

## THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

October 18, 1950

Description: In this segment, ER interviews Sarah Churchill, daughter of Winston Churchill, about her role in the film, *Royal Wedding*.

Participants: ER, Sarah Churchill, Elliott Roosevelt

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[Elliott Roosevelt:] Hello, Al. Roll 'em, please.

[ER:] My charming young guest today is famous not only because of her father but in her own right as well. She is Miss Sarah Churchill.

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt, it's wonderful to see you again.

[ER:] I'm so glad to see you and now besides having introduced you as the daughter of a famous father with a career of your own, I should also add that you have a husband, Anthony Beauchamp.

[Sarah Churchill:] Yes, that's right and uh today actually is the anniversary of--of our wedding.

[ER:] Your first anniversary?

[Sarah Churchill:] Yes.

[ER:] That's interesting. I think it--I was rather--rather hard to take you away [ER laughs]. Well now, Sarah, I believe you recently returned from Hollywood where you completed a picture. Has it been released yet? (1:00)

[Sarah Churchill:] No, it hasn't, and it probably won't be released until early next year. It's a Technicolor film and the technical difficulties, well, the putting together of it are so much harder than the black and white that it takes quite some time after you've finished it before it's released.

[ER:] What's this picture going to be called?

[Sarah Churchill:] It's called *Royal Wedding*, and it's with Fred Astaire, and Jane Powell and Peter Lawford.

[ER:] I don't uh -- somehow I can't associate uh *Royal Wedding* with a musical picture, and I've heard it was-- had a great deal of music in it. Uh why is it called *Royal Wedding*?

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, um yes it's completely a musical picture. It has lovely music in it and--and a wonderful story. The title is uh-- *Royal Wedding* refers to the royal wedding of Princess Elizabeth and Prince Philip, but it only acts as a--a sort of background. The story is the story of a very famous American dance team rather like Adele [Astaire] and Fred Astaire, and they go to England, and they fall in love with English people. And uh they don't want to marry for many reasons because of business reasons and they are happy professionally and--but the romance--the background of romance in London, the royal wedding and all as they walk down the streets, people always talking about it. They--they--they catch the air of romance and they finally decide to get married to their respective [Sarah Churchill laughs] partners.

[ER:] That's rather a charming story, and-and um sounds as-as though it would be not only popular in this country uh but uh popular in England too uh—

[Sarah Churchill:] I think it will be because it--quite half the picture is uh shot in London, Hollywood [Sarah Churchill and ER laugh]. We had to build a whole of the sets, but they were wonderful.

[ER:] That must have been very interesting. You could help them on building the sets, [ER laughs]

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, you know the awful thing was I couldn't really. I was ashamed to find a hard little I knew. They used to come to me, they had a very efficient um sort of technical advisor on it, but they used to come to me suddenly and say--this was before I was about to go on with um um a shot -- they used to say, "Are London policeman clean shaven?" When you come to think of it, I couldn't remember whether they were or not, it was an awful moment. And I remember that in all our comedy films, whenever we have a comedy policeman, he always has a great walrus mustache, so I-I decided that they could be clean shaven or not clean shaven. [Sarah Churchill and ER laugh]

[ER:] That's funny, you know, the little things that uh most of us just never notice in everyday life. I have often been caught that way. People will ask you something uh that you should know because you've lived with it every day of your life probably, [ER laughs] and then when they suddenly ask you, you have no idea whether it is that way or quite a different way. Someone the other day asked me something and I couldn't actually remember um even noticing--it was the color of something, you see, it was something I've seen every day probably, and I never could remember noticing it all. (4:05)

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, I--I couldn't understand-- boy, I was --I'm glad this has happened to you too. [Sarah Churchill laughs].

[ER:] Well, I-I think it's um I think I should look forward to this picture very much, because um I-I like the idea of the background of the story, and I love pictures that are set in surroundings that one knows and can compare with different-different countries. So I should look forward to not only seeing you in the picture, but at the same time to seeing whether I really think that it is like London or it is like wherever it is supposed to be played [ER laughs]. Because um I-I think the accuracy is sometimes quite remarkable in productions from Hollywood. Don't you?

