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Biographical Note
Robert Rothschild (1911-1998) was the Deputy Chief of the Belgian diplomatic mission to the Republic of the Congo in 1960. This interview focuses on the United States' and Belgium's policies towards issues in the Congo, the United States' policies regarding Europe, and the Belgium government's view of the Kennedy administration, among other topics.

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Oral History Interview

with

HIS EXCELLENCY ROBERT ROTHSCHILD

October 24, 1966
Paris, France

By Joseph E. O'Connor

For the John F. Kennedy Library

O'CONNOR: All right, then, let's begin with the first question.

ROTHSCHILD: Well, I believe that, in regard to your first question, the conflict between American and Belgian policy in the Congo was much more apparent than real. It was brought upon probably by a certain clumsiness in Belgium of presenting its case which brought upon them rather serious suspicion on the part of the United States of the real purposes of the

Belgian policy in Africa. When it became possible to explain to the Kennedy Administration, especially after Mr. [Paul-Henri] Spaak came back into office, the real purpose of our policy and what we were doing in the Congo, those conflicts disappeared and the apparent diversion of opinion was erased, Mr. Spaak at once made it his purpose to explain to the American Ambassador, who was called almost daily into his office, what we were doing. He saw a lot of Mr. [Averell] Harriman, who was put in charge of the Congo file. He met two or three times -- I don't remember exactly -- President Kennedy and explained to him, he had a long interview with President Kennedy and explained to him what we were doing. And then, at the lower level, I was personally in contact daily with the Americans -- the American Embassy in Brussels, and often the Americans in Washington

where I went several times to explain at more a civil servant level what we were doing.

O'CONNOR: Did you find anyone who was particularly hostile to the Belgian policy in the Congo?

ROTHSCHILD: At the beginning, at the beginning a great deal of people were hostile, especially [G. Mennen] Soapy Williams. And I candidly must say that the hostility was based on, as I said before, a certain clumsiness in our way of presenting our problems. What we did when M. Spaak came into office -- what I already had done at my level before, but perhaps not at the ministerial level before -- was to establish a daily contact with the American authorities. We showed them all our, practically all our telegrams. We had no reason to hide it. And after awhile, Soapy Williams, who was definitely hostile to us in 1960, became a good friend of mine.

What became the greater part of my victory was when he admitted me in his Congo Club.

O'CONNOR: Did you have any contact with Wayne J. Fredericks?

ROTHSCHILD: Yes.

O'CONNOR: Was he also hostile or were you abèe to make . . .

ROTHSCHILD: Yes, yes. Well, perhaps hostile is not the right word, but suspicious was the right word. Soapy Williams was, of course, a man with less professional knowledge than a man like Fredericks and, therefore, his suspicion was more pronounced and more passionate than the profewsional people in the State Department. I believe that for them it was. . . . I think the same thing can be said about your Ambassador, [Edmund A.] Gullion in Leopoldville, who was probably hostile for reasons which I will never be able to understand. He felt that the Belgians had no role to play in the Congo; that their role was past, and that

anything they would do would be detrimental to the stability and the future of the Congo; while other people in the American Administration felt that we still had a useful role to play there.

O'CONNOR: Do you know whether -- you said that really Soapy Williams gradually changed his mind or gradually lost his suspicion. Do you feel that Ambassador Gullion, for example, or Wayne Fredericks, do you feel also that peopde like that did lose their suspicions as well?

ROTHSCHILD: Well, Fredericks I cannot tell you very well because he's a rather silent man and difficult to know, and I saw less of him than perhaps I did of the others. He was always with Soapy Williams, and, therefore, expressed himself less. As far as Gullion is concerned, I think he léft the Congo with the same feeling of suspicion and belief that we had

to give up.

Personally, I don't think that we Belgians have any national interest in remaining in the Congo. I think that when I say that our presence there is useful, I think it's because we cannot be replaced by other westerners. It's not a question of national interest that I want us to stay there. It's merely by the fact that if we go, who is going to take our place? There's, of course, the problem of language. It would be very difficult for Americans in large numbers to go there and take the place of the Belgians. And the French are not ready and are not willing to spend the money and the human manpower which is necessary, while they do a lot over in other parts of Africa. But Ed Gullion didn't seem to think so. Harriman on the other hand was very, very thoughtful; very thoughtful. [Charles E] Chip Bohlen also. That was

before the Kennedy Administration. It was the time Mr. [Christian A.] Herter was Secretary of State.

