) Fitzgerald had a liking for me--and every time he would see me at an affair, he wanted me to harmonize "Sweet Adeline" together.

MARTIN: This had been an interview with Joseph Russo, long time active in Boston politics, a former Boston city councilman. The interviewer, Ed Martin. The place is Boston, and the date, June 2, 1964.

1 page 2 unclassified

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RUSSO: The best memory impressed in my mind was his Inaugural Address. I think that every word that he uttered was sincere. He had the grasp, the knowledge. It was tremendous. To me he was a great American.

Jack's grandfather--John F. ("Honey") Fitzgerald had a liking for me--and every time he would see me at an affair, he wanted me to harmonize *Sweet Adeline* together.

MARTIN: This had been an interview with Joseph Russo, long time active in Boston politics, a former Boston city councilman. The interviewer, Ed Martin. The place is Boston, and the date, June 2, 1964.

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