

Women of Valor

STORIES OF GREAT JEWISH WOMEN
WHO HELPED SHAPE THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Sheila Segal

Foreword by Gloria Goldreich



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DEDICATION

For Danny, who is with me in everything I do

—S.S.

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CHAPTER 6



Shoshana S. Cardin

THE PRESIDENTS' PRESIDENT

(1926-)

Shoshana Shoubin grew up in Baltimore, where the neighborhood Labor Zionist Center was the heart of her social life. She was always surrounded by people who cared passionately about the fate of the Jewish people. Her parents, Chana and Sraiah Shoubin, lived by the principle that all Jews are responsible for one another, and it was clear early on that their daughter also took that responsibility seriously.

As a child Shoshana raised money for the Jewish National Fund, gave political speeches, and was elected president of her Zionist youth group, Habonim. As an adult she made community service her career and eventually became the first woman to head the prestigious Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. In her weighty role as the official spokesperson for American Jewry, Shoshana Cardin has never been afraid to speak the truth—to say whatever has to be said—even when face-to-face with the most powerful leaders in the world.

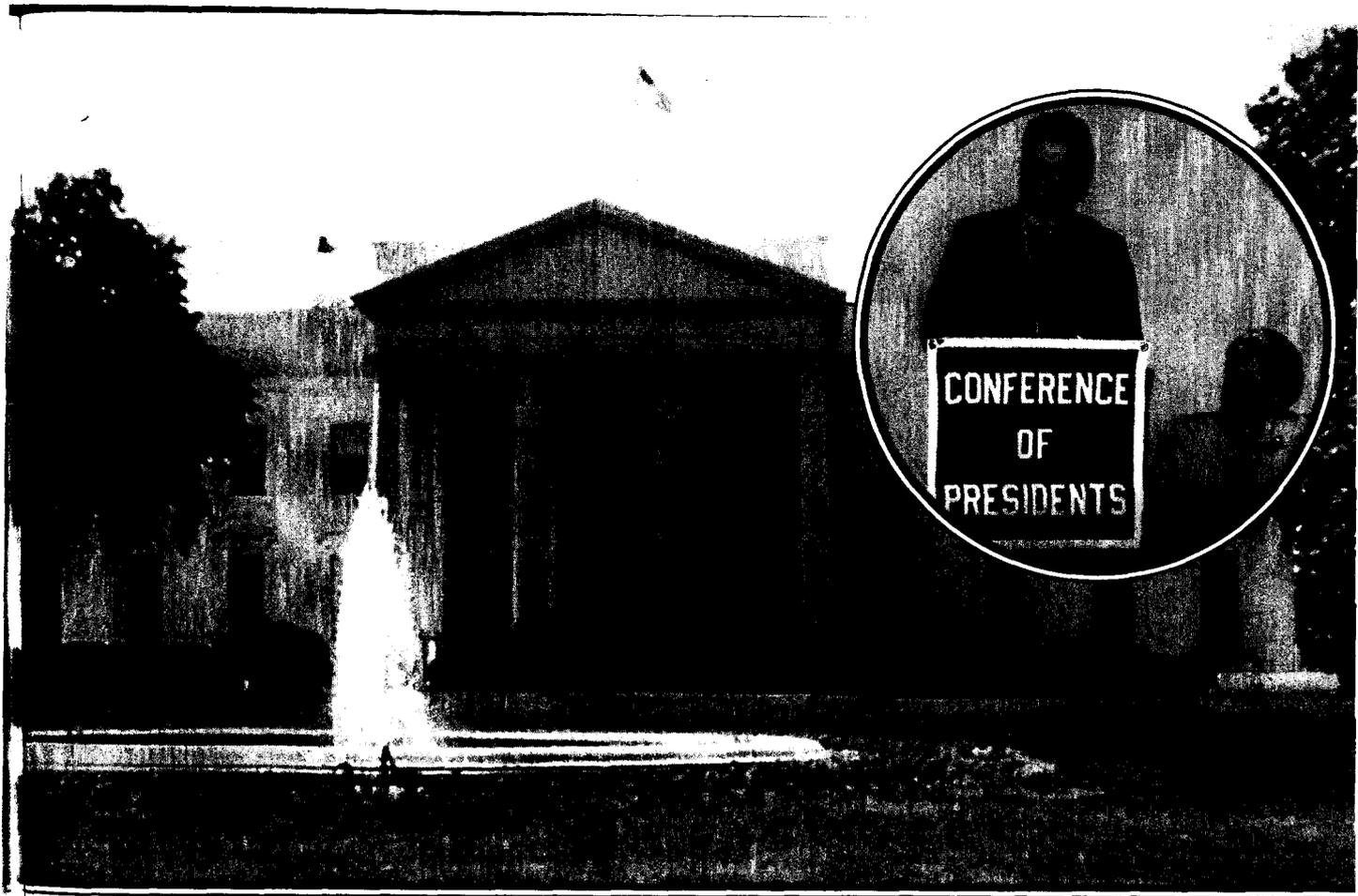


A position of authority can be a lonely place. Shoshana Cardin first learned that lesson when she was still in her twenties, working in the Baltimore public school system. Cardin was hired as a substitute teacher for an eighth-grade English class composed mostly of fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds. Her students had already spent a year or two in the eighth grade and, they were proud to say, had already seen a parade of substitute teachers come and go. Now it was up to Cardin to take charge of this hostile bunch.

It didn't take long for her to size up the situation. Nelson, a hulking student who held the power in the class, was determined to see her fail. Each day he egged on the others with his wise-guy antics while Cardin tried to press ahead with her lessons. The showdown finally came when she announced to the class that she was going to be its permanent teacher.

"Oh no you're not. We'll get rid of you, too!" shouted a voice from the back of the classroom. Nelson sat there smirking, daring her to respond.

Shoshana Cardin knew this was a crucial moment. The class was waiting to see what she would do. There was no one to consult, no one to support her. She was on her own. With every appearance of calmness, she made her way down the aisle, stopped next to Nelson's desk, and glared down at him.



Nelson looked up. "For a nickel I would slap your face," he snorted, and Cardin knew the score: She had to meet his challenge on his terms, or she would lose the class. She returned to her desk, opened her purse, took out a nickel, and walked back to where Nelson sat.

