

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

November 11, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about different committees of the United Nations and the makeup of the United States' delegation to the UN. In the interview segment, ER discusses the hotel industry with Neil Lang, the general manager of the Park Sheraton, and Bob Neal, the Park Sheraton's resident manager.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Neil Lang, Bob Neal

[ER:] What are we talking about today, Elliott?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I have a question that has come in from one of our listeners who's been watching uh the television programs that have been emanating from the United Nations, some of the coverage of the United Nations by the television stations. And uh this person is quite confused. Uh as a matter of fact, he doesn't quite understand about the makeup on the United Nations organization because he's been seeing uh-uh some of the plenary sessions and committee meetings and Security Council meetings and he just doesn't understand what it's all about. And uh so could you just reduce it to nice simple terms and explain to us what is the makeup of the United Nations?

[ER:] Alright, there's this thing called the General Assembly that's meeting right now, that is a um meeting of delegates from all the nations that are members of the United Nations, now 60 nations, and each delegation is entitled to five delegates and five alternates, and they bring advisors and clerical help of different kinds with them. Now we have when we first meet what are known as plenary sessions they meet at Flushing. And that—those sessions are attended by the whole delegations at first because there is a general debate. That is when the heads of delegations um make their big speeches on the things that they hope are going to be done during the session in a general way before the subjects are signed by the general committee to different committees.

There are six main committees. In each of those committees of the general assembly one representative delegate from each country sits, and to those committees there are assigned different items for discussion, for decision, and so forth. Now Committee One is the political committee and it goes right on down, Committee Two is economic, Committee Three is humanitarian and educational and cultural um and social questions, Committee Four is budget I think, or Five is budget, or no Four is trusteeship, uh questions that come up in relation to non-self-governing territories and peoples, Five is budget, and Six is legal questions. Now the General Committee allots these things, and there's one extra committee that's been created called the Ad Hoc Political Committee, which takes political questions that um cannot be covered because that's the greatest number of things discussed--can't be covered by committee one the political committee. And those committees sit and as they finish their discussions and are ready to report back to the General Assembly where the final vote is taken.

When enough uh items have accumulated they call a plenary session, then the delegate on the committee whose report is going to be read must be there for that uh session but the whole delegation doesn't have to be there. Perhaps the delegate and the head of the delegation or perhaps just two or three will be at those plenary sessions. Then of course your Economic and Social Council meetings and your Security Council meetings come at different times during the year and they have um members that are permanently here and that come whenever they're called. Some of those meetings, not the Security Council, but the Economic and Social Council are held in Geneva and some of the committees and commissions that meet at different times during the year are held both at Geneva and here. And it's a

rather complicated set up, but really it isn't complicated when you're working on it, and it works out quite uh easily. And at the end of the session you have plenaries again, and hear the final reports of everything that has been done, where all the delegations are together.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right well, now there's several more questions, do you suppose after I get this uh next uh little message about our sponsors off my chest that you could give me some more information?

[ER:] I'll try to. I never know whether I can help [ER laughs].

(Break from 5:11-5:27)

[ER:] Now I'm ready, Elliott, to try to answer your other questions.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right well, I'd like to ask first of all, because you've explained the general makeup, I'd like to get down to some of the delegations now. I'd like to find out a little bit about them. Ah how many members are there on the American delegation, the US delegation?

[ER:] Well, there are five. All the delegations have a right to five delegates and five alternates. Now we have five delegates and five alternates, but there are a few of the smaller countries that don't name their full quota and in that case they have a dreadful time to cover the committees, and that's why you sometimes find that a vote will be recorded and there will be a number of absences. That simply means that that country doesn't have enough delegates and alternates to cover all the committees and just can't be there at—all the time. But um we have um our full quota of delegates and alternates, we have a great number of advisors and political officers. I think in all probably we must have something like two hundred people working all the time.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Alright, who are the five uh members of the uh American delegation [ER: Well—] and how were they chosen?

[ER:] Well, the choosing of the eh delegation is first of all the State Department um talks over who would be good on the delegation and then when they are agreed on the people that would cover the items they have—they think of first the kind of subjects and try to choose people that uh will do well with some of those subjects so they can be divided up among them. And um then they present those names to the President. If he approves of them they are presented to the Senate, sent by the President, and the Senate has to accept them and ratify them or whatever you choose to call it.

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, how long can--do they serve?

