

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

January 22nd, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about US relations with communist Yugoslavia. In the interview segment, ER's guest is producer and director Arch Oboler.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Arch Oboler

[ER:] What have you today?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I think I have a very interesting question today which I'd like to hear you discuss. Do you think the United States should be helping countries apparently friendly to us, and yet communist? Yugoslavia, for example. Particularly when there are so many others who fought with us who need the same help?

[ER:] Well um, that question and-and the evident slant is that we should not be helping Yugoslavia. I think uh, that the person who wrote it was not taking into account the situation as it faces us in Europe today. Eh you have to remember when you are deciding a policy, uh just exactly what the whole situation you face is. Now, there are many people in Europe who fought with us and many people in Europe whom we fought against, all of them need help both those who fought with us and those who fought against us. Uh we are helping those who fought against us because we feel that um it's better to have free nations in the central part of Europe. They voted not to arm Germany, eh and I, personally, think that may be a wise uh thing. And--but I think they must be free and able to stand on their own feet um otherwise they're always a prey to communist ideas. Now, in the case of Yugoslavia, we have a communist nation, a nation that did not start with communism, but uh during the war the communists were always very well organized underground, but the ones who retreated into the mountains and emerged as the defenders of independence in Yugoslavia, and they were on our side uh because [ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap] they were fighting.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, that's a point that I'd like to point up that I think it is-is a mistake in principle in this whole question, and that is that Yugoslavia fought against us. Yugoslavia and the communists in Yugoslavia fought on the same side that we did [ER: Of course they did.] during the war [ER: During the war] so did the Russians [ER: So did the Russians.] [Elliott Roosevelt laughs].

[ER:] Um, at that time we all fought together against Nazism [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm] and fascism [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm] against Hitler, and they were the communists. And we have to remember that it was communists in France in the underground who were the best organized and who did the most, and that's why today they still have considerable influence because in many European countries it was that small nucleus of well-trained communists that helped the other freedom-loving people, and frequently they were great friends. There were men together who had different ideas, but who became fast friends through their work in the underground together. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] You had to trust each other, you had to live in the fear of death practically every minute. Now, um we find um Yugoslavia, at the end of the war, drifting away from the democracies and being with um the Soviets. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm] Then there comes a difference because the people of Yugoslavia are very independent and Tito finds that he is unable to put over some things in the same way that they are put over in the USSR, and we finally have a country that is communist, but has certain differences, is perhaps first nationalist. Um, though economically and ideologically eh they are communist, [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm] and um the

question arises whether it isn't vastly to our advantage to have a nation uh in that very troubled spot of the Balkans that is growing closer to the democracies, because of its love of freedom even though it is communist, and whether it is wise for us to encourage that nation on the side of freedom not on the side of the belief of communism.

Um if they stick to that forever and if they believe in it, well that's because it suits them and there's nothing--we're proving there that we can live in the same world with people who do believe in communism, um but they must be free. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah um] They must be free people, there must be, and it's interesting it may be that it will become um the same kind of despotic regime um because it is a police state, but there seems to be at present a chance to encourage freedom, and perhaps that's the thing to do. In any case, it's the thing to do to strengthen even a communist state which is not willing to be completely subservient to the type of communism that exists in the USSR and particularly in that area of the world, where we have always had um an unrest, and where at present uh the-the question of how much will be turning to communism and how much will not um is of very burning importance. So that um I suppose you could say that one finds one's self um making allies of um people of different ideas, but that's because one has to meet each situation that arises and take the point of view that looks at the whole situation and sees on the whole what is the best thing to do. (6:45)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right. Well now, how would you feel uh what is implied here is that we should not help--spend much money, for instance, to uh support the Germans? Uh what do you feel uh-uh [ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap] in that case?