O'CONNOR: What about Mr. [William R.] Tyler? Did you hawe any contact with him in connection with the Congo problem?

ROTHSCHILD: No.

O'CONNOR: He, of course was . . .

ROTHSCHILD: Bill Tyler?

O'CONNOR: Yes, he was conserned with European Affairs in general as Under Secretary of State.

ROTHSCHILD: Bill Tyler was an old friend of mine, but I don't think we saw each other much on the Congo business. We were accomplice in many things, European and Atlantic. But he's Ambassador at the Hague now, as a matter of fact. He's a very old friend of mine. But no, nothing.

O'CONNOR: All right, you can go on to the second question if you'd like.

ROTHSCHILD: Yes. The second question, as I said, is very much the same as the first one, "Would Monsieur comment on United States policy towards European colonies?" As far as I remember, the only main problem which evolved during the Kennedy Administration in Africa was the Congo business. And there, as I said, and probably very much throggh his efforts and his willingness to listen to us and see in our defense and our presentation of our case what was good, very much to his willingness to do that I think division, which was really division between one country because most of the Emmopean countries didn't care very much about the Congo business. C'etait bonne. That I think is the only thing to say about the second question.

The fourth question, "What objective. . . ." No, I think that on the whole the policy of the Kennedy Administration of liberalization

of trade was very -- and I'm not talking about politeness -- I deeply feel that was very much of the antipathy (?) in the good sense. The main part of it, of course, was what is now called the Kennedy Round which is taking place. . . . The economic pact between Belgium and the United States had not very much to do with that policy. It was out of a routine . . .

O'CONNOR: Yes.

ROTHSCHILD: . . . a general trade pact, which is a good thing, but which is a good thing not -- has no direct bearing on. . . .

The next question of course we felt in Belgium that it would be, that it was a good thing that the British should enter into the Common Market and, therefore, we felt that any help given to that was good. The Kennedy Round would have been a much bigger affair if it could have been done between a European community where Great Britain was

than as it is now. It would have been, as you say, the question puts out, a more balanced Atlantic partnership.

O'CONNOR: But did the United States in pursuing the policy of fostering Great Britain's entry into the Common Market, did the United States pursue this policy cleverly or clumsily or do you have any feeling about this?

ROTHSCHILD: No, cleverly. I think their action was very discreet and _les emissieurs_ only knew about it. No, I think they kept away from the direct negotiations as they should have done. No, that was done the way it should have been done.

O'CONNOR: By the way, you can cancel out any of those questions if you . . .

ROTHSCHILD: _Non, non_. _Non, non_. The so-called special relationship between. . . . I cannot answer to that because there's been a lot of talk about

that. But it's been the aim of the French government. . . . What has been <u>l'immobile qui a allume le gouvernment francais en mettant tant de negotiations</u>, nobody knows. I think that it was from the very beginning decided that the moment of getting England into the Common Market had not arrived, in Paris, And that what happened in the Atlantic-- where was it, in Bermuda?

O'CONNOR: Nassau.

ROTHSCHILD: . . . Nassau, was the pretext for it. But, you can promptly add the opposite views. And I think the only man that would be able to answer to you would be M. De Gaulle. [Laughter]

O'CONNOR: Well, we hope someday he will.

ROTHSCHILD: That may be if he writes another book about. . . . And even then. I have to think two or three minutes for the next question which is difficult.

O'CONNOR: Sure, go ahead. Let me turn this . . .

ROTHSCHILD: It is very difficult to answer to your question

with precision and accuracy. It involved so many very serious problems of world strategy, that it is difficult to answer one aspect of the problem without thinking about all the other aspects of the problem. I don't think really that the European countries have done a great deal in building up their conventional forces since the [Robert S.] McNamara statement. On the other hand, there is no doubt that in certain circles the McNamara position has brought about a certain amount of suspicion. *[On the other hand -- this is to answer to you briefly the different aspects of the problem -- the fact that -- he wants a ___?___ , not a promise that if France can't do it -- which was the idea of new American strategy, sounded very logical and that of course at one point, if McNamara h___?_______ happened; that the threat that you have to resort to total retaliation would make it less credible in front of an incident which might be major.]

