

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

May 30th, 1951

Description: This recording was produced while ER was in Geneva, Switzerland. In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question regarding whether or not the US should give aid to India without diplomatic conditions. In the interview segment, ER and Dr. Renée Girod, president of the Swiss Feminist Movement, discuss women's enfranchisement in Switzerland.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Dr. Renee Girod (spelling confirmed)

[ER:] How do you do? This is Eleanor Roosevelt speaking to you from Europe where I'm attending a meeting of the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Today will be something of a ladies day on our program. Mrs. Roosevelt's guest on this recorded interview from Geneva is Dr. Renée Girod, president of the feminist movement here in Switzerland. Before Dr. Girod comes on the program we're going to devote a few moments to our usual discussion period. But first, let's invite our announcer to give us today's news from the sponsors.

[Break 0:40-0:49]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mother, today our question is one which has come in uh as a result of an article that came out in the international edition of the New York Times in which Nehru is quoted as having said that India, although grateful for help, will not accept food from any country if it had quote uh "any political strings attached to it." Uh In the article it says uh that uh the government of India has decided not to rely any longer on two million tons of United States grain and that food and that the food importing policy uh was being uh uh to a large extent uh battered around so much by Congress and so many strings being put on that it uh would spoil the Indian government's feeling of uh independence themselves. And I have a feeling since I've been here in Europe that there is a certain amount of feeling on the part of the people of Europe that they don't want to be in a position where we give them something and then try to tell them, "Now we've given you this now therefore you must do this, that, and the other thing in your foreign policy to go along with us." Uh do you think that uh that we should attach string to where we uh supply food and other necessities of life? (2:26)

[ER:] It's a very difficult thing to say, dear. Because uh it's a natural thing if people give things um--there are circumstances in which they wouldn't give them um unless they got something in return. I think it's really--the criterion is not so much if what you do is attach a condition, but it is whether the condition attached um is a purely um self-interested one on the part of the giver. For instance, in this case of giving uh grain to India, India is a free and thoroughly a uh old civilization, uh well able to decide on what their foreign policy should be. If we attach something that bears on as a condition to the-- to our gift that bears on their foreign policy then we've done something that I think is entirely wrong because [Elliott Roosevelt: Well] they're free- they're a free people and they have a right to their foreign policy. Now--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now is-is uh-- let's bring this down to uh uh exact uh uh means of discussion in the case of this Indian uh gift of two million tons or sale or whatever it ends up as the reasons the strong exception has been taken by the- uh by the Indian government seem to be to three particular strings which we put on the conditions of our gift. These uh three would require India to distribute supplies obtained locally or imported with--or imported without discrimination as to caste, color, or creed. And then second,

to give full and continuous publicity in India for American assistance. And three, to permit unrestricted observation of distribution by Americans.

[ER:] I think all three of those things we could have obtained um through diplomatic uh request and negotiation without actually having tied them on to the gift. I think they were stupid things to be talked out in Congress.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And to be written into the bill.

[ER:] And to written in to the bill. That I think was just plain stupidity because it's um uh it's insulting to a government which has already passed the law that all people are now to be treated equally. We know only too well that laws don't always mean the actual carrying out [Elliott Roosevelt: But I think India--] immediately of a-a law but we also know that we're the last people who should be putting strings like that on it because we've had a law on our books for a very long time which said there should be absolutely no discrimination, and we haven't been able to carry it out in our states--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well you know what if like--what I'd like to put up to our senators who are uh considering this bill is uh-is a question: cer-- we want certain raw materials from India and we're very anxious to get them, things that are hard to get in the United States. We'd like to be able to get those materials but wouldn't it be pretty terrible if the Indian government uh decided to pass a law that we wo-- the government of India will provide these materials in such and such an amount for the next three years on condition that the United States will hereafter agree if they'd get those materials to ensure the rights of all colored people in the United States. Why I can see the Unite--

[ER:] No, they wouldn't say that. That-that wouldn't be comfortable. What they would say was. "on condition that the industries in which these materials are used show absolutely no discrimination in employment." That would mean that no southern state would be [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] able to get some of those raw materials. Now in that sort of vein, that would really have been a comparable thing. And--(7:15)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well in--and on that basis then, our government probably would uh fly up in arms and would say that the Indian government was encroaching on our national interests [ER: on our domestic] and our own- our own [ER: domestic policy] business. And they better go home and mind their P's and Q's.

