



Photo by Gideon Lewin

# JACK ROSEN

## building bridges

BY ALY DAVID

When it comes to Jack Rosen's table, the question "Guess who's coming to dinner?" rarely produces a common answer. Around his elegant table, in his seven-story home off Fifth Avenue, Rosen and his family have hosted presidents, senators, prime ministers, and other major players in world politics, including the Clintons and Ariel Sharon. But for Rosen and his gorgeous wife, Phyllis, it's not simply about breaking bread with notables, it's about breaking barriers and opening minds.

*Lifestyles* had the privilege to partake in one such cozy dinner where the guest list was a smorgasbord of the Who's Who. Even more flavorful and spicy than the haute cuisine was the conversation that seasoned the evening. It quickly became as clear as the crystal before us that the "main course" for such gatherings was always the same: the State of Israel and the state of Jews worldwide. "I think such evenings are very important," Rosen says. "We have a dialogue and they learn about our community, our feelings and concerns, and that can make a difference."

Though Rosen, chairman of the American Jewish Congress, does not expect everyone to completely digest the Jewish

agenda he sets forth, his great talent is his ability to send guests off with a sweeter taste in their mouths and no heartburn.



It is for good reason that Jack Rosen has recently been listed by *The Forward* as one of the top-five most influential Jews in America. But this one-of-a-kind man, who is a well-known guest at the White House, who has flown the Clintons on his private airplane and who receives phone calls from Ted Kennedy, had very humble origins. Rosen, 58, was born in Germany in a displaced persons camp. Although he and his family moved to America when he was only 4 years old, by age 7 he found himself living in Germany once again because of his father's business. Being the only Jewish student in his school, he remembers being forced to attend church once a week and also sitting on Santa's lap. "Looking back today, I can truly appreciate the concept of the separation between church and state," Rosen reflects.

When Rosen's family came back to America, he and his brother were raised in the Bronx and went to yeshiva for several years. He then attended Columbus High School and later graduated from City University of New York with a degree in mathe-

matics. Although his upbringing was not Orthodox, his parents still maintained a kosher and strong traditional Jewish home. And indeed it is the preservation of Jewish tradition that has become an integral part of Rosen's mission as a leader of the Jewish people.

"We have a historic responsibility to maintain Jewish traditions for our community and our children," Rosen says. "We have a rich tradition that must be passed on from generation to generation in defiance of our enemies' efforts to destroy us."

Rosen's own sensitivities toward Jewish preservation were cultivated in his 20s, when he insisted on taking his father back to Poland for the first time since the war ended. "I was really curious to learn about a place that hated Jews so much," he tells. Yet, Rosen's heart was not stirred as much by the sights of his journey as he was by the fear he saw in his father's eyes when they had disembarked from the airplane.

to face the past, he still wasn't able to speak about it for years to come. It was only when Jack Rosen's own children, Jordan and Daniel, were grown, that his father began to tell the details of his story and his death march out of Auschwitz. But when he did choose to speak, the backdrop could not have been more suitably chosen. His story unfolded during Passover—the holiday of freedom and triumph—during a



President George W. Bush with Jack Rosen.

and to get to know each other, it is not so hard to make friends and find common bonds," Rosen feels. He once told Prince Bandar that even more important than the two of them getting to know each other is that their children get to know each other. "It is never too late for the next generation."

Although Rosen knows that he alone cannot change the world, he does feel that he can perhaps touch one person at a time. Yet when it comes to Jack Rosen, that one person may be the leader of Cuba, Russia, Israel, or the United States. His name and influence spans the international landscape. World leaders have sent messages through him back to Washington. And as he continues to network, he sprinkles the seeds for alliances in his trail. Rosen reflects on how one ambassador at the UN told him that whenever he

**"We have a rich tradition that must be passed on from generation to generation in defiance of our enemies' efforts to destroy us."**

Rosen had gone to Poland as a quasi-"tourist" to search out its cruel history. However, his father, who lost his parents and five brothers in the Holocaust, was still a victim of that country's savage past. Thus, when they reached the town of his childhood, where his family, youth and life were plucked from him with merciless villainy, Rosen's father could not get out of the car.

"Initially, my father made many excuses just not to get out," Rosen reflects. But with the fortitude of a true survivor, David Rosen set his feet upon that very ground that once flowed with Jewish blood, defying history by his very presence and his firstborn at his side. "You can hear all the stories you want about the Holocaust," Rosen recounts, "but until you see the fear, you can't really ever appreciate it."

Yet, even if Rosen's father was able

family vacation in the State of Israel.

Thus, with a keen eye on Jewish history and a concerned heart for Jewish tomorrows, Rosen has chosen not to shun enemies or threats to the Jewish people, but rather to engage them. "We are living in a post-Holocaust era and the forces that provided for a safe and secure Israel are changing," Rosen points out. "We have to look at what the future holds and have to use all the skills we've learned in America and that are available to us to ensure security for Jews around the world."