[ER:] Well now, I-I feel, of course, that um much of the later money, the money that we've just been giving to Yugoslavia, is given because of the drought, it's given for humanitarian purposes. It will help in their military uh buildup, but um I think in any case where people starve because of um a situation that has arisen in their country on account of drought or flood or anything like that, uh your humanitarian instincts would make you want to save the children, if you could, the hardships that that means, even if you can't save the whole nation from those hardships. Older people are better able to stand them. Now, as far as Germany is concerned, I think it vital that we help the German people, who now seem to have a desire not to be built up as a military nation, to get back on their feet economically, eh to live decent and satisfied lives because in that way they will help us to combat the ideas that lie back of the type of police communist state that the Soviets are at present. (8:25)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm All right. Well now, uh you just said that that you thought that the money that we were sending--the goods and supplies and so forth that we were sending to Yugoslavia of late was mostly to--uh for humanitarian purposes.

[ER:] Well it's not all, but I said that to--in great part [ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap] it was to alleviate-

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well what about--what about uh Red China where they have uh a great famine uh threatening [ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap] the population today?

[ER:] Well, at the present moment as long as Red China is actively fighting against us, I don't think we should do anything for Red China. Um it's unfortunate--because I hate to see um this country not aid when there is a-a real um uh catastrophe which affects the people of a country, but as long as they are actual aggressors I don't think we can, but the minute aggression stops I think we should. (9:26)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, what would you do with regards to the Soviet Union if they had uh a drought there and uh the population was in dire straits?

[ER:] I would help the population without any question because we are not at war with the Soviet Union at present, except in a surreptitious way which is their way of going to war. But, that is the Kremlin's work and not the people, and if there was a catastrophe which threatened the people, I would feel that we would gain by showing them um how democracy feels about the individual and the individual's rights. (10:08)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, of course, I feel that if we gave help to the Soviet Union or we gave it to Red China uh when there was no actual aggression going on that those governments would just take those supplies and use them for their own propaganda purposes.

[ER:] That might well be and there might be a way eh of um changing the propaganda, um of-of making it a condition, I mean of sending in certain people and-and being able to do things. I remember very well that when we uh sent things at another time to Byelorussia, one of our people who was distributing them said that "nobody could change the knowledge of the people, that those cans of food had USA on them."

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm.

(Break 10:54-11:03)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] With us today, Mother, is a very interesting young man who's just finished producing and directing an extraordinary motion picture which he also wrote. It uh hasn't been released yet uh, but when it is, it'll certainly cause a great deal of comment. So, uh we have him here with us today and his name is Mr. Arch Oboler.

[ER:] I'm so glad to have you here, Mr. Oboler.

[Arch Oboler:] I'm very happy to be here, thank you.

[ER:] Well, now we'll start right in and ask you questions about the things that uh I'm very anxious to know about and I know our radio audience is interested in. Now, after Pearl Harbor you wrote and broadcast ninety plays for the war effort. What sort of plays were they?

[Arch Oboler:] Well Mrs. Roosevelt, I believed that the best way to reach the people with the issues of the war--one of the best ways, was through the emotion of-of the drama and that's the sort of plays I wrote. They uh ran the gamut of uh the blood bank to the larger issues of the war. They were written for the moment and I hope they were effective in the moment.

[ER:] Well, um I-I think you're right that um uh through the emotions you create in the drama, you probably can get a great deal across that uh people cannot understand otherwise. And I noticed that in your *-Who's Who* history, much of your work comes under the head of public service. Um, do you um-- you therefore seem to think that uh these public issues um are better presented in this way, which I can understand but is there--is it always possible to do it without having um for instance discussion and different points of view presented? (13:11)

[Arch Oboler:] Well, I-I don't want to imply that uh on this program you should uh bring in uh Bette Davis and uh Mr. Stewart at all who discuss all matters. Hardly that, I do think there as-as you imply there's a place and a time for the use of-of drama. I do believe that drama sometimes tends to uh, shall we say, oversimplify issues and uh, in some hands, emotionalize in-uh-uh issues uh far beyond the point they should be emotionalized. Yet in the hands of uh-of the adroit, I-I think they can well serve their purpose, particularly in the terms of uh cut-and-dried public issues. After all, there is no argument, Mrs. Roosevelt, 'bout the need of-of serum and [ER and Arch Oboler overlap] uh that sort of thing.