[Sarah Churchill:] Oh, I think it is wonderful, and at the same time that they were building London, they were building Paris on the next door set because they were making *An American in Paris*. To [ER: That--]wonder in two minutes from Piccadilly to Montmartre was very nice.

[ER:] Well, that is very interesting. Now I see that Elliott wants to say a few words.

[Break 5:10 to 5:18]

[ER:] I've always enjoyed uh seeing pictures in which Mr. Astaire played a leading role, and I'd just like to ask you if you enjoyed working with him?

[Sarah Churchill:] Yes, I did. I share your enthusiasm for him, and he is the most um wonderful person to work with. He is very painstaking and very gentle and very kind and very patient [Sarah Churchill laughs].

[ER:] Well, that's nice. It's nice to work with someone [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] that uh makes it easy for one, I think. And now I'd like to ask you something because I don't know how much you've done in television, but I imagine that uh you're going to do more and more, and there must be some um

connection between um television and-and pictures as time goes on. I wonder how it's progressing in England [Elliott Roosevelt coughs]. Tell me a little about it. (6:16)

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, uh I believe it's--you know I'm almost a stranger in England now. I've been away for a year. But I did do one program for television in England, and um I understand that it's progressing in leaps and bounds the--our major difference is, of course, is that we only have one channel.

[ER:] Well, that's something I don't think over here we understand very much about your BBC. Tell us a little about that.

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, the-the--we have no commercials. It is not--it is uh-uh a public corporation that is given some money by royal grant and charter, it is not government controlled, it is non-partisan, and the television is run on the same system. Um we have three uh main channels in our BBC, and then we have subsidiary stations in the North, in the South, in the East, and in the West of England for local news. That takes care of the broadcasting. And then the television, we--our main uh station is situated in Alexandria Park which is on a high hill uh [ER: I must--] above London. (7:27)

[ER:] Above London? [Sarah Churchill: Yes, uh.] I must ask you something. Is your father interested in television?

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, I-I don't know. I don't think he's ever been on television. Uh well, no, I don't think he ever has.

[ER:] I think he'd be wonderful on television!

[Sarah Churchill:] I think he'd be wonderful. Yes, I think they ought to get him. [Sarah Churchill laughs]

[ER:] I think he should be on television because [ER laughs]—

[Sarah Churchill:] I bet they're interested in him.

[ER:] I know-I know he's good on radio because I spent a great deal of time during the war listening to him, but uh I think it would be even more interesting to see him on television.

[Sarah Churchill:] I don't know that they've um--of course they televise, naturally like they do here, all the big uh sport meetings and race meetings, but I don't know they haven't done it too much in political meetings yet, but I expect they'll—

[ER:] Do they ever televise Parliament over there?

[Sarah Churchill:] No, they don't, you see uh we don't uh--you aren't allowed to uh record in Parliament either. You have to go make your speech again in the evening in the BBC which made in some ways additional work for him in the war, because if he delivered a-a major war speech in the afternoon, it was not allowed to be recorded. He would then have to go to the BBC and make a similar one or—

[ER:] I wonder what that uh -- what the reason for that is, because I've always felt our Congress doesn't like to be televised I understand. But I've always thought it would be a wonderful thing in making people feel close [Sarah Churchill: Yes.] to what was going on, and just exactly as televising the United Nations activities has awakened an interest in in the United Nations here, which I never felt until it was televised. (8:58)

[Sarah Churchill:] I-I agree with you. I think that some major occasions like the opening of Parliament may be in a debate uh they feel that the members would have to--would not have the freedom of speaking if the public we're in, but I think in sort of ceremonial occasions, I think it would be wonderful if people could see it.

[ER:] Well, I'm-I have-I have a feeling that in your country and in mine we should do all we possibly can to keep the people of the country um feeling close to their government and uh sensing uh a responsibility for what goes on in the government because that's the real way that you uh keep a democracy going. And so uh I would think that both of us would have to be thinking all the time of how to do that, and television seems [Sarah Churchill: Yes] to be the perfect channel.

[Sarah Churchill:] I agree with you. I mean the sort of--it shouldn't be a mystery. People sometimes get rather awed by politics, [ER laughs] [ER: They're difficult to handle.] but they're not a mystery. [Sarah Churchill laughs]

[ER:] Well, perhaps they feel that it's something that they don't know much about just yet and they don't um uh feel they want to begin. Well, now I think Elliott has to have uh a few--chance to say a few words and then we will be back again.