[ER:] Exactly. That's why that particular thing, I think, is the particularly bad thing that we did. Now that's number one, and I've forgotten in the mean time--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well and the next one is with regard to full and continuous publicity in India for American assistance.

[ER:] Well I think that should be done but I think we should be perhaps intelligent enough to mark our own-- Oh I don't suppose we can mark wheat. Well I suppose that uh that's a perfectly legitimate request.

[ER and Elliott Roosevelt Overlap]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I don't uh- I don't believe that it's necessary to write it into a bill though. [ER: No, I don't think it's necessary.] I still like your previous idea that it should be carried on through diplomatic--

[ER:] Well I don't think any of these things are necessary to write into a bill, they undoubtedly would have done it had we had done it in the proper diplomatic channels.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And I don't doubt but what they would welcome American assistance [ER: in distribution] in the distribution of this wheat because their uh whole system over there of transportation and of administration is probably strained to the utmost anyway and they'd probably be delighted to have American assistance in seeing to it that this wheat gets distributed around all over India where it's needed.

[ER:] Oh I think that was--that in a way is also and interference with domestic policy because they must uh decide where they um feel it's most [Unclear term]--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well isn't there one more point that should be considered at this point? uh When we set up the Marshall Plan aid for Europe it was specifically written in that the funds as earmarked by Congress uh for each country and passed for each country were to be administered by the countries themselves and spent uh as the countries themselves deemed to the best interest of the [ER: Once--] recovery of that nation. (9:23)

[ER:] Well the plan had to be presented and accepted, and when it was accepted and we did have the right to have observers.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I know, but wouldn't it have been best to follow the same system [ER: Much better.] that we used in the European nations when we moved over into Asia. [ER: Much better.] Well on that basis then, we have insulted the government of India to a very grave extent and probably damaged our prestige throughout the entire eastern world.

[ER:] And I- I wonder very much whether it isn't just the senators was so anxious that we should take uh um greater, stronger action in our far eastern policy who have been interested in writing these things in. I haven't been close enough to it to know but I would be interested to know--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You mean the senators who would like to see us move in with the--an aggressive military uh [ER: program] program on a much enlarged scale over what is now being done by the United Nations in Korea. [ER: Yes] Well I-I can't say for sure but I imagine that your-your thought in the matter is probably correct. But I do know that uh over here uh there is a strong feeling that the United States is uh taken a position almost of trying to dominate uh because uh of the fact that it has given uh aid to various nations and therefore would like to be able to dictate overall policy rather than to come to a common understanding with the nations who are allied with it.

[ER:] That's a very difficult thing to say because that would almost inevitably be said and the attack that the United States is imperialistic and wants to dominate is a very natural attack. I don't think it's actually so. It certainly isn't what the people at home want, but it's very difficult to keep that out of uh the thinking of some of the people [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] and in power [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah.] and so I suppose that's an accusation that we just have to accept and try to live down by showing [Elliott Roosevelt: Well I-] that we don't mean to dominate.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yeah. Well now I see that our time has about run out on this particular section of our program and I'm afraid that we must move on uh and after we've heard from our announcer we will go on to our interview of the day.

[Break 12:01-12:23]

[ER:] One of the most interesting persons I've met in Switzerland is Dr. Renée Girod who is president of the feminist movement in Geneva. You will remember that I have mentioned that in Switzerland women

do not have the privilege of the vote nor indeed do they seem very much to want it. I think we will all find that what Dr. Girod has to say will be of great interest. I present to you, Dr. Girod.

[Renee Girod:] Very kind of you to say that I am at the head uh of the feminist movement. I don't know that this is the case but I have great interest in feminist movement um years ago already. Now I'm astonished to hear that women in Switzerland are not interested to get the vote.

[ER:] Well I'm interested in what you will tell us uh about this because I've had both sides presented to me: those who don't want the vote and those who do want the vote, but as a rule as I talk to people I find that women don't seem very anxious.

[Renee Girod:] Certainly all the women don't desire to vote because uh we --our-our situation is so good in Switzerland. We can--we have the same education as men, we can go in all the high schools, we can go into all professions, or nearly. Only the list of women solicitors are not allowed. That's why the interest of the vote is not so great. And as to the difficulty to get it, that's a thing which is very difficult to explain.