[ER:] No, that true there is no argument or discussion about that, you're just trying to make it uh appear important to people, that's what you're trying to do. [Arch Oboler: Exactly, exactly.] Uh I-I went to see uh a movie the other night, um which was a very dramatic movie. It made me very miserable, um but it had at the end of it an appeal um that all those who knew really, who'd been through the war, um should keep telling us at home that we ought to con---to stay strong. And um I wondered if uh to most people that really carried the message that it carried to me, which meant that you had to be strong in-in all ways at home, and I wondered if the movie medium had been used to the greatest advantage in that case because it seems to me that in that medium you have great opportunities to say more perhaps than you say ordinarily. Now, you came into the movie production field and what was your reason? Was it because you felt you could say more through the movie?

[Arch Oboler:] Exactly, you know the radio we're talking on now is a one-dimensional medium. Uh in motion pictures, through the two dimensions, one's able to say a great deal more. I-I find an excitement in motion pictures that goes far beyond uh radio only in that uh the addition of the filmic to the spoken word can give so much more meaning and so much um more personalized meaning rather to the issue.

(15:53)

[ER:] Well, [ER clears her throat] Um I-I think that-I think that's true because you're-you're seeing it and hearing um, but also I wonder if we used [coughing] to the fullest--what I'm trying to get at I think is that um uh you-you have to appeal to so many different kinds of people, and if you appeal only um in one way you only reach a-a certain type of audience and it seems to me that the movies might be able to reach with a-a message a-a a lot of different kinds of people that could understand different shades of meaning and they don't always do that.

[Arch Oboler:] How right you are. You know in-in my radio work I always felt this way, that if I failed to reach a mass mind with the particular idea I-I was trying to put across or explain through the drama, I had failed miserably because--and at the same time, if I didn't reach, shall we say the um the upper IQs with my idea through the same play I-I-I failed. And so what I tried to do was this, I tried to put the idea into that sort of a story that even if one missed the philosophical content, um the storyline itself was such that it enabled one somehow to uh get some of the idea, and that's what, of course, what I-I-I'm trying to do in the motion picture I have done--and I'm going to do. It's the very sort of thing that you're talking about. I think it's about time that um our motion pictures weren't so black and white you know, either Betty Grable or um the larger issues, a-a-a-a welding of the two. So, a mass audience gets a part of that which now is only reserved for um, as I said before, those who can get uh complex ideas. (18:06)

[ER:] Now, in your new moving picture, which is uh *Five* isn't it? [Arch Oboler: Yes, *Five*.] I understand that you wrote it uh in Africa where you--What-what were you doing in Africa? Were you on a trip or a trip undertaken for the purpose of writing or what was the--?

[Arch Oboler:] Well I always wanted to go to Africa. I started out in life to be a zoologist, now I am confessing [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] my love of turtles and lizards and snakes and uh somehow in um certain elements of show business that I've come into in later life, I don't think I've been very far from zoology. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh.]

[ER:] Well I know a young boy whose chief interest in life is bugs! [ER laughing] He's spends his life looking for bugs.

[Arch Oboler:] Well, I think that's-that's a very important venture. I uh-- who-who is to say to say that it's not as important as looking for new materials to-to make fissionable, you know? [ER Laughs] But I went

to Africa, to answer you directly, because I'd always been curious about Africa and uh the opportunity to do some radio broadcasts from Africa. So, off I went with Mrs. O and uh a safari. (19:17)

[ER:] And uh did that give you leisure to write or did you find that you had so much to do uh on safari that you had no time to [ER laughs] devote to anything but gathering impressions?