[ER:] Just one term, even if you have two terms in a year of the General Assembly you get new, uh you have to be nominated all over again and you have to be passed on by the Senate. You never serve more than one term except in the case of your Security Council members and Economic um and Social Council and some of your commissions. There your term is usually eh given to the country, do you see, and it um may be a three year term or a two year term or whatever was decided on. Then as a rule, the member chosen by the county is chosen for the full term that the country has on that commission [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] and they may not be renamed. As a matter of fact, the big countries are nearly always renamed on the committees and commission, and but um that doesn't mean of course that they have to choose the same representative, but usually a representative is chosen for a—the period that there are given to serve. (8:51)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Alright, who are our five delegates right now?

[ER:] Well, uh Ambassador [Warren R.] Austin who is the permanent member on the Security Council, Senator [John] Sparkman, Senator [Henry Cabot] Lodge, and there is I think sort of agreement—um we all felt the need very much of having legislative uh connection again. We lost it for a while uh when Senator [Arthur] Vandenberg and Senator [Tom] Connally and the two congressmen who used to be on were off, and I think there's a sort of agreement that we will have um senators and congressmen alternating. This year we have Senator Sparkman of Alabama, and Senator Lodge, and Mr. [John Foster] Dulles, and myself. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yours truly.] And um uh then as alternates: Mrs. [Edith] Sampson of Chicago, Senator [John] Cooper, Mr. [Benjamin] Cohen, and um Ambassador um [Elliott Roosevelt: Gross.] [Ernest] Gross, I think. And Mr. [John] Ross.

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Alright, now um we have one, we have one more question I think that we can put before we have to go onto another part of the program. I think that we have um one principle antagonist in the UN at the present time. Who heads the Russian delegation and who is their member on the Security Council?

[ER:] Mr. [Andrey] Vyshinsky is the head of their delegation and Mr. [Yakov] Malik is their permanent member on the Security Council.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I see, and uh and Mr. Vychinsky is also foreign minister, is he not?

[ER:] Yes, and I should have said that of course uh our Secretary of State is head of our delegation whenever he can be here.

[Elliott Roosevelts:] Cut.

(Break 10:40-10:57)

[ER:] Today we're going to go behind the scenes in the management running of a very large hotel, none other than the Park Sheraton where I live. And to tell us about this my guests are Mr. Neil Lang general manager and Mr. Bob Neal resident manager. First, I'll introduce Mr. Lang.

[Neil Lang:] Good evening, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] And now Mr. Neal.

[Bob Neal:] Good evening, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Well, I just want to ask you one thing that has nothing to do with hotels, Mr. Lang. You were telling me eh something about having seen the White House um in its eh repair stage, what about it?

[Neil Lang:] Well I was down there about ten days ago. I dropped into see uh Bob Landry, General Landry perhaps I should say. He is the president's aide for air, and um he took me all through the uh construction work, and I was completely amazed to see that the White House had been gutted, there isn't a single room or floor in it. It's like a huge papier-mâché box and they're building a complete steel super structure inside.

[ER and Neil Lang overlap]

[ER:] Have they kept the old walls, thick as they were?

[Neil Lang:] No mam, nothing, nothing. The only--it looks--just as I said it looks like a huge paper box that would blow-blow over in a good wind.

[ER:] That extraordinary because those old walls were so thick, I shouldn't have thought it was possible.

[Neil Lang:] Ahh and other thing that I saw that attracted my attention, it looked like a bomb shelter but actually it isn't. It's a uh-uh huge concrete block house that's being built on the back side of the White House and all of the machinery, the air conditioning machinery, and uh the pumps and everything of a mechanical nature going to go to that one uh structure which will be under the surface of the grass.

[ER:] Well, I just hope that when they get to building it again they put back the old woodwork and the old ceilings so that at least I will be able to recognize it if I ever see it again.

[Neil Lang:] I saw President Roosevelt's um ah swimming pool also.

[ER:] You did, well that's still in existence.

[Neil Lang:] Wonderful, General Vaughn was swimming in it when I was there.

[ER:] Well, that's something anyways that will stay the same. [ER and Neil Lang laugh] Well I suppose that we ought to come to saying something about um running a hotel. I-I wonder, um who shall I ask, you Mr. Neil perhaps. Do you find that it's a terrible responsibility?

[Bob Neal:] Well really Mr. Lang has all the worries. I'm associated with Mr. Lang for some time. And um he has the worries and I uh sit next door to him and uh try to help out as much as I can. But there are lots of worries nowadays when rooms are hard to get here in New York City.

[ER:] Well, I just wonder how you got into the hotel business. Which of you would like to tell me? A—I-I wonder if you went through a regular hotel course once upon a time.