So that the whole policy of retortion, of massive reprisàl is based on its credibility. The problem we want now is to avoid war, not to wint the next war. There is no doubt that the credibility loses some of its value if you have to resort to total reprisals for a rather minor incident in Berlin or somewhere else, so it's impossible to criticize the McNamara strategy. But on the other hand, it's also true that he gave the pretext, at least, if not truly, the possibility to think that something was changed in the American policy. And I find that question somewhere later on -- yes, question eight. "It is often said that the French and German leaders were not entirely confident of President Kennedy's willingness to defend Europe at the risk of endangering the United States." In some circles no doubt, sincerely or not, I don't know, that belief existed. It is not

true in the case of the Belgian government at the time, and I don't think of the present Belgian government. We felt that the assurances given by the American government, not only in the North Atlantic Treaty, not only repeated that several times at the NATO Council, but its mere presence, the mere presence of American troops and of the great American military establishment in Europe -- also the fact that I believe peace is undividable and that there is no doubt that the military American leaders feel the same way. But most of the people in the Belgian government felt that there was no problem about that; that it was impossible for any American government in the foreseeable future to forget about Europe in case of Russian aggression in Europe, and confine itself to the defense of the United States.

O'CONNOR: Well then, the changes in American strategy,

for example, the change toward a graduated response?

ROTHSCHILD: Well, the circles which felt, sincerely or not, that it did mean change were not Belgian official circles.

O'CONNOR: That's what I was interested in knowing, whether you felt this way or M. Spaak felt this?

ROTHSCHILD: No, no, no. And I remember, I think it was the President or Mr. Herter -- I don't remember -- who once said that the Americans were a bit irritated by the fact that Germans and other people had said on several occasions -- put in doubt. . . . Well, we understood quite well their point of view. Of course, you have to be patient with the Germans who were in the frontland, if I may say so. It doesn't mean very much anymore, frontland or not. But we never felt that there was any doubt about the necessity, and we felt

that the object for the Americans to defend Europe at the same time because we could never envisage a situation in which the Russians would attack Europe without first destroying American retaliation possibilities. The Russians would be asses, taking tremendous risks by invading, let's say, Germany, without trying to destroy the possibility of American retaliation. They would have to take the risk to be under fire from American long-range missiles, and all their panoply of weapons, without doing anything to stop them. We could never envision such a case, and I cannot yet.

O'CONNOR: In connection with this . . .

ROTHSCHILD: I'm afraid my English is terrible.

O'CONNOR: No, your English is quite all right, certainly understandable -- well enough that they'll be able to type up a copy of this. But in connection with this same problem, I've heard

the United States, and particularly Secretary McNamara, criticized for having, in effect, sprung a change in policy on Europe without sufficient consultation with your government, or with France or Germany, other NATO countries.

ROTHSCHILD: You see, I've been making and adding to it the next few minutes a great apology of American policy. And I believe from the total of the lasty twenty years in Europe, American policy has been a policy of great wisdom, of great generosity, and of great precision, of foresight. Perhaps the only thing which is lacking sometimes in American policy is the psychological cleverness to explain to people what they are doing. And it's quite possible that the policy of McNamara has not always been explained with sufficient cleverness to people. I know that Adenauer, Chancellor Adenauer at several times was suspicious, was afraid

that it might be dropped, sincerely. But he was a very old man of course, and he was acting tres sentimentalement. We often had meetings in Belgian circles to see our problems, and we never felt that we had anything to be afraid of on the whole as far as we could see. Of course, nobody knows what's going to happen in ten or fifteen years. But in the present circumstances with three hundred thousand Americans on the Continent, another three hundred thousand, I believe, in England, the vast establishment of all sorts of weapons and especially the fact that I don't think the Russians would take the risk of attacking Europe without attacking the United States -- that the whole picture made it very unrealistic to believe in a divided war. No more than I believe the Russians would attack the United States like some Europeans fear and have Europe sit

out of a war. <u>Non</u>, <u>l'eventualite de ca c'est absurde par mon habit</u>.

O'CONNOR: Well, your reaction though, specifically, to McNamara's policy, was it -- did you feel that he did not explain his policy cleverly enough or sufficiently enough?

ROTHSCHILD: Yes, yes.

O'CONNOR: Was it actually sprung on you? He made a speech at Ann Arbor, a very famous speech.