[Arch Oboler:] Well really Mrs. Roosevelt-Mr. Roosevelt, in spite of uh what the so-called explorers uh tell one, uh Africa can--going from place to place in Africa, can be as boring as going from place to place on--I don't know your subways very well, but I think the I-IRT day after day. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] There's hundreds of miles of nothingness and on those hundreds of miles of nothingness going from uh excitement to nothing to excitement, I had plenty of time to think about the state of the world and uh to think about the picture *Five*.

[ER:] Um that's-that's very interesting and um what part of Africa--I'm-I'm just curious, what part of Africa did you cover? (20:19)

[Arch Oboler:] Well, I stayed away from the uh tourist routes the uh--I should say the explorers' routes. I keep saying that because you know, um the minute I got to Africa, I found that most of the books I'd read about Africa, and most of the articles I'd read, and all of the motion picture I'd seen about Africa were completely wrong. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs.] Uh you could find just as much excitement in the Bronx Park zoological park as you could in most of the places that these explorers had done most of their great quote exploring unquote. (20:52)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And it was pretty highly organized to take you on an exploration, wasn't it over there?

[Arch Oboler:] Oh, very definitely. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] When they see an American come, the cash register gets polished [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh] up. Uh-uh can you imagine this, they charge four thousand dollars a month for two people to go out on a hunt. Now, uh I say can you imagine this because after you've been in Africa for a while, as I was, you discover you can get exactly the same service for a sum total of one hundred dollars a month.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[ER:] Oh dear! That is some difference.

[Arch Oboler:] Of course I-I if I might um use um uh names at the moment, as you know uh a motion picture was recently made called *King Solomon's Mines*, a very successful picture, [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm] and I understand that after that motion picture company left Africa, uh all of England's problems as far as the dollar balance was concerned [Elliott Roosevelt: unknown word were solved] were solved completely. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] They joined up with one of those companies, you know the four thousand dollars for two companies--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yeah. I think I have to interrupt here for just a minute so that Ben Grauer can come in and deliver one of his short messages and then we'll be back again in our discussion.

[ER:] You're right.

(Break: 22:05-22:14)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now Mother, I think uh we can go back to our discussion with Mr. Oboler and his uh safari into darkest Africa. (22:22)

[ER:] All right. Well, now I want to know, if you'd tell me, why you gave your picture the rather curious title of *Five*?

[Arch Oboler:] Because in the picture, five people are left on Earth after the last atom bomb has fallen. I know there's a dull silence after that one! [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes. [ER: Oh my!] You paint a rather grim picture.

[ER:] Only five people are left? [Arch Oboler: Yes.] And the atom bomb has consumed the world as a whole, is that the actual story?

[Arch Oboler:] It isn't the atom bomb because um looking in my own crystal ball, I don't think that the atom bomb uh or a series of them will destroy the Earth. Rather it's um radioactive dust. The dusting of the cities of the world somewhat in the manner of a farmer renting an airplane to dust the boll weevil out of his cotton.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And what effect does that have upon the rest of life on the planet?

[Arch Oboler:] Well, uh perhaps it would be best told by my um giving you a uh quick resume of the motion picture, if I might. I think it's pretty much told in the opening and closing dialogue. The opening we have a girl, dazed, complete state of shock, running around an empty village crying, "Help me, somebody help me." When the picture is over an hour and a half later, she is looking up and saying, "I want to help you." That pretty much tells the story of the picture in itself. Insofar as what happened to the um rest of the fauna and flora, well it's a wonderful thing about being a prophet, particularly being a prophet about atomic uh radiation, uh you know blame well that if you guess wrong no one's going to tap you on the shoulder and want his money back. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh]

[ER:] Where did you make the picture actually? (24:16)

[Arch Oboler:] The entire picture was made um in my backyard in the Santa Monica Mountains in California. Uh I live up a very rugged terrain up there, it's-it's a sort--as you know--as you very well know, one can have--find all sorts of uh-uh atmosphere in California, 'bout the only reason the movie industry has stayed there rather than on Broadway. And my backyard happens to resemble the um Italian Dolomites. Peculiar structures of um--

[ER:] I know the Dolomites well. so I know what that would be like.

