

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

January 8, 1951

Description: In the interview segment, ER interviews portrait artist Douglas Chandor.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Douglas Chandor

[ER:]Mr. Chandor, I remember having my portrait painted by you. I dreaded having a portrait painted. It wasn't really that I thought it was going to be boring. Only I expected that I would hate it so that it would be boring. Eh won't you tell our listeners how you keep your sitters amused?

[Douglas Chandor:]Oh I don't know. Um I uh talk a lot of nonsense. [ER laughs] It has to be nonsense.

[Elliott Roosevelt:]Limericks?

[Douglas Chandor:]Yes and that kind of thing. I couldn't paint at the same time if it wasn't nonsense, I couldn't think about painting. It is a sort of idiotic patter. I try to tell jokes and make up rhymes, oh silly rhymes. Things like this: "Eating more than she was able, Mary died at the breakfast table. [Elliott Roosevelt laughs] Seeing which, said Cousin Meg may I have her other egg." [ER laughs] I do recitations and I occasionally sing. [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh] It's nice to have a mind so full of useless information [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh]. When I was painting Mr. [Bernard] Baruch the other day, for instance, I started on something like this: "Mr. Baruch is really a ba-rick, who gives everyone a ba-reak, but never went ba-roke" [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh].Uh uh uh only to discover, if you please Elliott, that his hearing device was turned off. [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh]. Um however, I always enjoy my own jokes. [ER laughs] Uh sometimes, my sitters go me one better. Uh do you remember, Mrs. Roosevelt, when you were sitting to me last year and I was chirping some old song called "Gilbert the Filbert," and you finished up the last verse which I'd completely forgotten. [ER and Douglas Chandor laugh] I couldn't have gotten that but you did it awfully well. [ER and Douglas Chandor laugh]

[ER:]Yes, I had forgotten it but that's very funny. But I did know some of those old rhymes [ER laughs]. Well you've painted so many famous people; couldn't you tell us something amusing about them? Some anecdotes?

[Douglas Chandor:] Oh, I don't know. Uh it is awfully hard to think up anecdotes. Uh well I suppose probably people listening on the eh radio would like to hear uh one or two things about Mr. Churchill, I could tell that. Uh we had lots of fun uh when we were painting him. Uh he asked me uh when I got about half way through with his picture to shave down his waist a bit [ER laughs]. I was a little hesitant so he just couldn't wait and he picked up a brush and did it himself. [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh] As soon as he's gone, I scraped off all the paint he put on [Douglas Chandor and ER laugh]. I uh was painting-- (2:45)

[ER:] And of course he's a painter so he felt he could do it.

[Douglas Chandor:] Yes, oh yes, he thought --he was determined to do it a little better, you see. Um, but uh I was painting him in his Air Force uniform.

[ER:] Yes, I remember.

[Douglas Chandor:] And uh two of his medals were missing. So for fun I put in a couple of back number ribbons. [Elliott and Chandor laugh] Uh he spotted them at once.

[ER:] Oh, he did?

[Douglas Chandor:] And he said, “Why you have given me a medal for the Crimean War of 1852. And what’s that one? Good heavens! It’s Waterloo.” [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] Mrs. Churchill then chimed in and she said “Oh it doesn’t matter my dear. I’m sure you were there in spirit.” [ER, Elliott Roosevelt, and Douglas Chandor laugh] She was having me do her portrait at the same time as a uh birthday present for her husband. Uh uh and when I’d almost finished I said “Now I must put in her dimple.” And she said “I don’t think it’s a real dimple. When I was a child I had a tooth pulled there. I think it’s simply suction.” [Elliott Roosevelt and ER laugh] Isn’t that wonderful? (3:45)

[ER:] That’s wonderful. I think that’s wonderful. But you must have another uh anecdote about Mr. Baruch you could tell because you did have a number of sittings with him.

[Douglas Chandor:] Oh yes, I did as a matter of fact. But uh you know you’ve got to do an awful lot of play acting uh before you can really get – you’ve got to make a sitter do a lot of play acting before you can get them to do just the thing that they look right doing in a picture.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] What did you have Mr. Baruch doing? Turning [Douglas Chandor interrupts]

Douglas Chandor:] I’ll tell you what I had him doing. [Elliott Roosevelt interrupts]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Turning his hearing aid on?

[Douglas Chandor:] No, he was uh putting his two fingers on his left hand like that, you see.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Uh huh.

[Chandor:] And uh he was really sort of uh laying down uh the law of how things ought to be done.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Uh huh.

[Douglas Chandor:] And I said “Now, Mr. Baruch do you ever put your fingers on your left hand like that?” He said “No, I never do it as far as I know.” And just at that minute his secretary came in and said “Why he does it all the time!” [ER and Elliott Roosevelt laugh] And so I got him uh to stand like that, you know, as though he had been asked a question, at the United Nations or somewhere, and he was trying to explain how he would set about uh putting things into action.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Douglas, you did two portraits of father. Uh certainly you must have known a great deal of-- or noticed a great deal of difference between the first portrait which as I remember it was done in about nineteen hundred and thirty--

[Douglas Chandor:] Thirty--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Five.