[Break 10:21 to 10:33]

[Sarah Churchill clears throat]

[ER:] I know a little bit about the work which both you and Mary did during the war. And I would be awfully happy if you would tell our listeners a little bit about what you did during the war period.

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, I was um a WAAF, which is the women's auxiliary branch of the air force, and my particular job was to with photographic interpretation, which I know you know a lot about because of your son, Elliott.

[ER:] I happen to know that you were extraordinary good, how did you get as good as you were?

[Sara Churchill:] Well, I-I don't know because my mathematics weren't any good, but [Sarah Churchill laughs] the hardest part was learning to work out scales of the photographs and-and the maps. And once you've done that it really was quite an elementary mathematical problem, which bored me considerably. The rest of it was really fascinating. And it was really in some ways rather like a sort of jigsaw puzzle. You had to identify things on photographs like guns and ships and things and -- They used to find that women were quite often uh very good at it because they had a very simple approach to it. And uh sometimes they used to want to take out of sorts with plane and show us the guns, to show us what they really look is so that we recognize them on the photographs. But of course they don't look the same on the ground as they look from 30,000 feet up, and they found that we were really much better when we really had no knowledge at all [Sarah Churchill laughs] than when we were given extensive technical training.

[ER:] Well now, that's very interesting because I remember Elliott telling me that your interpretation of the pictures that they took was the best of anyone that did the interpreting.

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, we had a very happy unit because, you'll note, it was a joint unit and um all sort of branches. There was the quick interpretation and then there were the slower forms, and uh I worked through most of them except the very quick one. That was the one you wanted to get in, it was called "First Phase." That was very exciting because then you were on a station where the planes actually came in, and then after that it got decentralized down into various buildings. And I mostly worked in "Second

Phase," which was--you had to do a report in about twenty-four hours. But then there were the uh very studious ones which took two or three weeks, which had their value at the beginning of the war uh more than at the end because they built up a form of intelligence.

[ER:] Well, that's very--it's very interesting, and uh interesting in a way because we got so far away from those days when we were all doing some kind of work of that kind. I uh am glad to have you talk about it again tonight, and then I'd like also to ask you uh because I know that on several occasions you went with your very famous father, Mr. Winston Churchill, to at least two of the big conferences. Were they Yalta and Tehran?

[Sarah Churchill:] Yes, that's right. Yes.

[ER:] That must have been extraordinarily interesting. And I wonder whether you would tell us um a little about um what you saw, because you really were watching history in the making, and um it must um it have been a pretty nerve-wracking way to learn history. Uh you weren't learning it in the way you learn about it in school; you were actually having to live it. And some of the things that make living history hard are the conditions under which one has to live. I imagine you were as comfortable as anyone could be, but you must have had some difficult times. I wonder if you'd tell us a little bit about some of those trips. (14:27)

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, I think that they were really so thrilling and exciting that any conditions that uh-uh-uh existed that might not have been quite comfortable one forgot about. But I think that the most thrilling thing for me was the first time I had ever seen a warship was when we left to go to Tehran, and we went on the battleship Renown. And I remember seeing it as we came out at four o'clock in the afternoon in the small boat that took a launch--that took us out to it. And being immensely impressed by this steel gray low ship -- extraordinarily low they are on the water -- and then I think going through the Straits of Gibraltar and standing on the bridge was the most exciting thing that one could have possibly done. And then, let me see that was 1943, therefore England had been in a blackout for some four years then, and the first time one-one saw lights was the necklace of lights around the base of the Rock of Gibraltar.

[ER:] That must have been perfectly wonderful. We just have to interrupt for a minute because Elliott wants to say a few words.

[Break 15:33 to 15:45]

[ER:] Did you find, Sarah, on those trips that you were able to help your father with some of the mountains of work which you must have had all the time. Uh I've always wondered how much you really could do.

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, unfortunately one could do so little. Uh-uh when Mary and I--when Mary and I when we were in an unofficial capacity although we still wore uniform, it made it simpler to travel that way and-and-and move around. But the journeys were very often, as you know, long and sometimes six days at sea, sometimes twelve to fourteen hours in the air and moving around. And so we would just there really to form some kind of home background for the long journeys and the few moments that there were.

