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Edmund S. Muskie Papers

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Statement by Senator Edmund S. Muskie on Soviet Jews

Edmund S. Muskie

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Following is the full text of Sen. Muskie's statement:

Discrimination against Soviet Jews, coupled with the Soviet Union's refusal to permit emigration, has been of growing concern to everyone. In recent months the Soviet Union has permitted increased emigration of Soviet Jews to Israel. An article in the New York Times last Sunday, January 2, 1972, notes that three times as many Jews emigrated from the Soviet Union in December as in all of 1970. If the trend continues it is possible that as many as three or four thousand Jewish Soviet citizens per month may emigrate to Israel in 1972.

This release is a blessing. For the United States, with its historic humanitarian commitment to the support of refugees, the news is particularly welcome. For Israel, the blessing is also accompanied by staggering financial and social burdens. Israel, like our own country, was built by refugees; last year, with help, it managed to cope with some 43,000 immigrants. The anticipated influx of Soviet Jews in 1972, if it materializes, will nearly double current levels of immigration.

The main burden of relocating and absorbing Soviet Jews necessarily falls on Israel, since it is to Israel that they choose to go. We know from our own experience with some 650,000 Cuban refugees in the past twelve years and some 30,000 Hungarian refugees in 1958 and 1959 how difficult it is to absorb substantial numbers of refugees -- and we are a nation of more than 200 million. For Israel, the task is awesome. Given our relative populations, it is as if the United States was suddenly confronted with the need to absorb into its social and economic structure an additional 2 1/2 million to 3 million people, roughly the size of Philadelphia or Los Angeles. Housing must be built, food provided, and jobs created. A new language must be taught. Health and educational facilities must be found. New communities must be developed. Counselling and training are required. None but the Israelis can build the homes, teach the languages, find the jobs, and otherwise pay the social costs of giving freedom to Soviet Jews. But there is a financial cost as well, a cost estimated at \$35,000 per family. That is something we can help with. I believe that we must help.

First, since World War II, the United States has contributed more than \$2.8 billion to refugee assistance, directly and through inter-governmental organizations. We spent close to \$600 million to assist Cuban refugees. From 1947 to 1951, we contributed \$237 million to the International Refugee Organization. In the early 1950's, we contributed almost \$85 million to aid Korean refugees. And for Arab refugees, we have contributed more than \$500 million. We have never forgotten that we were founded and populated by the refugees of an earlier world. Our commitment to this cause is inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty.

Second, there is the long history of our concern with persecution on account of religion, and, in the last half century, particularly with the persecution of Jews. Beginning in the early 1900's, our national leaders have fought for the freedom and dignity of the world's Jewish community. We played a major role in the creation of Israel; we have been its firm defender ever since.

Third, beyond humanitarian concerns, there is our clear self-interest in the health and well-being of Israel. War is not the only danger to a healthy Israel. Economic disaster can accomplish what war could not, if we let it. A country the size of Israel, with its heavy defense burdens, cannot afford the several hundred million dollars that will be required for the anticipated influx of Soviet Jews over and above Israel's

normal budget for immigrants. For all these reasons, therefore, we must be prepared to help Israel cope with the hoped for emigration from the Soviet Union. The necessary legislation is on the books, The Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1962. What will be needed, if the influx materializes, is an appropriation adequate to the task. I am therefore writing to President Nixon to ask that he use his statutory authority under Section 2(b)(2) of that Act to designate Soviet Jewish refugees to Israel as eligible for American assistance. I am also writing to Senator Proxmire, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the Senate Appropriations Committee, to ask that he explore the best means of providing . . . this assistance. I believe we must provide whatever assistance is necessary to enable these refugees, who have suffered so long in the Soviet Union, to emigrate to Israel and build a new life in their religious homeland.

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