[Neil Lang:] No, I um I got in quite by accident. I put in many years with the New York Central Railroad with their legal department, and uh I boarded the Detroit one night headed for Detroit out of Harman, and I ran into an old friend of mine by the name of Ed Frawley who was then the general manager of the Fort Shelby, and uh he waved a piece of paper at me and said I have just been appointed General Manager of the Park Central Hotel in New York City. So um he said, "if you could find a place where we can sit down, I'd like to buy a drink and we'll celebrate." And somewhere during that evening while we were celebrating I got out of the hotel—out of the railroad business and into the hotel business.

[ER:] Well, that's just happen so, I-I'll tell you an amusing sidelight, when I used to go every year to farm and home week at Cornell, where they have a hotel managers course. Uh I used to meet and be waited on the luncheon by a lot of young boys that were going to manage hotels someday, and now to my complete surprise every now and then I run into one of them who says "oh, I waited on you in Cornell once." So that I just wondered that how both of you came into this originally. How did you come in, Mr. Neal?

[Bob Neal:] Well, I started out as a rural school teacher up in northern Wisconsin teaching uh rural school of fifty-three children, and then went in an educational consultant for one of the large publishing companies. After that into the war and was a personnel officer in the air operational training command a unit that was uh in Miami, Florida. After the war, I wanted to do personnel work, and I joined Mr. Lang at the Roney Plaza.

[ER:] Now that is very interesting. It shows just by what strange ways we get into the hotel business, and yet I think both of you probably had very good training because really being in the hotel business is knowing how to deal with people, I imagine. And though I think that now we have to let our sponsors have a word, uh I'll come back to that.

(Break 16:01 -16:07)

[ER:] We'll come back to that question of what one really needs uh to have as a background for running a hotel. Um I'd like to ask you something about uh your staff, Mr. Lang. How do you manage it? How big is it? Um tell me about it.

[Neil Lang:] Well, eh we can use this particular hotel as a uh as a subject for discussion. We have slightly in excess of fifteen hundred rooms here at the Park Sheraton and we have a staff at the present time of about seven hundred and fifty. That's about maximum staff here. [ER: I should think it was.] And uh I think the real crux of the hotel business is that it involves a maximum of cooperation. And I'm prepared to say after twenty years in the hotel business, that the most helpless man in the hotel is the manager [ER laughs]. I'll explain that in this way, if you call me up to render some sort of complaint about some part of our service, unless I have the good fortune to be able to reach a telephone and call somebody up to pass it along there's nothing I can do about it. I don't bake any cakes, I don't clean any bathrooms, I don't make any beds, it takes seven hundred people to do those jobs, and they keep the hotel running. So I think in order to have a full appreciation of this business you have to have a feeling of humility for these small people who do small jobs, and I can say in all frankness none of them are overpaid.

[ER:] Um and yet they're much better paid than they used to be, I imagine.

[Neil Lang:] Yes, and that's a very fortunate thing for our industry. I don't think we can ever sink to the depths of the 1933, four, and five Depression because they are now organized and they're being paid a reasonably good salary.

[ER:] I-I- I was quite shocked the other day by something, and I wonder if I'd find the same thing in the hotel business, as long as we're on this question. Do you uh count--do you uh expect to pay a living wage for all the uh occupations in the hotel or do you count on tips largely to um carry out--uh to fill out that wage?

[Neil Lang:] I'm--that's a very interesting question and it-it calls for an interesting answer. I'm sorry to say that there are certain categories in our business that--um where the employees depend upon gratuities, uh that isn't the healthiest sort of a situation but it's uh it's uh a situation that has existed for many years.

[ER and Neil Lang overlap]

[ER:] I never thought it was healthy in the United States-- in America-- because I always felt that um we ought to get away from it if we could, both in houses and in other areas of business. [Neil Lang: I couldn't agree with you more, couldn't agree with you more.] But it--I know it exists, I was amused the other day um I got into a taxi cab and um the taxi cab driver said to me, "I don't often pick up people here because people who come out from that particular place don't give very good tips and we work on a commission basis plus tips." And I said, "what, what, I don't understand that." And he said, "oh yes, we get a commission and then we count on tips, so if people don't give us good tips, they tax us on what they thing we ought to get and we pay our tax every day, and um we work on that basis. And if people don't tip us right, why then we don't make as much as we should." So uh this was all news to me, and I said-- I began at once to find out what a proper tip was, that always bothers me [ER laughs].

[Neil Lang:] Speaking about tips, I had a rather unusual experience. I get in a taxi cab here about two weeks ago when the American Bankers Association was here. And as I got in I noticed the cab driver was in very- very bad mood, he said, "I just picked up the first stiff I've had in years". So I said, "what do you mean," so he said, "I picked up one of those bankers and took him across town and the clock read sixty cents, he changed a dollar and gave me sixty and walked away, so there's a banker for you" [ER and Neil Lang laugh].

