

## THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

October 12, 1950

Description: In the first segment, ER interviews Perle Mesta, U.S. Ambassador to Luxembourg. In the second segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about corruption in the New York City Police Department and in politics more broadly. It appears the segments in this interview are switched; the interview should be in the second half of the show and the listener's question should be at the beginning.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Perle Mesta

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[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now, Mother, I know we have a very fine lady as our guest today, so you'll-- won't you introduce her to our audience?

[ER:] Thank you, Elliott, I'll be very glad to introduce her. I'm particularly happy to greet, here in our own country, Mrs. Mesta, our minister to Luxembourg. She greeted us so warmly when we went to Luxembourg last summer. She made herself really uncomfortable to take in a whole party. We were so many people. It was, really, an imposition.

[Elliott and ER overlap here]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] It certainly was.

[ER:] But she never let us feel that way.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, uh and particularly because the uh the minister's residence in Luxembourg is not the largest household and uh and I [Elliott Roosevelt chuckles] noticed that she managed to put us all away and, and make us all very comfortable; me with uh my two children, and you and Tommy. It was really quite remarkable how well she did.

[ER:] Yes, it was a wonderful thing. So today, I'm very happy to say thank you, Mrs. Mesta, thank you for American hospitality. It was really a wonderful example of that. But I did learn something while I was there with you. I realized that to be United States Minister to Luxembourg, a small country but nevertheless an important country, a country that is the seventh steel-producing country in the world, means that whoever is the minister is a very busy person. Could you outline for us a typical day? (2:03)

[Perle Mesta:] It is very good to see you again, Mrs. Roosevelt. And I am particularly pleased to be a part of this wonderful new radio pro-program you're starting. First of all, I want to thank you personally, and for the Luxembourgers, for taking the time out of your busy schedule this summer to pay a visit to Luxembourg. The people of Luxembourg are still talking about you. And I am sure they never shall forget the graciousness with which you spoke, time after time, as you went through their villages. You ask me about a typical day. Actually, a typical day at the legation is one of great activity. And much of this activity is spontaneous, brought about by communications from The Department of State, or from other missions, or by visits of Americans, and incidentally these visitors range from stranded Americans who have lost their passports or their money, to leading American officials. This past summer brought between five and six thousand American visitors to Luxembourg. Of course this includes the tourists and the students. As the person chosen to represent America in Luxembourg, I feel a personal responsibility for the activities of the legation, and try to see that each visitor and problem is handled with personal interest. Most of the activity is carried on at the office rather than the residence.

[ER:] Yes, but I didn't give you much chance while uh I was there uh to um carry on your usual activity at the office because you were so kind as to take us to really see the countryside.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, as a matter of fact I can remember all too well. Mrs. Mesta had a schedule for all of us while we're [Elliott laughs] over there that meant that we started out from the legation before nine o'clock every morning and I don't think that on any single night that the uh the work of the day was over for Mrs. Mesta until after midnight.

[ER:] Well, I imagine that's true because after we, we had finished she was making arrangements for the next day.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's right, and you were uh doing a little work too, weren't you? I think you did your column when you got back home.

[ER:] Yes, sometimes. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] But uh I've always thought that I was pretty busy person uh but I think you're just as busy as I am, Mrs. Mesta. And [Perle Mesta: I doubt it.] [All laugh] In spite of that, and the fact that I realize it's a great responsibility to be our minister um abroad and in Europe today, still, I don't believe it's a hardship to live in Luxembourg; it's such a lovely country! I'd like to ask you something I really didn't ask you when I was there. Have you traveled all over it? And is it the same type of country throughout? Or are there different climates and scenery?

[Perle Mesta:] Yes, Mrs. Roosevelt, I have traveled many times over the country of Luxembourg. In fact, I have done--become acquainted with many of the mayors of the provinces. And just before I left, I gave a luncheon for all the mayors or Luxembourgs, or I mean burgomasters [Perle Mesta laughs] [ER: I see] as they call them. The geography of the country is fascinating. And the climate is healthful. And I agree with you, Luxembourg is a beautiful country. (6:14)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, Mrs. Mesta, but I remembered, speaking of uh burgomasters uh one luncheon one day that we all went to and there were several of them present at that luncheon. And uh if I remember rightly uh they invited you to uh go fishing with them one day in the near future. Did you ever keep that date?

[Perle Mesta:] Indeed, I did. I not only went once with them, but I went many times.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, that's wonderful.