[ER:] You were really there to give companionship whenever and-and really lighten the--get away from work in other words rather than to help with the work, [Sarah Churchill: Yes, I would say.] because there were always people, I imagine, who had to--who had actual [Sarah Churchill: Oh yes.] work to do, but you were there to distract as much as possible from work. Yes, that's--that's what I imagined would be the case. Did you have times when you uh felt a little bit uh lonely and without work or were you always so interested that you couldn't uh?

[Sarah Churchill:] No. One never--the days were quite long, and uh one-- uh it was a job of an ADC, one went everywhere, which was wonderful and interesting. And one stood without in the ante-chamber behind closed doors and waited until they opened [Sarah Churchill laughs].

[ER:] You stood in the rain and stood in the sun [ER and Sarah Churchill laugh] [Sarah Churchill: Stood along with a hat rack.]. You tried to smile on all occasions I'm quite sure [ER laughs].

[Sarah Churchill:] Oh well, that-that really the whole thing was-was an enormous thrill. You-you said it earlier on that it was history in the making, and so one was thrilled with the whole thing.

[ER:] You were thrilled all the time and forgot all the slight discomforts. I-I um I think that I probably appreciate what it was like, because I used to do that occasionally in this country. I --I never went on trips to the big conferences, but uh I went on a great many trips with my husband in this country, and I know very well what it is like to be a sort of ADC [ER laughs] and background. But there must have been some amusing things that happened. Can you remember any of them or have they faded away now? (18:29)

[Sarah Churchill:] Yes, I--there--there were of course amusing things. It is awfully hard to sort them out now because I-I have remembered them, kept them, but I wish one to pick for this evening is so hard. But this one was amusing to begin with, then it might have serious, then, it -it wasn't serious, so it was all right, [ER: Mhm] but it had a complete sort of set of emotions. We were on our way back from Tehran, and we did the long flight from Cairo to Tunis, and we were to spend just the morning there really sort of having baths and changing, and then we would go on to England. And it had been pretty hot in the plane. And we arrived in Tunis, and we were preparing to land, we actually had the wheels down, and suddenly we pulled the wheels up off we went again, so naturally we asked the pilot what it was. And he was like, "I can't understand, but they waved us away." So they tried again, and three times this happened. And it was some concern; thought perhaps something was wrong. And so he at the end of the long flight, he wanted to-to-to get down, so we went to the nearest landing strip, which happened to be a night bomber, Beaufort, I believe they were. And uh we put down there. It wasn't any but about forty miles away from the air field, but that for the reception part was simply quite a long drive [Sarah Churchill laughs]. And it turned out that the field had only been closed for us to land in, some [Sarah Churchill coughs]-- (19:50)

[ER:] And it had been cleared for you to land in [Sarah Churchill: They cleared--] and they wouldn't let you land.

[Sarah Churchill:] And then- then they wouldn't let us. So the reception committee and cars had to tear over muddy roads [Sarah Churchill coughs].

[ER:] I don't think that would have been funny at all [Sarah Churchill: Well]. I think I would have felt that was anything but funny because [ER laughs]—

[Sarah Churchill:] Well, we thought it was funny because there were all these sort of RAF people cleaning their bombers, and it was a surprise to see this plane come down and all these odd people tumble out, you know. And then my father sat on the sort of boxes that they had brought out because right in the middle-- it was a strip completely unsheltered which of course was not too good for him.[ER: Not exactly what you expected]. And they took a few minutes and then of course they started to recognize [Sarah Churchill laughs] him, and then they all left their bombers and came round him, but then after that he caught pneumonia. And we don't know whether it was perhaps because he was sitting there for those few moments from the hot plane [ER: Oh dear.] to the chilled field. But as you know he got over that [ER: Not too bad.] with surprising quickness [Sarah Churchill laughs]. All was well in the end. (20:45)

[ER:] Thank you for telling us that and I see that Elliott wants to say a few words again.

(21:06)

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Transcription: Melissa Perez  
First Edit: Calla Gilson  
Final Edit: Seth LaShier

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