ROTHSCHILD: No, no. That I don't remember exactly. He made, he explained it to use in the NATO Council. All those things were discussed in NATO Councils. I don't remember and it should be checked tosee if the first NATO Council where it was explained was after his public speeches at Ann Arbor. That I don't remember. But it's not so much McNamara, well, what McNamara said perhaps, and also a whole school of thought in the United States which did lots around the McNamara offices and

purposes and so on. . . . But, you see, it's always easy to criticize and very difficult to do better. And as I say, the Americans were very suspicious when I started going to them about Belgian policy in the Congo. There is no doubt that we did our best. But our best was not good enough to explain what we were doing. So, I must say, in all modesty, that on the whole I believe the American policy, its change in strategy, was perhaps not explained with enough force or pertinence to certain Europeans. I know that the Germans on several occasions, Adenauer, as I said, on several occasions was afraid that things were changing. Of course, it's certain that Europeans, I suppose all people, are difficult people. They want to be explained; they won't want to do very much; they want. . . . Par fastueux -- la politique par fastueux. Ca

<u>c'est cette fastueux les tres moins amusants</u>.

Question nine, it's a very difficult question also.

O'CONNOR: [Laughter] They're all difficult questions.

ROTHSCHILD: Becasse there is no doubt that again in the Cuban Crisis and the decision of the President was criticized, and criticized on the subject with some grounds. Normally the alliance of course provides in such cases the necessity -- not the treaty, but the habits and the tradition of the alliance provides that the consultations take place before any of the member countries do something. So, there is no doubt that the President was bound by the habit and tradition to do so. There is also no doubt that if he'd done so, the credibility of his actions would have drppped, and the whole thing might have misfired, <u>Voila</u>, <u>c'est difficile la vieille</u>.

O'CONNOR: Was there a strong feeling, though, after the Cuban Missile Crisis was over on M. Spaak's part, for example, or on your part that nonetheless there should have been consultations before?

ROTHSCHILD: No. Speaking as I do, as you told me, for history, and not for the present time, we felt that it was the only way to do it, and that preservation of peace and security in a case like that. . . . But of course, you see, the problem is that the policy, that the decision, has to be wise and it has to succeed in a case like that. If the policy of the President of the United States would have been unwise or if it would not have been successful, then, of course, our criticism would have been warranted. But I think the whole Cuban matter in those days was carried out in a masterly way, and it preserved peace in the world and security in

in the western hemisphere. Therefore, what could we say? Only express regrets that we were not consulted. And we did I think, in the place of the other, faites part, paying lip service to the problem.

Now, when a few years before, a crisis arose -- which was much less dangerous -- about Quemoy and Matsu, I think that consultation took place in the NATO Council and that the Secretary of State at the time, Mr. [John] Foster Dulles was impressed by the unanimity of the members of the Council asking him to use more prudence in handling the problem of Quemoy and Matsu. And I think he did use more prudence. At the beginning he was very drastic, and he was a little more subtle after that. And I think in that case, of course, the consultation was good because, personally, I believe that he went a little too far in handling the problem and that the result of the consultation made him a little

more careful -- not in the purpose because I'm sure that Dulles was a man of peace, but in the methods which were a bit tactless perhaps. So, it's the same case in the Cuban Crisis. If his decisions had been unwise, we would have been greatly disturbed that we would not have been consulted. As it was wise and showed itself wise, in the Belgian government we felt it was the right thing to do. Does that answer to all your questions?

O'CONNOR: Yes, Well, it answers the main questions. I want to ask you one other thing really. Perhaps we should have discussed this at the very beginning. You did have some personal contacts with John Kennedy?

ROTHSCHILD: Yes.

O'CONNOR: And I wanted to know what sort of personal contacts these were, when they occured, perhaps, and what impressions you had of the man himself.

ROTHSCHILD: Well, I don't myself. . . . I went to

Washington two or three times. I don't remember exactly. I think it was three times. The first time I was very curious to meet that young Roman emperor.

O'CONNOR: Had you heard anything about him or did you have any impressions before?

ROTHSCHILD: Of course. I mean the general public has impressions about the President of the United States in all the European countries.

O'CONNOR: Certainly, but I wondered what you might have expected when he became President -- a change in policy or did you expect American policy to be good, bad, or indifferent? I really would like to know what you expected when you knew that John Kennedy was going to be the next President of the United States.

ROTHSCHILD: Well, yes. I'm not taking sides in American politics, as you realize, but at the end of the -- I'm not speaking about the Congo business but on the whole picture of foreign policy -- the end of the Eisenhower Administration

looked very much like a less inspired leadership of the western world than we got during the Truman Administration, especially after the death of the Secretary of State. And I have great respect and liking for Mr. Herter, but he had no time to assert himself; he had only been there for a fewmmonths when it was the end of the Administration and so on. And, as I say, the arrival into office of President Kennedy looked very much like -- he looked like a young Roman emperor almost in his best years. He looked so young, much younger than actually he was. He looked, I would have said, very understandable for the Europeans, more than presidents who had less European fashion seating -- we know he had been living in Europe and so on. I think we thought that he was going to be a young and dashing president. It's very difficult to remember now what I thought about him before seeing him because I remember exactly what I think about

him now.