[Arch Oboler:] Looks rather empty and I picked it for the place for the empty world.

[ER:] Well now, did you finance this picture yourself?

[Arch Oboler:] That uh word, finance, just at the moment when I'm feeling so happy, frightens me.

[Elliott Roosevelt laughs] Shall we move on to the uh [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] philosophic content of the picture? [ER laughs] We talk about the people.

[ER:] All right, what about the people?

[Arch Oboler:] We um--when it came to casting the picture, I felt that uh one thing I didn't want to see, making myself the viewer of the picture, was a familiar face uh-uh shall we say like uh Jimmy Cagney

suddenly being the last man left on Earth. Now, perhaps he will be and perhaps it'll be a fine thing, but I-I didn't think that that would lend to a very authentic picture, a naturalistic picture. So starting with the leading man through the five, they're complete unknowns, fresh new faces on-on the screen.

[ER:] Well that's rather interesting, I think. I think that's fun. Well, where did you find them? (25:50)

[Arch Oboler:] I uh, if I may say so in this medium, I found them on [Unknown word: might be "quote"] television kinescopes. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] [ER: I see.] It's a wonderful way to cast pictures. Our-our colored man, who plays Charles Lampkin, plays the most important part on the picture. I saw him on an amateur show um reading a um poem in competition to the lovely young starlets of Hollywood bouncing around singing and dancing and, curiously enough, he won the contest by telephone vote. And that was true right down the line of the people.

[ER:] Now, did it take quite a big staff to produce the picture?

[Arch Oboler:] It was a very exciting adventure because I didn't have to do it in the uh Hollywood norm. Um, it was a small group of people very excited about the subject matter. But you know we forgot one thing, we forgot Newton's law of gravity, that what goes up, down, and so forth. We forgot that we were making a picture on a mountainside, that every time we had to lift one of these cameras, we had to lift it up a thousand feet and take it down a thousand feet, [ER laughs] and by the time we were through we had muscles on us something like Lowell Thomas, Jr. carrying his father on. [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh]

[ER:] Oh dear, uh well it must--did they all stay with you while they did this picture?

[Arch Oboler:] Yes, we had a--we had quite a household. Uh Mrs. Oboler and myself you know, uh went to the mountains because we wanted our aloneness and uh suddenly we were turned into a motion picture studio uh people eating, sleeping, fighting, quarreling, studying with us. It was quite an experience.

[ER:] I think that must be like one of these amateur uh groups that come together to produce plays in the summer [ER and Arch Oboler laughing] [Arch Oboler: Oh yes, yes.] that must be very much like that. Well now, tell me, since you said that this was produced by radioactive dust, um how did you know what the effects of radioactive dust would be?

[Arch Oboler:] Course I could say--talk again about the prophet who's never tapped on the shoulder, but my sister happens to be a um a well-known dermatologist in Chicago on the staff of, I think, the University of Illinois, and uh I consulted with her at great length and when she got all through telling me how it would be, she ended it with "But then" as most competent physicians would, "But then Arch we really don't know, do we?" And they really don't. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[ER:] Well, and of course, uh there is uh as I-I believe a group of people who think they've discovered the way to neutralize radioactivity, which would be interesting if that ever does--is successful. [ER laughs]

[Arch Oboler:] I don't believe it until I read it in *Reader's Digest*. [ER: No.] [All laugh]

[ER:] Well now, um do you really feel that what you've done in this picture is pure fantasy or are you trying to make the public feel that it's a-a possibility? What-what's your intention? (28:53)