[ER:] That's really funny. But I-I'm glad to know that you think it's something that we perhaps should be working towards someday eliminating. Do you feel the same way, Mr. Neal?

[Bob Neal:] Yes, there are—I only know of one or two hotels that tried to eliminate tipping all together and it wasn't successful at all.

[ER:] Oh you can't do it now, it's not possible. But we don't do it in this country as we uh used to in-in Europe. I remember when you went to dine in a house and you had to give a tip eh to the butler as you came out or you weren't a welcome guest. And I happened to read a little story the other day, eh written by a um German woman who said she not reported to the Gestapo once because she was the one guest who had tipped the butler as she came out. Which was an interesting tale I thought and sidelight on what tipping did.

[Neil Lang:] You know, speaking of tips, sometimes people over-tip and that's just as a big a-a danger as those who under-tip.

[ER:] Oh I'm sure that's so, well now we have to stop for a minute and let someone else talk.

(Break 21:16-21:25)

[ER:] Mr. Lang, I wonder if you could tell me whether you keep in a hotel like this any records to show from what parts of the country and um perhaps many countries your guests come?

[Neil Lang:] Yes, we have a very complete guest history here. And um the record shows um the date of each guest arrival, the date of his departure, the room that he or she occupied, and the rate that's paid. Now at the end of each month those records are summarized and I get a report as to the trends in certain sections, you'll find them up certain times of the year. Uh I-I might point out that um normally uh Philadelphia would contribute the greatest amount of transient registrations to a large New York City hotel, but here it isn't true. The Sheraton influence uh with Boston headquarters means that we get more registrations from Boston and Massachusetts than we do from Philadelphia and Pennsylvania which is running against the trend, you see. [ER: That's, yes, that's--] That's because that's because the Sheraton office is located in Boston, they feed.

[ER:] Mhm, well now having--I'm sure you do have a rather varied group of people. I wonder whether you Mr. Neal have any interesting story about um any guest that you've had, either here or before you came here?

[Bob Neal:] Oh we had an interesting thing happen ah last June. One night I had a call a frantic call about 11:30. A mother, turned out to be a mother, called and said, "You can't do this to my daughter, Mr. Neal, you can't do this to my daughter." Not knowing exactly what she meant I said, "Well, I'm sorry I don't know your daughter." She said, "Well, my daughter just called me long distance, she was married in NY and she came to this hotel to spend her honeymoon and you gave her a room with twin beds, and she was very much disturbed" [ER Laughs].

[ER:] That I think is very funny. I'm sure you have many other things, what about you, Mr. Lang, can you think of some interesting experiences?

[Neil Lang:] I think one of my most interesting experiences occurred while I was with the Roney Plaza and it was in connection with the visit of President Truman to attend the American Legion convention in October, 1948. The secret service came to the hotel about three days before the president was due. And they made a complete survey of the physical layout and they made it quite plain that while the president was there they wanted to occupy all of the rooms on either side of the suite in which he was-to be assigned. They also made arrangements with the elevator company to have an a-a special mechanic on the elevator machinery, and he in turn was guarded by a secret service man while the president was in the hotel. And we had to submit to them a list of all the employees who would handle the president in anyway or serve the food that he might eat. I think there was something like fifty-five or sixty names submitted

and in twenty four hours they had been cleared with eh the--some source in Washington and they sent me a telegram saying there were two people, two aliens that they wanted off the property while the President was there. Seemed that these people for some reason or another were not in the good graces of our government, and while they may have been good Rooney Plaza employees they weren't satisfactory while Mr. Truman was on the premises. We had--

[ER:] I imagine that was just as a precaution.

[Neil Lang:] That's right.

[ER:] And what um, I'm very familiar with this sort of thing, I'm sure you had people all--dotted all around the hotel while the president was there.

[Neil Lang:] We did, um it was something like twenty secret service men in the hotel while he was there. And um your good friend Jim Rowley, [ER: Yes.] he was he was in charge, a very fine young man.

[ER:] I--that's-that's very interesting, because I don't think most people have any idea of the precautions that are taken every time the President goes anywhere at all. It's uh -- when he goes on a train and particularly in war time of course uh that was just uh terribly--it was even bad in the White House. And I never could get accustomed to it, they were always so particular about everything. Have you any other interesting stories that you can think of, either of you?