[Douglas Chandor:] Five that’s it, yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And the second one was done just the month before he died. Uh or started two months before he died. Uh couldn't you tell us something about the difference in his attitude toward portrait painters in that time? (5:34)

[Douglas Chandor:] Oh, toward portrait painters. Oh good heavens, what a question! [Douglas Chandor and ER laugh] You know Elliott is going to catch me, Mrs. Roosevelt, on every one. [Douglas Chandor laughs]

[ER:] Oh, I think he's trying to very hard.

[Douglas Chandor:] Well I think, probably, he was really very weary and tired of all this portrait business. But Elliott, you know, I was one of the first back there uh doing that thing. It was 1935.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mhm

[ER:] I think he always had very--

[Douglas Chandor:][overlapping] And he was often, I said, he was really too tired, Mrs. Roosevelt, later on.

[ER:] The last time he was too tired. But the first time I think that he enjoyed it. I think I remember—

[Douglas Chandor interrupts]

[Douglas Chandor:] Yes, he did. And you know I painted him standing in that first portrait.

[ER:] Yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] It is the only one that has ever been done.

[Douglas Chandor:] It's the only one that has ever been done. [Elliott Roosevelt interrupts]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And that hangs [Douglas Chandor interrupts]

[Douglas Chandor:] of him standing. It's down in the uh in Austin, in the uh-- [Elliott Roosevelt overlaps here with Douglas Chandor]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] State Capitol.

[Douglas Chandor:] State Capitol, yes.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's Austin, Texas.

[Douglas Chandor:] And really uh one felt about the president, although he sat, uh one felt that he was a person actually who stood. I don't mean to uh what you were saying about painting souls of people. But one always got that impression that he was on his feet. (6:44)

[ER:] On his feet. Yes--

[Douglas Chandor:] Mhm, oh yes.

[ER:]That's very strong.

[Douglas Chandor:]Very strong.

[ER:] Now I wonder if you have any other hobby except painting.

[Douglas Chandor:] Oh indeed I do. I've--I've got uh a hobby which is almost as important as painting--

[ER:] Oh really?

[Douglas Chandor:]Yes, gardening.

[ER:] Oh.

[Douglas Chandor:] As a matter of fact it's more than a hobby. Uh Almost all my spare time is spent uh, Mrs. Roosevelt, is gardening or making plans for our garden down in Texas.

[ER:] Well now, just one thing more I'd like to know. And that is somehow I don't think you're born with the ability to at once start painting as you do today. I wonder if you could tell me something of your early life and what you had to do to gain this ability. (7:29)

[Douglas Chandor:] Oh, I had a terrific struggle. Um I always loved drawing, as a matter of fact, uh and painting. But my father used to say "We don't want an artist in this family with long hair and a dirty neck. Uh we've got to get him -- he's got to be a sailor." Um it's really rather gloomy to think about it. At least I was very fortunate in having a good early education. Very strict, typical English public school, cricket, football, Latin, and Greek, and that kind of thing. But my somewhat prodigal father died when I was twelve leaving us penniless. My mother and sister died soon after. However, I was fortunately able to pay my way at school with a classical scholarship and sneak off on occasional afternoons to sketch the English countryside. I loved doing landscapes.

Then when the war broke out in 1914, oh let's see I was seventeen and I joined up in the ranks of a pretty tough regiment in the British army. In 1918, I was invalided out. I had six months of study at the famous Slade School in London, where I was lucky enough to get an art scholarship. Actually, I think I really learned to paint-- you know out of books--I don't think uh the Slade did me much good. And too draw at an art school and that kind of thing.

Well I found I could draw likenesses. I used to sketch other soldiers a bit during the war. And I started right away portrait hunting. But it was agonizing months before the miracle appeared in the shape of a carpet manufacturer of all things. That was thirty years ago. The portrait was successful and I painted the family and others came along. Then I had a little exhibition in Bond Street which went well. The Prince of Wales sat to me. And I got a job to do the Prime Ministers of British Empire at Number Ten Downing Street. Oh, and then the Queen of Romania and other big names and so forth. And I came over here in 1926, and since then I have been managing all right.

[ER:]Yes, I think you have.

[ER and Douglas Chandor overlap]

[Douglas Chandor:]I think I've done about three hundred and fifty portraits in this country. And I believe, Mrs. Roosevelt, that's really as far as I see it about the top of the news from here. [Douglas Chandor laughs]

[ER:]Thank you very much for being with me today.

[Douglas Chandor:]Well I think you're awfully kind to ask me. (9:50)

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