[ER:] That's the way to make friends! Well, I was particularly interested in the wonderful way in which you arranged so many things for us. I had wanted to take my grandchildren to see Clervaux, where my mother-in-law, my husband's mother's uh family had once lived. And uh from which the gentleman who came to this country had come! And I really can't tell you what an impression it made on me seeing that old castle and the ceremonies they had arranged for us that day. And looking across and then hearing the stories of what had happened in the war, it made the old and the new come close together, and made me realize that history is all of the piece really, the past leading into the present. And so, I'd like to speak now of one thing which is one of the things I believe will mean something in the history of the future. And it's something you have arranged. You've done a wonderful thing, I think, in arranging for these scholarships which I read about the other day. And I'd like you to tell our audience something about those scholarships and don't leave out how you got them! (8:25)

[Perle Mesta:] [Perle Mesta laughs] Well, at the, the first July G.I. party in Luxembourg, and you may or you may not know, this is a monthly reception for anyone in the armed forces who cares to come. I

invited the members of the Purdue Glee Club, which was at the time touring Europe. And there is a magnificent group of American youth with marvelous voices. I met Dr. [Frank] Hockema, Vice President of Purdue, and while the boys were singing I asked him if we couldn't persuade Purdue University to grant us some scholarships for Luxembourg students. The result was several scholarships to Purdue. Peter Reiff, the first student chosen for one of these scholarships, is arriving in this country on October the thirtieth on the America.

[ER:] That's very interesting. I hope that he has an opportunity, not only to study here, but uh to perhaps see some uh family, live in a family for a while, or visit an American family. I always feel that when young people come here they should have that opportunity. Now I see that Elliott has something he wants to say [ER laughs].

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, I [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] uh don't want to interrupt this very interesting uh conversation between you and Mrs. Mesta uh but I do have a few words to interject at this time, if you don't mind.

(Break: 10:07-10:10)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now let's get back to Mrs. Roosevelt and her guest. That distinguished stateswoman, Mrs. Perle Mesta.

[ER:] Well, we were talking of scholarships and how you accomplished uh getting uh Purdue University to give you some. I think you can attribute that to your charm, Mrs. Mesta. But I know that much besides charm has to be used to accomplish worthwhile things. Now I'd like to ask you, what are some of the problems of being a minister? And are they the same as the problems we have here, and how do you surmount them?

[Perle Mesta:] Problems? Well I don't think uh my problems are any different than those of other missions. In fact, my hardworking staff seems to be able to help me cope with any problem that may arise.

[ER:] Well, that's a wonderful answer, but I would have said that anyone living in Europe at present must have problems. For instance um has, has Luxembourg really recovered from the war?

[Perle Mesta:] I think Luxembourg in is, is in a marvelous economic condition.

[ER:] That of course uh is good to hear. And I realize that Luxembourg, at least it looked to me, like a garden spot uh part of Europe which was more fully recovered than almost any other part I saw. And I realize that for that reason you may not have some of the difficulties that confront some of the other missions. But there must be times when you have too many guests, there must be times when you get so tired you wish none of them would appear, and then they, then suddenly you have an influx of Americans who have troubles of all kinds. And besides that, I was struck by the amount you have learned about the country. Eh there wasn't an institution that uh we passed where you weren't able to tell me that you had already visited it. And when we went out to the um uh to Hamm--to the great cemetery, I found that you were there all the time, had been there many times, and knew all about the plans that were being made. I think that's very remarkable and I wonder how you do it. You just, you just think don't you of other people, and--

| [Perle Mesta and ER overlap]\_(13:02)

[Perle Mesta:] Well, I don't know about that. I must admit though, I do love people.

[ER:] Well, that's a very great accomplishment, I think.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You've taken a tremendous personal interest in the cemetery itself and when we were there I remember your telling us about your interest in, in the uh--where uh General Patton was buried and your conversations with Mrs. Patton uh with regard to the fact of the, of the General's wishes to be uh buried uh with his men. And I thought that it was uh very, very remarkable uh the way that cemetery was kept up and the real care that had been shown and uh the keeping of those graves. You told us uh something about the--of families of the Luxembourgers and what the interest that they took.

[Perle Mesta:] Each family adopted a grave. And every week they would take flowers to that grave. [ER: That--] The Luxembourgers continued that for many, many years.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's a wonderful thing.

[ER:] I think that's wonderful, but I was impressed with the fact that you ordered a wreath for me to take out to the cemetery. I would have been glad to do it myself but you did it for me.

[Perle Mesta:] Well, I was delighted to do it and I love to do that for anyone that comes and wants to go to the cemetery and place a wreath on the graves.