[ER:] Well why-why are do--when you say "women solicitors" you mean it um--do you have women lawyers?

[Renee Girod:] We do have women lawyers. We have barristers and they work equally with men.

[ER:] I see, it's just the higher uh the higher phases that you can't go into. [Renee Girod: Exactly, that's the question] That interests me. You see it's a little different from our legal system because we don't have barristers and solicitors. We just have lawyers in the United States. [ER laughs] So that has to be a little explained in our way. But now I would like um, since you have all the opportunities for women in the educational and also in the occupational field, um What--why is it difficult for women to have the vote? (15:04)

[Renee Girod:] It is difficult for women to have the vote because of the organization of the state and because of our constitution. Our constitution says that all citizens are equal before the law. But citizens are not supposed to include women. Of course when it comes to the chapter of taxes then the word "citizen" does include women. That's just the difference.

[ER:] Well that doesn't seem to me quite fair if you uh- we once had a saying in our country, you shouldn't uh have taxation without representation, now um that must apply to the women in Switzerland.

[Renee Girod:] It ought to, but before the world war we were told that the women would never get the vote because we have no military service and you know that in our country military service is compulsory for all male citizens. Well the world war came and women were called into the forces and they did enlist. They did enlist voluntarily and thousands of them went into military service. But still then nothing has changed. Now they say we don't want the vote. That's why they don't give it to us, but I'm not so sure that the men want the vote. I've heard today that we have had elections yesterday and that the participation of the electors was unusually high, but what you-- what would you think of it was: forty-six percent!

[ER:] Only forty six percent?

[Renee Girod:] Only 46 percent and that's supposed to be an excellent average for Switzerland! Well can you say that the men want the vote?

[ER:] Well that interests me because one of the reasons that was given me about uh not having the vote for women was that in Switzerland you vote so frequently, that you vote in some places almost every Sunday. That you have um uh a vote if you're going to change a road or whatever is going to be done has to be voted on by all the people, which is a very democratic procedure but must be a little upsetting to one's daily life. Now how about that? Can you explain that to me? (17:29)

[Renee Girod:] Well it is true that Swiss citizens vote much more than citizens from other countries but I don't think it would upset the women's life to go to vote even if it were once a month, which is a average, because after all it doesn't take so much time to go to the ballot. It takes a few minutes and a woman can go with her husband.

[ER:] What I was told was that it usually came on a Sunday, and that-that Sunday was very important because that was the day when the family had their most important meal and therefore it wouldn't be good to have the women going out of the house. Now I don't know what you say to that but I thought--(18:16)

[Renee Girod:] Well I say to that, that the women can vote on Saturdays because most of the men vote on Saturday to have their Sunday out of town, so that's no excuse nowadays.

[ER:] Oh I see, so it isn't set for Sundays, it can be either Saturday or Sunday.

[Renee Girod:] Yes I can be either Saturday or Sundays. The women could vote on Saturday afternoon just as their husbands do because most of them go off for the weekend and when it doesn't suit them well they don't vote at all. Vote is not compulsory in Switzerland.

[ER:] Well the vote is not compulsory. Now we're getting down to um the real crux of this matter. The vote is not compulsory so the men don't have to vote, and therefore the women wouldn't have to vote each time. Do you think that um if the women really um had an issue that they were very much interested in they would win the vote?

[Renee Girod:] Yes I think they would. We have already made great progresses, for instance in a few cantons we have already the vote in the church. We have already the vote for the board of um assessors who work on the contracts between employers and employees, I don't know how you call that in English, we call that [Unclear term: possibly prudame(s)] in French. And the first time the vote was given to the women there was such a crowd of women who went to the ballot that they had to close the door not to have accident. This comes every three or four years and each time it's the same. The women do go and vote, when they're allowed to.

[ER:] I don't quite understand and I'm sure at home they wouldn't understand what you meant by the vote in the church, it is a different vote in the church from the government vote?