"Put out your hand," she said firmly. She placed the nickel right on his palm, folded her arms, and waited.

Nelson held the nickel in his fingers for a moment. Then he stood up and threw it to the floor in disgust. Cardin had called his bluff. She had confronted the most powerful person in the room, asserted her authority, and earned the respect of all the students, even Nelson. Now, at last, she would be able to do her job.

Cardin completed the year with that eighth-grade class, but she did not return to teaching the following fall. In those days women were not allowed in the classroom if they were visibly pregnant, and between 1950 and 1957 she and her husband, Jerome Cardin, became the parents of four children. Shoshana Cardin chose to work instead as a community volunteer. She had the good fortune to be able to follow a calling for which the rewards are not monetary.

As the chairperson of the Conference of Presidents, Shoshana Cardin has talked face-to-face with many world leaders, including successive residents of the White House.





As Shoshana Cardin moved into positions of community leadership—first in her own city and state, then in major national organizations—the band of eighth-grade bullies became more remote. But the lessons she had learned in that classroom stayed with her. Never were they more valuable than in the fall of 1991, when Cardin was serving as chairperson of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. On two

During 1991, Shoshana Cardin's new job as chairperson of the Conference of Presidents required quick, decisive responses to fast-breaking events, such as the war in the Persian Gulf (above) and (opposite) the breakup of the Soviet Union.



extraordinary occasions that fall, her responsibilities brought her face-to-face with the two most powerful leaders in the world: the president of the United States and the president of the Soviet Union.

“Where in the world did I get the courage to do those things?” Cardin asked herself later. And then she remembered that it began with Nelson.

The Right Message

Shoshana Cardin's tenure as chairperson of the Conference of Presidents began on January 1, 1991. She was the first woman ever elected to this central position in the Jewish community, but she had no trouble establishing her authority as the spokesperson for the forty-eight organization presidents who made up the conference. She herself was serving her third year as chairperson of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, and she previously had been the first woman elected to head the Council of Jewish Federations. As a result, her name was already known and respected inside and outside the Jewish community and in the United States, Israel, and the Soviet Union.