O'CONNOR: All right, you can tell us about that. You said you were anxious to meet the young Roman emperor.

ROTHSCHILD: I was anxious, and I must say I was impressed by him. First, as I said to you before, by his personal charm. We knew, of course, that was certainly a little bit _du metier_, like De Gaulle always -- as a politician has to have, any political man has to have. But, also, in contacts you felt a great deal of willingness, of eagerness. And then when you started talking, hear him talk. . . . The first time I met him he talked very, very little. He asked questions, and he made us talk. The second time he did the same thing, but he inserted ideas of his own. And the third time I saw him, then he did most of the talking. And I think it was the progression of his authority as President. And it also showed a great deal

of wisdom because at the beginning he felt that the job was a very big job and that he knew little about it. And then as time went byy he began to take assuramce, _assurance_. And the last time we sawy him it was a few weeks before his death. He seemed to be in full possession of his _capacite_. He was a man with a great culture, historical culture and therefore _la culture historique_ sometimes -- (_elle est nationale_) -- can be a drawback. But he was what we call in French _un humaniste_. Do you see what I mean?

O'CONNOR: Yes.

ROTHSCHILD: He had a Roman culture. I remember on his death I thought, "_Toute c'est dite_" -- how do you say that? -- _toute c'est dite_, which is rather exceptional from the standpoint of any nationality.

O'CONNOR: Yes, I guess so.

ROTHSCHILD: But, I also have been sttdying Roman history

and Greek history, and I think when you read, when you write, when you're a student of history in the global way, not so very -- you get _l'éducation humaniste_ -- you have an outlook on problems which is broader than one when you don't, and there is no doubt that that was the case of Kennedy. Then I said before, his handling of the Cuban affair was clearly one of a great statesman. Courage in action and courage under strain are two things which serve him as well in one as well as in the other, in fields found in a _non politique_. He wrote a book about courage in politics. _C'est ca_.

O'CONNOR: _Profiles in Courage_.

ROTHSHILD: Yes. _Profiles in Courage_? Is that . . .

O'CONNOR: _Profiles in Courage_.

ROTHSCHILD: . . . _in Courage_, it's been translated in French under the name of _La Courage dans la Politique_. And it's very typical of the man. He was a man with a great mission.

O'CONNOR: What specific reasons had you when you went to visit him? Who did you go with? Do you recall when it was that you visited him?

ROTHSCHILD: No, I don't recall it exactly. I can find it, but it will take a few minutes.

O'CONNOR: Well, we can find it probably, but I was wondering what particular problems . . .

ROTHSCHILD: Well, M. Spaak, as the man responsible for the foreign policy of Belgium, used to go almost every year, sometimes several times, to the United States because we feel very strongly in Belgium that the United States is assuming the leadership of the western world, and it is useful and proper, especially useful, to keep in touch with the American government. Most of the American leaders have always been very kind ot us and showed great confidence in the opinion of Spaak. So when Spaak went back into office, he had already met the President once as Secretary General of NATO. He felt that we should go

to Washington to see the Secretary of State and, if possible, see the President. So three times I went, it was as the assistant of Mr. Spaak. And one of these times we had lunch at the White House -- I don't remember which one it was -- with the Vice President. The Vice President was present there, Mr. Johnson, who became President later.

O'CONNOR: Okay, I think unless you have any other comments that youdd like to add, why, we can wind this up now.

ROTHSCHILD:Q As I said before -- perhaps your machine was not turning when I said it -- I felt that President Kennedy had the spark of genius which made him different from most of the American presidents or the leaders of the world on the whole because -- this was something which was badly finished and exceptional. For me it was a very sad day.

O'CONNOR: Do you remember where you were when you

heard the news? You mentioned . . .

ROTHSCHILD: At the barbershop.

O'CONNOR: . . . at the barbershop.

ROTHSCHILD: Somebody came into the barbershop and said he heard that the radio -- and I was having my hair cut -- "The President had been shot at and he's seriously wounded." But, first his death was not announced. I have a very. . . . He was very kind with me. I was a very -- for the President of the United States -- a rather minor official. But he was very kind to me; got along well.

O'CONNOR: All right.

ROTHSCHILD: Bon.