[ER:] Well, I shall always remember that visit to Luxembourg because um it showed me more intimately than I had ever seen before what a woman, alone um could do. You see, um it's one thing when a man takes a post of that kind, he has a wife to do part of the chores, but uh you have to do everything. You have to do the work and you have to do the social things and, um I was impressed by the fact that the social side of life in Luxembourg, as far as the uh Grand Duchess and her family are concerned, is pretty formal. It's uh it's a small country, and they have to apparently keep up the formality.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] It's really almost one of the last places of the Old World style of living, isn't it?

[Perle Mesta:] How true that is. But before we finish, Mrs. Roosevelt, I'd like to interrupt a minute to tell you that shortly after I landed, I purchased a copy of *Flair Magazine* and read your article about me and the legation. I am flattered that a person in your position, with your ability and know-how had paid me the compliment you have in this article, and I thank you very much.

[ER:] Well, I'm very glad that you liked it. (16:16)

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, actually though before we let Mrs. Mesta go, Mother, don't you think it--uh we ought to get her to recount uh some of her experiences. I remember uh, uh you've told us uh for instance of uh her interest in the graves and her interest in various institutions. I think one of the most interesting things happened when she first arrived in uh Luxembourg when uh some union miners invited you to go down into the bottom of a coal mine. Is that story uh--can you tell that story of just what happened, and what happened, uh, uh when the owners of the mines came to you right afterwards?

[Perle Mesta:] I'll be glad to. Then the invited--the miners invited me to visit the mine the day that I presented my creden-credentials to the Grand Duchess and I accepted, immediately. And I then afterwards heard that the steel owners wanted to know why I went through the kitchen to the steel plant, [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] and I said uh I didn't know just what they meant. And they said, "Well why don't you come and go through, through the steel plants with us first." And I said, "Well, you didn't

happen to invite me but the miners did." So I must admit I was immediately invited to go through the steel mines after--uh the steel plant after that. (17:38)

[ER:] I think that's a delightful story, and I told the President and uh that story when I came back and was telling him how kind you'd been to us, and he was so amused because he said uh, "Oh yes, Mrs. Mesta knows the steel business and she knows about mines. That's why I sent her to Luxembourg!" [Perle Mesta and ER laugh] Which I thought was wonderful because I doubted if many other people in the country really knew why he'd chosen you for Luxembourg.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, Mrs. Mesta, I-I've heard the story and I don't know whether it's true, but maybe you can uh tell us uh and maybe let the world know. But don't you uh, uh aren't you quite a business woman in your own right? Don't you run some uh business connected with steel?

[Perle Mesta:] I'd hate to have you ask me that, but I was on the board of my--of our steel company for several years. And I believe I'm the only woman that's ever been on the board of a steel company.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I don't see any reason for your being at all embarrassed about having that known, uh you know big business isn't always bad business. [Elliott Roosevelt and Perle Mesta laugh]

[Perle Mesta:] I agree with you! [Elliott Roosevelt laughs]

[ER:] Well, I-I think it's a wonderful thing, and I'm very proud of it. And I was very happy that uh the President was so um uh so pleased at uh how well you ha-had accomplished your mission. He felt very happy about it. And I think that what you did, uh, for us, you probably have done for many other Americans as they come into that country. You probably um give them the feeling that this is a country that is worth seeing and uh that I had the interest, which was a family interest, and uh I talked to the children about it, but I found that um my children left Luxembourg, my grandchildren, with a real sense of uh the importance of what they had seen. So I'm very grateful to you, and I'm grateful to you for coming tonight and giving us this chance to talk together, and I'm sure you've told many interesting things to our listeners. Now, I want to say again how happy I am to say thank you for your hospitality and to wish you great happiness in your visit here and great success in the future.

[Perle Mesta:] Well, thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt, for inviting me to be with you today, and I hope to see you many, many more times on my visit to America.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And may I thank you also, Mrs. Mesta, for coming to our program today. Now I have a few more words to say before we bring our program to a close.

(Beak 20:41-20:50)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother, it is uh my hope that as these programs go along and, and if the public is interested in them, that they will send in to us their expressions of what they feel are the most important topics that should be explored and studied by all of us, and uh that we will have the opportunity of knowing what is on people's minds today. And with that in mind, at this, the beginning of our series on the air for NBC, it is--it-it occurred to me that it might be a good idea to get out and talk to people on the streets and in the country, and find out what was uppermost in their minds. And one of the topics that seems to be of universal interest to [Elliott Roosevelt chuckles] New Yorkers is uh that in view of the exposés uh of the existence of graft in the New York City Police Force, and the entrenched position that uh gambling interests seem to have acquired in all forms of government in this country; do you think it is impossible in a democracy to ensure clean government? And do not human greed and avarice tend to operate against a graft-free operation in our governmental system?