People who have worked with Shoshana Cardin know her as an unusually serious, knowledgeable, and articulate person. They have also seen that even with all her talent and self-confidence, she has

never shown interest in gaining power or recognition for herself. A traditional Jew, she is motivated by a deep commitment to the values of Judaism and a driving concern for the destiny of the Jewish people.

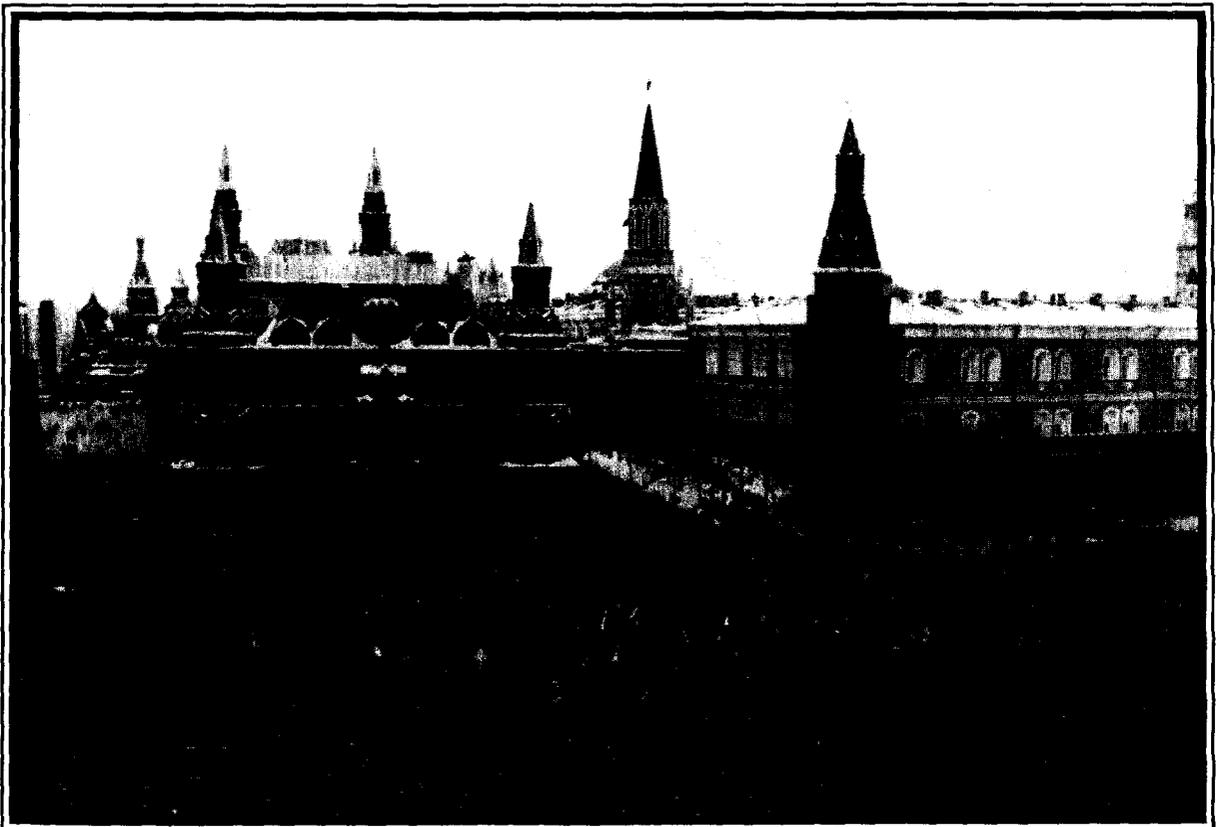
People have been ready to listen to Cardin because she is always thoughtful and well prepared. And because she takes a fair and open-minded approach to every issue, she has won the respect even of those who disagree with her. It was clear that Cardin could be counted on by members of the Conference of Presidents to represent a consensus of Jewish opinion and the best interests of the Jewish community.

For American Jews and Israelis, 1991 was a year of high tension. There was the war in the Persian Gulf, the crisis over U.S. loan guarantees to Israel, the stop-and-go movement toward a Middle East peace conference, the beginning of the breakup of the Soviet Union, and the rise of anti-Semitism in the Soviet republics.