[Renee Girod:] Yes, it is quite a different vote. The vote in the church is to elect a pastor or the members of the parish. And uh in most of our states, because you know that we have twenty two states in Switzerland which are actually a confederation just as you have in the United States, in most of our states only the men elect the pastors but in a few states, like in Geneva for instance, the women are also allowed to vote. And this seems normal because after all the church is filled with women and not so many men. (20:46)

[ER:] That seems rather familiar, I've heard that said in other parts of the world that the women are the ones that uphold the churches [ER laughs] so that's-that will not seem strange even in the United States, That's quite -that's quite normal. But um I'm interested that has been granted, now is there any other vote,

for instance in the United States there were places where women voted on schools before they voted in the whole election. Is that allowed?

[Renee Girod:] No, in our country, women are not allowed to vote on schools and uh because the schools are municipal. A few months ago in the canton de Vaud, which is not very far off, the women allowed to be-to um be elected and to be allowed to vote on the municipal but this uh seemed to um seemed to be accepted by everyone, all the political parties said they agreed to that. It was the beginning and a good beginning to help women to get into the habit of voting. Everybody seemed to agree but in the last minute an enormous majority turned against the women. Which shows that the Swiss citizen when he is in the secret of the ballot he doesn't obey his party; he obeys his own little private plan.

[ER:] Does that mean really that what you have to win over, since "citizens" mean "men," is what you have to win over is the men. [Renee Girod: Yes.] Now what are they afraid of? They've given the women the right to equal education and to equal participation in employment of all kinds. Uh, now what is it they're afraid of if the women vote?

[Renee Girod:] They are very much afraid of the influence of the Communist Party. They believe that the communist women shall all go to the ballot and that uh other women will not because either they're not interested or they don't see the importance of it.

[ER:] That's an interesting thing because I have heard that on many, many other things that the communist men and women are better disciplined than the others of other parties and that therefore they do whatever they're told to do or expected to do and that um the rest of us um are careless about what we are supposed to do and therefore the influence of the Communist Party eh will come out on top. Now I've heard that in the United States. I've seen it work, I'm sorry to say, in other cases but I'd like to ask you a little more about it in a minute, just for a minute we have to break off and let our announcer have a word but we'll come right back to this talk.

[Break 23:57-24:22]

[ER:] Now we will go right on with the talk with Dr. Renee Girod who is here in Geneva with me. Um we were just talking about the fear that um they have in Switzerland that by giving the vote to women it will mean a great um predominance of the communist vote because the communist women will go to the polls, the others will not. Do you think that's so ma-- Dr. Girod?

[Renee Girod:] I don't think there's a great danger, uh because women feel their responsibility when they're given the responsibility and my impression is that all women shall go to the vote. As I already told you when they are allowed to vote they do go. If they're shown and that we would be ready to show them the importance of voting.

[ER:] Well Dr. Girod um, I think we've pretty well covered the question uh which is of great interest because Switzerland is after all the oldest democracy I think and um it's always a surprise to everyone, because they think of Switzerland as a very progressive country, that the women don't vote here always is a great surprise. But we seem to have covered that point rather well. Is there anything more you think would be essential uh for us to know about this question?

[Renee Girod:] Well I think there's one point more I would like to show. uh Switzerland is the oldest democracy and it just because it's very-very old country things change very slowly. Some new countries have accepted the women's vote and all modernizations of the state much quicker than our old state. We have now an experience of very nearly um nine centuries and um our people don't like to risk anything new. They have done well till now and we must say, we women, that we can trust them. But nevertheless,

it's very hard on us and it does give us a certain inferiority complex not to be accepted as total citizens, what we would like to be, because we feel that we deserve it. (27:00)

[ER:] Well I quite understand that feeling and I hope you do get the vote before um many more years, but I also understand the um slowness of change that comes in an older country. uh We already see that in India they've granted the rights to women in the new constitution, quite suddenly and quickly and I don't know that all the women will understand that one-- what they've been granted and take any part at all. But it is understandable that an old and established society and government doesn't change quickly but when it does um it's probably done on a solid basis. So I hope that you will get the vote and I'm sure when you do that your women will take their responsibilities. Now I'd like to ask you [ER clears throat] to tell our audience at home something about the feeling of the women here in Switzerland on the whole um--well the whole international situation. Because you in this country have been in a way almost um as safe from war on your own territory as we have in the United States and sometimes I think um in different ways we're very similar and I'd like to have you talk to our women a little bit about your feeling in the whole European situation.