[Bob Neal:] Well we had a little happening out in the Middle West when I was working with the Midwest Hotel. One night a gentleman came in with a reservation and he had a large box waiting outside for him, and when he registered he said that he had to have his guest in his room. We later found that the guest was to be a seal, and he wasn't interested in bathing himself so long as the seal had a place to sleep in the bathtub [Bob Neal laughs].

[ER:] So he took a room and a box but the box was for the seal, is that right, Mr. Neal? [Bob Neal: That's right, that's right.] I think that's very amusing, I wonder if you had any other kinds of animals. No?

[Bob Neal:] No, I can't think of anything at the moment.

[ER:] I could tell you about some I've had at home, but I won't because I see our sponsor should come in.

(Break 26:29-26:34)

[ER:] I'd like to ask you a question, Mr. Neal. Um do you find that your accident rate among employees in a hotel as large as this runs very high?

[Bob Neal:] Up until this year the Park Sheraton, which was formally uh under another name, had a large accident rate. In fact, uh a year ago at this time our particular hotel had the worst record of any large hotel in the city. At this time we are fourth from the top being the best in the city as far as accidents are concerned.

[ER:] Well, what do you attribute that to?

[Bob Neal:] Spending time with employees, understanding their jobs, how to handle tools, explaining to them the seriousness of accidents. Because you see when a man or a lady loses time on accidents the first week they're not paid and there's a full week before they can draw compensation because of their workman's compensation.

[ER:] Well, that's-that's very interesting and um I-I think that would lead into you said spending time with them and uh teaching them about their jobs. Isn't there something too that is important, and I'd like

to ask you think Mr. Lang, isn't there something too in having a kind of human relationship with them? So that uh perhaps you notice if um something is wrong. Because I've always thought that accidents happen perhaps when people's minds were taken up and they didn't pay attention.

[Neil Lang:] Uh I think this statement can be made without fear of contradiction. At any time you have a high accident ratio in a hotel you've got a hotel staff that is not properly organized. When we came in here a year ago, as Mr. Neal has pointed out, one of our biggest problems was to reduce the accidents. Because in the final analysis that uh saves or affects the return on your insurance premium and as we got the hotel organized and we got the right type of people in key jobs and a better understanding between the department heads and the people who completed the staff we saw the accident ratio steadily falling. Now um to get back to the later part of your question, about the relationship, to get the human feeling between the boss and the people who work for him that's very vital in our business, very vital, because um the important people are-are the people with the smaller jobs, I pointed out before, the doorman, the bellboy, the elevator boy, the starter, the maid they're the people that you come in contact as a guest. I seldom see more than a small percentage of our paying guests.

[ER:] Well, now they must have things like everybody else that go wrong at home and that must affect their work now and then.

[Neil Lang:] Very, very--and you must take that human factor into consideration eh we ask a boy to open an elevator door and smile at a guest and say good morning, we know nothing about what is happening at his home, perhaps he is having difficulty meeting a doctor bill or some sudden emergency has developed, so we we've got to be a little on the human side, we can't expect too much.

[ER:] Is there um much chance for advancement among your staff members?

[Neil Lang:] Um at a recent meeting of the Sheraton cooperation in Boston, the um top management in advanced what I consider one of the finest ideas in the hotel business in a long time. They pointed that in every large hotel there were men and women who were-were good and were entitled to advancement, but the circumstances just didn't permit us to advance them because perhaps above them the jobs were capably filled, so now we're filing in Boston the names and-and all of the information about people who are entitled to employment so that the Sheraton is building up a what I might call a talent file at the home office. So if the man at the Biltmore wants a good sous-chef he may take one of our men, but it gives them a chance to get a better job and make more money.

[ER:] Oh I think that's a wonderful thing, it must be a help among your boys. You'd be amused to know that one of your boys in the elevator confided in me that he thought he might have to go back in the army and he was feeling very sad about it [ER laughs]. They talk-they talk to me quite a bit because I go down early and gather the papers up. And so we always talk and say good morning.

[Neil Lang:] I'd like also to tell you that um the relationship between staff and top management uh can be improved in this manner. We have a bowling team, now um our bowling team bowls against other hotels every Thursday night, and Mr. Neal is one of the members of our team. He'll be over there tonight bowling until about midnight. And then in the spring we have a baseball team which competes in the baseball league. I try to get out to as many games as I can, Mrs. Lang goes out, that is a great factor if-if your people see you at the bowling alley and at the baseball park, they-they love it.

[ER:] Well, that's fine. I thank you very much for being with us today and I think everyone will understand what it means to run a hotel and now we must go back to another part of our program.

(31:50)

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