The most controversial issue for American Jewry turned out to be Israel's request for a ten-billion-dollar credit endorsement, or



A demonstration near the Kremlin walls, Moscow, at the beginning of the breakup of the Soviet Union.



loan guarantee, from the U.S. government. This guarantee would enable Israel to borrow huge sums of money from private banks and other institutions in order to build new housing for Russian immigrants. With the arrival of about 350,000 Soviet Jews in the late 1980s—pouring in at the average rate of about 10,000 a month — Israel's need for new housing was urgent.

The administration of President George Bush was unhappy that so much of Israel's new housing was planned for the West Bank and Gaza. The right to these areas, which had been occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Day War, was still a matter of dispute, and Bush believed it was impossible for Arabs and Israelis to talk about peace as long as the number of Jewish settlers in those territories was increasing. There would be no loan guarantee, he said, until Israel stopped building in the West Bank and Gaza.

All through the spring and summer of 1991, American Jews expressed the opinion that it was unfair to withhold the loan guarantee, which was so badly needed for the resettlement of Soviet Jews. But the Bush administration held firm. At the same time, however, a few members of Congress began to talk about taking legislative action to get the loan guarantee approved. A special task force of the Conference of Presidents decided to designate a day for concerned Jews to come to Washington, D.C., and speak about the matter with their representatives in Congress, urging them to act favorably when the question came to a vote.

President Bush was not at all pleased with this turn of events. He was annoyed with Congress for interfering with the president's role in making foreign policy decisions, and he was annoyed with the Jewish community for joining the effort to bypass his authority. Still the task force proceeded with its plans. The member organizations began to notify their individual members about the special mission to Washington, which was set for September 12. About 450 people signed up to participate.

On Friday, September 6, six days before the scheduled mission, Shoshana Cardin received a personal call from Lawrence Eagleburger, the deputy secretary of state. He told her that President Bush was still very unhappy about the whole affair, and he asked her to call off the "march on Washington" in the interest of avoiding an open confrontation.

"I'm sorry, I can't do it," Cardin replied firmly. She did not want a confrontation, but she could not give in on a matter that was so important to Israel.

"But why can't you?" the secretary pressed. "You know the president is going to have to speak out about what you're doing."

"I can't do it," she said, "because I would be sending the wrong message. It would be the wrong message to the Jews in the Soviet Union, to the Jews of Israel, and to the American Jewish community. It would say that we are not as serious as we really are."

"I'm willing to confront the president with that if I have to," Cardin concluded.

A Terrible Blow

What happened over the next five days was the opposite of what the Bush administration wanted. When the word spread that the president was "preparing for war" over the loan guarantees, the number of people signed up for the mission to Washington more than doubled. On September 12, approximately one thousand citizens arrived on Capitol Hill to call on their representatives in the House and Senate.

At noon on September 12, a very irritated George Bush called a news conference and put a surprising spin on the day's events. Portraying himself as under personal attack, he defended his view on the loan guarantees and his right to set foreign policy. He complained of the "powerful political forces" working against him and described himself as "a lonely little guy down here" with "something like a thousand lobbyists swarming all over the Capitol."

True, Shoshana Cardin had been warned by Deputy Secretary Eagleburger, but she never imagined that American Jews would hear their president say something so offensive and insulting. The president's remarks echoed the classic anti-Semitic slurs about a powerful Jewish lobby that controls the government and the press. In fact, the president's remarks touched off an outpouring of anti-Semitic phone calls and letters to the White House, congratulating the president for taking a tough stand and "speaking the truth" about the Jews.

The thousand Jews who visited Capitol Hill on September 12



These Jewish demonstrators in Washington, D.C. share Shoshana Cardin's belief that the right to petition government is a fundamental Constitutional right of every American citizen.



were not professional lobbyists, individuals who are paid by specific groups to represent their interests in Washington. They came to the Capitol that day as private citizens exercising a fundamental Constitutional right to petition their government. There was nothing unfair about it, as the president implied.

Shoshana Cardin knew that the president's challenge had to be met with an immediate response. She quickly called a news conference for later that day. Then she drafted a formal statement expressing her deep concern that the president appeared to be denying Jews one of the basic rights of all Americans. Later that afternoon Cardin distributed her statement to the press and answered their questions.