[Arch Oboler:] I think my intention can pretty well be told by the opening and closing titles of the picture. [Elliott Roosevelt coughs in the background] At the beginning, the words appear on the screen saying uh, "This is a story about the day after tomorrow," at the close, when it's all over, when the play has resolved

itself, these words appear, "This is a story about a day after tomorrow which will never happen as long as we are strong, as long as we are courageous, as long as we are wise." But I--

[ER:] You have to be so wise. And just at the moment we don't seem to be showing much wisdom.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I think it uh--Mother has lately come to feel that uh humanity as a whole is uh intent upon not showing very much wisdom in their uh meetings down at the United Nations. She's run into so much bickering and squabbling and smallness that she wonders if we ever will find any way to [ER: Well] search for wisdom--

[ER:] I-I'm not sure it's only at the United Nations. I-I think we ourselves are lacking in um uh wisdom. Um, but now in your play only two out of the five survive. Um what do you really want the public to get out of this besides--you say, you hope they'll get wisdom. It's hard for the public to get wisdom and um--so what uh what--in writing it you really were thinking about the whole of the future and your object was to tell the people something on every level of intelligence um which would affect that future, which would affect what they would do in that future. Now, I suppose--the play's to be shown in New York, isn't it? (30:49)

[Arch Oboler:] Yes, shortly. We're arranging those business details but I--

[ER:] Well then [coughing], what are your plans for the future?

[Arch Oboler:] I think that uh what the motion picture *Five* says about the future, um and-and what it says how the public should think on all levels can pretty much be told by, if I might quote from a play I wrote five years ago broadcast during the last war, the beginning of the last war. Uh as you know, I'm no performer but I'd just like to read it to you [ER: Yes.] if I might. It's a letter from a father to a-- from a son to a father and the father is reading it. He says, "And it's being alive that I want to write you about, Father. In your last letter you made a wish to me, do you recall? You said that you wished that I could have in this my twenty-third year, the life you knew when you were twenty-three, and then you filled five solid pages with memories of those years, the glorious turn of the century, you called it. America, after long years of struggling was sitting down to enjoy her new richness of soil and force and minds, the accumulation of all the hard work of all her people, and men like you built their homes and raised their families and put their monies in the bank, and life outside was bright and glistening. Men wrote about when knighthood was in flower, and sang of daisy bells, and read of David Harum, and applauded actors playing Beau Brummell and Monte Cristo and Ben-Hur and Floradora.]. The glorious nineteen-hundreds, yes, when America was rich and growing richer and everything would always be that way. For we, indeed, were quite the wisest and there was no world but our world, and there were two broad oceans all around us and life was good and safe, safe, everlastingly safe. And that's why you wanted to give me your old world, Father, to give me safety, but now I tell you I don't want it.

For in that safety was a decay that grew and grew, a rottenness of men who thought security could be bought with strong beams in their houses and thick vaults in their banks, who talked of Christ and who applauded evil when it grew powerful, who thought that the world of their family was more important than the world of men. That safety, Father, no, not at the price of a world where men grow fat and children hungry, not in a world where every fifty years they blast and bomb and burn your churches, where power feeds itself on persecution, where greed stands upon the throats of all people. I don't want that world, I tell you. This is my world and this is my day. For now, at last, men fight and know that they are fighting against the miseries you forgot were in your world. Good and evil, clearer than ever before in the history of man, stand facing each other across the blood and tears. Yes, this is my day, Father, our day, our fight. I may die today, tomorrow, very soon perhaps, but I'll be fighting for my world. And even dead it'll be my world, a world of people living in the peace that will come, must come, the peace of all

the brotherhood of men together at last in common decency, in simple justice.' So ends the letter from the man who was my son, dated December seventh, Pearl Harbor or dated December seventh, tomorrow."

[ER:] Thank you very much, that's um a very wonderful thing to say, but sometimes I think that it's almost harder to decide how you shall do things to live than how you shall live for things by dying.

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