

Michael Curtis Has Passed Away



Michael Curtis, public intellectual and eminent scholar on Europe and Middle East politics died on Monday October 3, 2022. He celebrated his 99th birthday on September 11.

During the 1970s and 1980s Curtis was the spokesperson for the United States Jewish academic community on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict representing the organization, he

founded, American Professors for Peace in the Middle East. He initiated the APPME in 1967 during the Yom Kippur War because emotions ran high and no other organization existed to express rational discourse about the situation. The APPME counted in its several thousand membership most of the Jewish academic community from all fields and published *The Middle East Review*, a respected scholarly journal. Curtis was the commentator of choice on major television news networks such as PBS and CBS when there was an outbreak of hostilities between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

His interest in international politics was evident by the time he was 13 years old. In 1936 he participated in the famous incident when the Jewish population along with other residents of London's East End prevented the Fascists led by Oswald Mosely from marching down Cable Street, one of the major thoroughfares in the East End. His service during World War II in the Royal Artillery Corps led him to stations in Germany and Trieste, further contributing to his interest in international politics.

Curtis was graduated from the London School of Economics with a double first in economics and political science. He and George Soros were in the same class (1951), but Soros ended at the bottom of the class. Curtis's self-deprecating joke was, "So much for graduating at the top of the class. Soros was busy with other things." Having already published his first book in the UK (it was about British politics), he came to the United States in 1954 on a Cornell University postgraduate fellowship to study American political systems. He was teaching at University College London and few in England knew anything about American politics. He met his first wife, the late Laura Goldsmith Curtis, at Cornell and eventually became an American citizen.

In 2014 he was honored by the president of France as Chevalier of the French Legion of Honor for his contributions to the study of the history of French political thought and 20th

century French politics. His appointment was presented by Francois DeLattre, then French ambassador to the United Nations, who served as Macron's Secretary General of the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs from 2019-2022, and is now French ambassador to Germany. His first book after coming to the United States was *Three Against the Third Republic* (Princeton University Press (1959), re-issued by Transaction Press with a new introduction by Curtis (2010)). This book is considered the definitive study of early 20th century French politics and the rise of the right after the Dreyfus affair. In it, Curtis focuses on three writers, Georges Sorel, Maurice Barrès, and Charles Maurras and their reactions to the deficiencies they saw in the Third Republic and in the system of French democracy. They formulated a philosophic political amalgam of the conservative, reactionary, and moralist segments of French thought that later became the rationale for the rise of rightist governments throughout Europe epitomized by German Nazism.

Inspired by the French Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld's book of photos of hundreds of French children murdered during the Holocaust, Curtis turned to an examination of France's complicity in that horrific event. The result, *Verdict on Vichy*, came out first in 2002, published in London by Weidenfeld and Nicolson (Orion Press) and was named one of the best books of the year by *The Daily Telegraph*. It went on to be published in the United States in 2004 by Arcade Press, and was also translated into Italian and Czech for editions in those countries. The Italian title, *Francia Ambigua*, expresses how Curtis explored the contradictions and the dilemmas faced by various segments of French society, particularly in relation to the Holocaust. He brought to light for the first time outside of France, the investigation of the French government commission on despoliation, the requisitioning of Jewish property.

Curtis was the author of more than 35 books. In addition to

his work on French politics, his books cover the fields of political theory, comparative government, Western European politics, the European Union, and the United Nations. He has long been known for his writing on antisemitism, totalitarianism, the Middle East, and Israel. He was one of the first to discuss the tangled web of the interconnections between religion and politics in the Muslim world in *Religion and Politics in the Middle East*. Other significant books on the Middle East include *Israel: Social Structure and Change*, *Israel in the Third World*, and *Orientalism and Islam*.

The textbooks he wrote have introduced thousands of United States college students to the study of comparative government. They were used globally, translated into other languages (for instance, *Elementi di Scienza politica*, published by Il Mulino for instance first in 1968 and then reissued in the 1970s). His textbook, *Great Political Theories*, published in the 1960s, is still in print and used throughout the US. After reaching at Yale, Oberlin, and other U.S. institutions he retired as a Distinguished Professor Emeritus in political science from Rutgers.