She had made her views clear, yet she still felt a need to respond to the president directly. After consulting a few other people, she decided that a personal letter would be the best way to state her position. It was a forthright letter in which she rejected the president's description of what had taken place on September 12. She tactfully suggested that his remarks had triggered negative responses that she

was certain he had not wished to elicit. On September 13, she sent the letter to the White House, but she did not release it to the press or distribute it to the other members of the Conference of Presidents.

A week later, on the morning of September 21, Shoshana Cardin picked up her copy of *The New York Times* and read on the front page: BUSH ACTS TO CALM ISRAEL AID UPROAR. The article reported that President Bush had “sent a conciliatory letter . . . to reassure Jewish groups after his harsh attack last week. . . .” She eagerly turned to page 4 for the full text.

Cardin gasped. The letter was addressed to her—“Dear Shoshana”—and yet she had not seen it before. A few days earlier the White House had notified her that the president would soon reply to her letter of September 13, but there was no hint that the reply would be by way of a major newspaper.

Cardin was taken aback, but she had to be pleased. After all, her letter had drawn a public acknowledgment from the president of the United States. Nonetheless, she had a feeling that George Bush didn’t fully understand the implications of what he had said and why it hurt the Jews so much. She made up her mind that at some moment in the future she would explain it to him again, preferably in a face-to-face encounter.

Confrontation at the Kremlin

Just a few weeks later Shoshana Cardin was on her way to Moscow, hoping for a face-to-face meeting with Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev. During her presidency of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry (1988–1992), Shoshana Cardin visited the former Soviet Union several times a year, accompanied by Martin Wenick, the executive director of the organization. It was important for them to maintain direct contact with the Jewish communities and to meet frequently with Soviet officials about anti-Semitism and emigration.

In the fall of 1991, the number of Jews allowed to leave the Soviet Union was rising, but refuseniks were still being held on grounds of “secrecy,” and no fair emigration law had yet been enacted. Jewish groups were also concerned about the activities of Pamyat, a vicious anti-Semitic group that was blaming the Jews for all of their

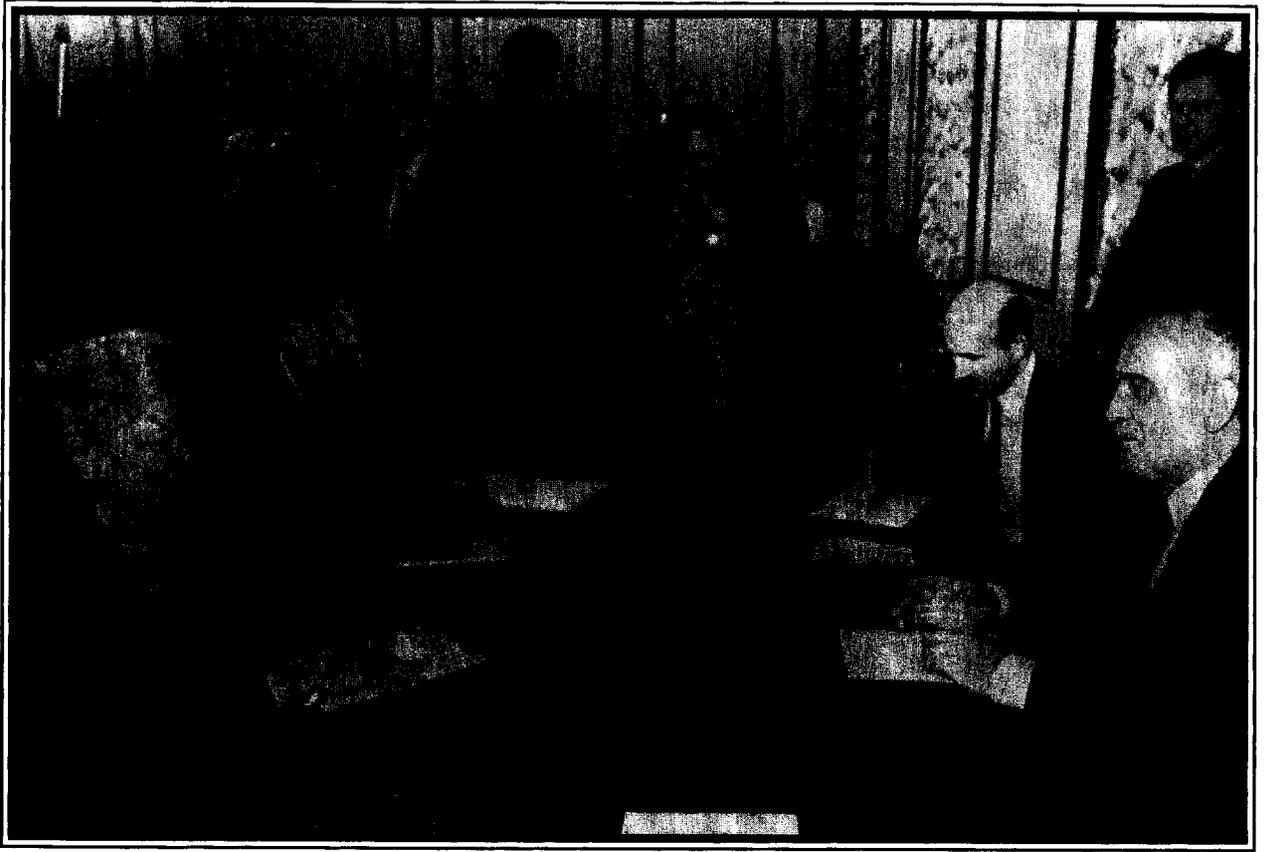
country's misfortunes. Shoshana Cardin and Martin Wenick wanted to discuss these issues with President Mikhail Gorbachev. No official representative of American Jewry had ever had a personal meeting with a Soviet head of state, but Cardin and Wenick hoped for a change of heart at the Kremlin. After all, Gorbachev seemed to be more serious than ever about desiring openness and reform in his country.