And so Rosen has been actively trying to create a dialogue between the Jewish community and prominent Arab leaders in the Muslim world. Rosen has even hosted His Royal Highness Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz, the ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United States, at his home. "Once people are given a chance to talk

raised his hand to vote, he thought about their discussions regarding the Jews and the Jewish state. During one of his travels to China, Chinese officials kept talking about one China as if conveying their sentiments to Washington through Rosen would change American policy. Rosen took the opportunity and graciously toasted his host, "Here is to one China; here is to one Jerusalem."

Rosen is not only occupied with trying to build bridges between foreign leaders and Jews, but also between Jew and Jew. He is a member of the executive committee of AIPAC, a trustee of Park East Day School and Park East Synagogue, which honored him with its "Man of the Year Award." In a further attempt to reach out to the Jewish community, he started an organization within the framework of the American Jewish Congress called the Council for World Jewry. Its objective is to

get Jewish communities and leaders around the world to work together to protect Jews and fight antisemitism. He is greatly concerned that the antisemitism so rampant in Europe can easily spill over the borders. "There is a real war out there," Rosen states. "It's a matter of our survival."

Over the past few years, Rosen has taken Jacques Chirac's government to task for not fighting the blatant antisemitism swelling in France. His persistence drew criticism from local Jewish groups who preferred to deal with matters on their own. Even Chirac himself complained to the Sharon government and to Bush about Rosen's strong stance. Nonetheless, the French government has since publicly acknowledged the problem of antisemitism in its country and Rosen certainly played a part.

Rosen and his sons, one of whom is president of the metropolitan region of the American Jewish Congress, are also trying to reach out to a younger generation of Jews. Their mission is to instill Jewish pride by educating them about the great contributions that Jews have made to the world and giving them Jewish role models to relate to, such as Senator Joseph Lieberman, Ruth Bader Ginsberg and others. "We also try to make them realize that we have to work collectively to secure a safe and better future for Jews."

Perhaps Rosen's greatest trick is not dining with Muslims or getting two Jews to agree on an issue, but rather that he can comfortably work both sides of Washington's illustrious political aisle. To start, the American Jewish Congress has historically been on the liberal side of domestic issues. Rosen is also a longtime friend of Ted Kennedy and the Clintons, under whom he was appointed to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, as well as the NASA Advisory Council. He was also Clinton's special guest at the signing of the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty and part of the presidential delegation that attended Yitzhak Rabin's funeral. He was also finance cochairman of Clinton's election campaign in 1996.

Nonetheless, Rosen's integrity, influ-

ence and perhaps even his disarming blue eyes and unyielding dimples have earned him not only easy access to the White House but have also rendered him into the Republican's beloved poster boy of a Democrat who supports the president's policy. He has been nicknamed "Rosey" by President Bush, who is well known for bestowing nicknames on people he really likes. Rosen told *The Forward* that he acknowledges that his



President Clinton with Jack Rosen.

jump between the two parties has created some ideological gaps that he has not been able to overcome—particularly on the domestic side. But Rosen says that he can put those differences aside to work for the political needs of Jews around the world. Rosen always pursues a road of pragmatism.

Often the pragmatic comes down to the bottom line. Indeed Rosen, who is an eminently successful real estate developer, has signed a check or two and contributed to the American political system. But he and others have made it very clear that it is not the checks that are keeping our U.S. representatives in tune with the Jewish community. "They just don't take you seriously if all you give is a check," Rosen explains. "I have found that political leaders will only take you seriously if you engage them in issues of substance and bring to their awareness arguments and facts with which they can make a difference." It does appear, however, that the press itself is very impressed with the

\$100,000 check that Rosen donated to Bush. That single check has been written about so many times that Rosen's purported contributions have snowballed into the millions.



Perhaps it is because Jack Rosen has the special talent to cross lines, build bridges, turn enemies into friends and open very difficult doors that it has been speculated in press articles that he will be the next chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations—the central coordinating organization representing 52 national Jewish organizations on issues of national and international concern. Although Rosen is reluctant to declare whether the rumors are true, he does say it would be a great honor to be chairman and be considered among such distinguished leaders as Mortimer Zuckerman, Kenneth Bialkin, Ronald Lauder and James Tisch. Rosen said that a good leader needs to be able to get consensus and feels that is the requisite skill for the position. In Rosen's case, his track record speaks for itself.

Even though Rosen has soared high both as pilot of his own plane and in his business and other endeavors, his feet are very much planted on the ground. He says that his wife, kids and mother help keep him very humble. "We don't always succeed at everything in life that we want and that keeps us grounded, too," he says. "The public may only see one side—the success—but when you're living it, you're privy to the failures as well."

One of Jack Rosen's biggest regrets in life is that he didn't start contributing earlier on in life to the Jewish community and to Jewish life and was too involved in business. "Sometimes we look back on life and wish we could do it all over again," Rosen expresses. "But there is always some price for success and for failure. Basically, there is a price for living." lifestyles