[ER:] Well, of course, human greed [ER coughs] has a bad effect uh on government and of course human nature is uh pretty um weak at times, but I don't think it's impossible to have uh clean government. I think an exposé of this kind shocks people greatly. They suddenly realize that men who really probably did not intend to be dishonest have fallen into the habit of considering that certain things they were doing were legitimate things to do. You rationalize. I imagine you say, "Oh well, I don't get paid very much, and this isn't doing any harm, and I just make a little on the side." And you think about the people above you who probably make a little more and you don't feel it's so wrong to do if you're a little person. And as you go higher up there's always somebody a little bit higher who's doing it, and the mere fact that it's being done makes it seem alright. Until, suddenly, somebody comes along and says all this is dishonest. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] And you have a perfect uh recoil on the part of people. And a certain realization that um the forces of greed and the forces of dishonesty have got into the government and are giving them, the people, a dishonest uh government controlled by forces that they don't approve of at all. And then, at that time, you can usually, if you seize the opportunity and are in a position to do so, as for instance uh any high government official can do, you probably can get the backing of the people, who are now awake and alert to what is going on, to really sweep out these forces. And for quite a long time, that impetus will keep it clean. But you have to do it every now and then. And it seems as though human nature were so weak that it takes either people in the top places who are constantly alert, in the states I would say governors and mayors and perhaps some of the judicial people, in our own federal government I would say the very top people, um if they are constantly alert, they can, perhaps now and then, open up these things that uh they foresee are coming, and um sometimes it waits and it comes from the bottom and you just have to make sure that you take advantage of these occasions, to make—to clean up generally, and you've got to be sure that your people at the top really want to do the job. (25:49)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, of course, uh I have uh-uh heard and I've read as a matter of fact in some of the periodicals and some of the newspapers that the uh the gambling interest in this country and other uh underworld activities uh that are beyond the, the law, that they do take advantage even of uh of the ability to reach people in very high positions right in our federal government.

[ER:] Well, of course, when uh a power that is um [unclear speech] is really an evil power um takes a prominent place in uh society and actually um tries to control government, then you know that they will use every possible means to protect themselves, which includes blackmail. They will watch people, and if you do that carefully enough there are very few people uh where you might not be able to find something that looked badly even though it might not be bad, and if they threaten to show that up, sometimes your public officials haven't got the courage to face an accusation which may not even be true but which might look true. And they would rather be quiet about it than face the disagreeableness of having to run the risk of having people not believe them, uh two voices against each other, and how you're going to prove certain accusations. It's a kind of game of smear without proving and having people believe, um as mostly people do believe, the bad things instead of the good things, and that's what a lot of the bad people gamble on. They believe people will believe it and they use it against them--uh they use it as a threat. Now, it takes to being in public life courage and um sometimes it even takes the courage to say that you did something that was wrong and that now you know it was wrong, you didn't think much about it at the time. But I honestly believe that most of our high placed public officials are honest. Sometimes they may have known about things and not had the courage to bring them out at that time because for some reason uh it seemed inadvisable or their friends were involved. There are thousand and one reasons why you stay quiet about things that you know now and then, but I think public opinion has a lot to do with it. Um as soon as public opinion sets a higher standard of moral values uh you immediately find that certain things stop. Uh you're usually a little sorry for the man who goes to jail because public opinion changed at that particular moment and hadn't before. But it is because the public as a whole suddenly decides that certain things are now wrong and from here on out they're not going to stand for them anymore. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] Then they give the courage to the public officials to enforce those things. (29:45)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, of course, I've uh I've heard it stated as a matter of fact uh, uh that the--no matter how much we paid uh our public officials to remove temptation uh that if we paid them enough then a lot of scallywags would run for office in-in place of the good public servants. [ER: I don't think] And that therefore uh, uh that probably the democratic system had certain fundamental weaknesses and that maybe, I've heard it expressed although I personally don't agree with this, that a benevolent dictatorship uh where the benevolent dictating group would be working for the people was better than the democratic system.

[ER:] Yes, but unfortunately you're not sure of always having a benevolent dictatorship. It can turn bad just the way everything else can turn bad [ER laughs].

[Elliott Roosevelt:] So really you think that it--the democratic system ensures the best way of operating.

[ER:] Oh, of course, I think the democratic system ensures the best way of operating, but uh you've got to really operate and it's the individual people then who have to operate.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's right, well I-I think uh we've got a few thing--other things that we have to cover before we go on to other parts of our program, but I think it'll be fun to explore some of these questions every day if we have a few minutes if-if you agree.

[ER:] All right, I'd liked to.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right, fine. All right, now we go on to another por-part of our program today.

(31:16)

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