When Cardin and Wenick arrived in Moscow on Monday, September 30, there was still no word about the requested meeting. Finally, at 10:00 P.M. on Tuesday evening, a phone call came to their hotel with the all-important message: Mr. Gorbachev would see them the next day.

Late Wednesday afternoon a taxi drove through the imposing gates of the Kremlin, the center of Soviet power, with Martin Wenick and Shoshana Cardin in the backseat. Even the Russian driver was nervous. A few minutes later the two visitors were led into a huge office, where President Gorbachev sat at his desk, talking on the telephone. In an instant he had replaced the receiver and was walking toward them with an outstretched hand and a welcoming smile. He escorted his guests to a table where, following the rules of diplomacy, the representative of American Jewry sat directly across from him. Wenick was at Cardin's side, and a Russian interpreter sat next to Gorbachev, who does not speak English.

It was an incredible moment. Shoshana Cardin thought of the pogroms in czarist Russia, the murders of Jewish doctors and writers under Joseph Stalin, the ordeal of the Prisoners of Zion, the ruthlessness of the KGB. Now she was face-to-face with the leader of this people who had caused so much Jewish suffering, and it was up to her to say what needed to be said.

She began by expressing the gratitude of American Jews for the recent increase in the number of Soviet Jews permitted to emigrate to Israel. She was concerned, however, about the number of refuseniks still being held for reasons of "secrecy." She urged Gorbachev to comply fully with international standards for freedom of emigration. Then she raised the subject of anti-Semitism and Pamyat. She said that American Jews were upset that the greater tolerance for freedom of expression in the Soviet Union seemed to be resulting in freer expression of anti-Semitism. She asked



Gorbachev to take a stronger stand against it. In fact, she had a specific request.

A few days later the American Jewish leaders would be attending a memorial ceremony at Babi Yar, the ravine near Kiev where nearly thirty-four thousand Jews were brutally murdered by the Nazis in 1941. That week was the fiftieth anniversary of the infamous massacre. It was a most appropriate time, Cardin suggested, for the first public statement from the Kremlin condemning anti-Semitism.

"I can't do that," Gorbachev replied. His response was polite but firm.

"May I ask why not?" Cardin said respectfully.

"There are many different nationalities in the Soviet Union," he explained. "To single out one of them would not be beneficial."