Since his mid 90s, he has been writing almost daily columns for the online journals, *New English Review*, and *The American Thinker*, bringing to public view such issues as the fate of Christians in the Middle East or the role of the tribes in the Middle East that hold enormous power and transcend borders and official governments. A constant theme is his analysis of the ongoing political, verbal and legal attacks on Israel by various segments of the international community. In his book, *Should Israel Exist? A Sovereign Nation under Attack by the International Community* was published by Balfour Press in 2011, Curtis analyzes how the attacks on Israel are not only traditional physical warfare, but also political. He shows how Israel is the subject of over half the resolutions of the UN Human Rights Council with the rest of the world's nations compressed into the other half.

In *Orientalism and Islam*, published by Cambridge University Press (2009), Curtis focused on the history of European thought in creating the field of Oriental studies. He traces the invention of terms like Oriental despotism back to Montesquieu. He discusses the impact of Montesquieu's writing on subsequent thinkers like Edmund Burke, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. Included is an important chapter on Tocqueville. Tocqueville is usually associated with his study of the new nation of the United States, but Curtis reveals Tocqueville's contribution to Oriental studies with his analysis of France and its relation to Algeria. This book is highly regarded as revealing that Western philosophers like Montesquieu and Tocqueville were not inherently biased and could comment objectively on Oriental and Muslim societies, basing their theories on perceptions of real processes and behavior in Eastern culture and government.

Curtis has received numerous awards and commendations among them many academic honors. They include several Fulbright Fellowships and a Bellagio/Rockefeller Institute Fellowship. The American Jewish Committee honored Curtis for his contributions to the literature about Israel and anti-Semitism. In addition to his years at American universities, he also has taught at Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, University of Bologna, and given lectures at hundreds of institutions. He was a Summer Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (1981) and a Visiting Fellow, Center of International Studies, Princeton University. For many years, he was a member of the Advisory Council of the Politics Department at Princeton University.

Curtis is also admired by many for his comprehensive knowledge of the history of jazz and the Great American Songbook. He often played with lines by famous lyricists like Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, or Dorothy Fields in the opening sentences of his articles. For years, he and his second wife, artist and curator Judith Kapstein Brodsky, hosted jazz greats like Fred

Hersh and Bill Charlap to give concerts in their Princeton home.

In addition to his second wife, Curtis is survived by two sons. Dr. Anthony (Tony) Curtis, Champaign, IL, is a patent lawyer with Schwegman, Lundberg, Woessner, Minneapolis. His wife Dr. Susan Mertzluft Curtis is a Senior Lecturer in Accounting in the School of Business, University of Illinois, Champaign/Urbana. Michael D. Curtis is the Communications Director, Republican Party of New Mexico. His wife Sheryl Jaffe Curtis is the Investments Advisor, PNC investments, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Curtis is also survived by two step-children, John B. Brodsky and Dr. Frances M. Brodsky, six grandchildren, two step-grandchildren, and one great grandchild.

The funeral service will be held 1:00 pm on Sunday, October 9, 2022 at the Jewish Center of Princeton 435 Nassau Street, Princeton.

Burial will follow in the Princeton Cemetery.

Funeral for Michael Curtis

Sunday October 9, 2022

1:00 pm

At The Jewish Center

435 Nassau St

Princeton, NJ

The Service will be live streamed at www.livestream.com/tjc

Burial will be at Princeton Cemetery

29 Greenview Ave,

Princeton, NJ 08540

Friends and Family are invited to join the family at

53 Clarke Court

Princeton, NJ 08540

Sunday, from 3 pm

The family will also gather on Tuesday night from 7 pm to 9
pm.

Donations in memory of Michael Curtis may be sent to Memorial
Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, Princeton Medical
Center, Princeton Friends of Opera, America-Israel Friendship
League, or The Jewish Center, Princeton, NJ