Then Gorbachev spoke of his own needs. He asked for Cardin and Wenick's help in obtaining American support for his reforms. He needed economic aid, and he hoped they would appeal to the

Even when talking with the most powerful people in the world, Shoshana Cardin has never been afraid to speak the truth. Here, she sits opposite Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in the Kremlin in the fall of 1991.



White House on his behalf. He was afraid that the Soviet Union would disintegrate without it. The result, he believed, would be economic chaos and even greater hostilities among the different ethnic groups.

This observation brought Shoshana Cardin back to the subject of anti-Semitism. At Babi Yar, she said, there would be messages delivered from the president of the United States, the chairman of



*Shoshana Cardin
meets with U.S.
President Bush.*



the U.S. Holocaust Commission, and the president of the Ukraine. Wouldn't it be fitting for the president of the Soviet Union to also send a statement condemning anti-Semitism?

"Look, I cannot do this," he repeated. "But I do want you to know that I understand what you are talking about because as a child I saw Nazi atrocity for myself."

“But, Mr. President,” she persisted, “there is a difference between what you say to us here privately and what should be said publicly, now and at Babi Yar.”

Mikhail Gorbachev had no further comment. The meeting ended pleasantly, with Shoshana Cardin believing she had tried her best. At a press conference immediately afterward she announced that the Soviet president had promised to review the cases of 355 individuals who had been denied permission to emigrate. She said he acknowledged that anti-Semitism is a problem in the Soviet Union but did not believe it would be helpful to issue a statement condemning it at this time.

One hour later, over the radio, Cardin learned of Gorbachev’s final decision on the matter. President Gorbachev, an announcer reported, had just issued a statement condemning anti-Semitism. His longtime aide, Aleksandr Yakovlev, was scheduled to be at Babi Yar for the commemorative ceremonies, and he would deliver that message on Gorbachev’s behalf.

The following Monday morning a headline in *The New York Times* said it all: GORBACHEV CONDEMNS ANTI-SEMITISM, PAST AND PRESENT. It was the first such statement ever made by a Russian leader.

Alone with the President

Shoshana Cardin has always believed that a few individuals—seven or one individual—can have a significant impact on events, but she never dreamed she could have such an impact on the president of the Soviet Union. Perhaps that experience boosted her courage to speak the truth to the president of the United States as well. She still had that message she wanted to deliver to him personally on behalf of America’s Jews.

A few weeks later she saw her opportunity. When the White House called to schedule a meeting with the Conference of Presidents in New York City on the afternoon of November 12, she decided to request a private visit with President Bush beforehand. She didn’t say why, though the White House assumed it was about the loan guarantee. On November 9, Cardin received a reply: Yes, the president would see her.

Over the next three days Shoshana Cardin reviewed what she would say to George Bush. She consulted Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice chairman of the Conference of Presidents, who usually accompanied her in "private" meetings with government officials. She told him that she wanted to explain very plainly why the president's words had been such a terrible blow. Hoenlein agreed with her plan but warned her to be careful. By then it was understood that the loan guarantees would be granted. George Bush had done a lot for Israel, and he was, after all, the president of the United States.

At about 3:30 P.M. on November 12, Shoshana Cardin and Malcolm Hoenlein arrived at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City, where the meetings were to be held. They rode the elevator to the twelfth floor and followed two Secret Service men along a circuitous route to the presidential suite. Bobbie Kilberg, the White House liaison for community affairs, stopped them at the door.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but Shoshana is going in alone."

"What?" Cardin was stunned. "But we talked about the two of us going in—it's always the two of us," she said.

"No, this time it's just you." Kilberg repeated. And Cardin was on her way to meet the president—alone.

The president, however, was not alone. With him were his national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft; his chief of staff, John Sununu; and his speechwriter, Richard Haas, who was responsible for the president's September 12 remarks. Bobbie Kilberg and two other presidential aides were also present. The president greeted Cardin warmly and motioned her to the sofa. It was an informal arrangement of people, with the president sitting on a straight-backed chair angled to face the entire group. After a few moments of introductions and greetings, Shoshana Cardin took a deep breath and went right to the point.

"Mr. President," she said, "I have a very important message for you, one that I never thought I would have to deliver to a president of the United States in this half century."

The president gave her his full attention. It was up to her to tell it to him straight.

"Mr. President," she continued, "it's about the statement you made on September 12. When you made those remarks about the Jews who descended on Washington that day, you tore the threads

of the security net that we had woven around ourselves in thinking that we were full American citizens. When you tore that net, you drew blood, and the sharks came swimming.”

Shoshana Cardin spoke quietly, but her words were powerful—so powerful that the president was appalled. His face was white. He stood up and turned his chair around to face her directly.

“But what did I say?”

“You gave the impression that we were powerful lobbyists, and when you did that, you invited anti-Semites to come forward and have their say.”

“But I didn’t specifically mention the Jews, did I?” the president countered.

“No, you didn’t,” Cardin said. “You didn’t have to. It was very clear to us and to everyone. It was offensive,” she went on, “and it was personally painful. It’s the personal pain that I wanted to share with you, Mr. President, because I don’t think you wanted to hurt anybody.”

“I certainly did not,” the president replied, and for several minutes he offered sincere words of apology. He was truly distressed by what he’d learned. “Shoshana,” he said, “I would like you to open the meeting today and tell the others about this conversation. I would like you to convey my apology.”

“Mr. President,” she replied, “I beg to differ with you. I don’t think I should open the meeting with this.”

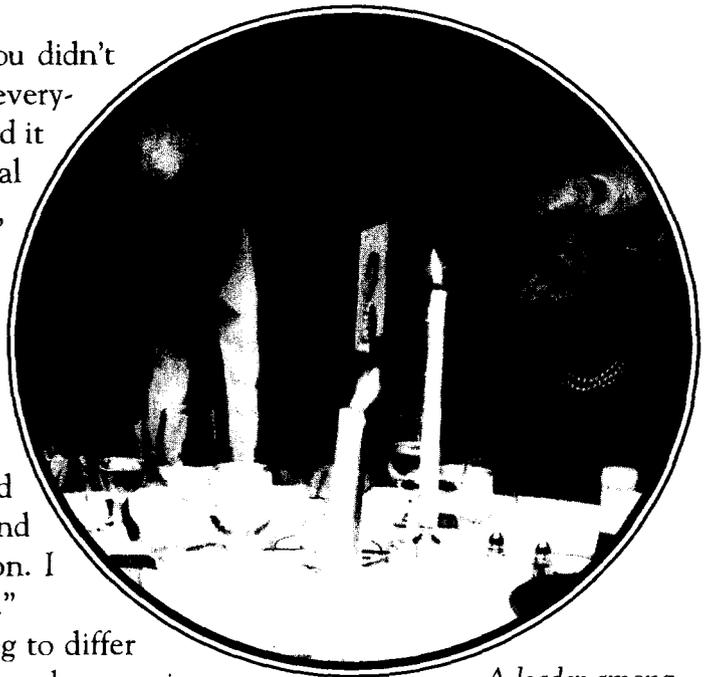
“No?”

“No, I think you should.”

The president was uncomfortable. “I really would prefer that you do it, Shoshana.”

“Mr. President,” she said, “I think this is your responsibility.”

And that is how the meeting opened—with a sincere apology from the president of the United States to the representatives of the American Jewish community.



A leader among leaders, Shoshana Cardin dines with the late Yitzhak Rabin, prime minister of Israel.



“Shoshana was very direct with me,” George Bush said, “about the pain that I inadvertently caused—Shoshana was kind enough to say ‘inadvertently.’” He was truly sorry, and he wanted them to know it and to carry that message to the community. It was a dramatic moment, one that none of the representatives had expected, and when the president finished speaking, everyone sat speechless.

Shoshana Cardin waited. With a room full of presidents of Jewish organizations, she thought that surely someone else would have something to add. But no one did. After all, their elected leader had once again spoken the truth to a person of power and had achieved something amazing. What more, then, could any one of them say?

On behalf of everyone present, Shoshana Cardin thanked the president for his understanding and for his apology to the Jewish community. Then she turned to the agenda before her and proceeded with the meeting. There was still a great deal of important business to address.



After her two-year term as chairperson of the Conference of Presidents, Shoshana Cardin became president of Clal, the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. In 1994, she became the first woman to head the United Israel Appeal, an organization that plays a central role in raising and allocating money for the Jewish state.