[Renee Girod:] What a very delicate question you're putting to me now. What I want to say is that also we have not been involved in war. We have seen a lot of the war. We have had many refugees--several thousands. We have seen them night after night fasting the [unclear], deprived of all, having lost their own families sometimes. We have seen lonely children come without that we couldn't tell their names. We have seen the destructions of thous-- the villages burning were quite near our border and I think our women have understood how serious it means to be involved in war. We do not want to be involved in war. We want to be neutral because we feel that being neutral in the center of Europe we can best help everybody. All the armies have been able to find help with us and all the poor civilians flying can find refuge. If there is in the center of Europe a very small territory which is not involved in war this is the feeling of our people. We very much wish to keep out of all the wars and all the discussions of the large countries because we feel that our country has nothing to gain by war but everything to lose. (30:27)

[ER:] That's a very natural feeling but do you think that um it's possible to remain neutral as you have and keep out of war? I know um the type of citizen's army that you have had in the past but modern war changes a great deal. Do you think that you'll be able to keep your neutrality always?

[Renee Girod:] No. I certainly don't. We know that if there is a third world war that we'll be involved in it. And one thing we love more than neutrality is our freedom and I think every citizen, woman or man, would be ready to die for his freedom.

[ER:] That's uh something that is very interesting to me here because um I heard someone say not long ago somewhere else uh that um freedom was so differently understood in different parts of the world that um people were not long going to be willing to die for it. And I disagree violently on the subject [Renee Girod: Mhm.] and I'm glad that to see would disagree in the same way. Freedom has um a definite meaning for the Swiss then.

[Renee Girod:] It has, it has had for years and for centuries. And I don't think it has changed by now, and I'm very sure that if anything ever destroyed our freedom that you'll find not only the Swiss army ready to defend it but you'll find all the civilians also.

[ER:] That's a very uh fine thing to be able to say of ones people. Now I'd like to ask you something about your young people. I heard something very interesting the other day about um the fact that your young people were trained their young to use--to go to target practice on Saturday mornings and they had guns and they were loaded guns but they never used them in ways they were not supposed to use them. Now that means to me that your young people have a very clear understanding of their responsibilities and of

what is expected of them. Um there must be something um in Swiss education which is very stabilizing and good for the young peoples that they have that feeling.

[Renee Girod:] You see, shooting has always been a tradition in Switzerland. And the boys feel the responsibility they have and they want to learn to shoot. I must say that not only the boys but also the women. I've seen women during the war practice their shooting. And wanted to shoot themselves. What I always objected to, because I feel that the woman hasn't to carry a gun, if a woman goes to war it'll only be to help the wounded and the dying that myself being a doctor of course I can't think otherwise that I feel that all the women are backing me when I say we mustn't carry arms. For the boys its different because they'll be soldiers, and if they can learn to shoot when they're young, well they are better shooters, they're better soldiers later on and that's why they are encouraged to do so.

[ER:] But they must be well disciplined always to uh use their weapons in the way they're supposed to be used and not to um perhaps do foolish things with them. Are your children taught discipline from their very early youth?

[Renee Girod:] Yes, I think they are or at least we're trying to discipline them; it's not always easy because discipline is not a quality of our day.

[ER:] But I notice another thing, um I see people walking in the parks and-and everything is so tidy, your people don't uh-- they seem to have a pride in keeping their city and their parks in good order and having it there for everyone to enjoy. I never--I don't begin to see the carelessness of throwing things round that you find in my country for instance. Is that taught to children in school?

[Renee Girod:] Well it's very kind of you to say so. I think it is and I think it's also pride of Swiss mothers to have orderly children in their homes because the homes are kept very clean and very orderly as you may have seen already.

[ER:] Yes I have, well does it run through all homes? They're all kept like that and children are all trained like that? (35:26)

[Renee Girod:] I'm afraid there are a few exceptions, but not very many.

[ER:] [ER laughs] Well I think you've given us a wonderful picture of the ideals of the Swiss home and I wish we could go on and learn more but now we've come to the end of our time and I want to thank you very much, Dr. Girod, and I'm very happy that you could be with me today.

[Renee Girod:] Thank Mrs. Roosevelt for asking me to come, it is a great pleasure and a great pride for me.

[Break 35:58-36:24]

[ER:] In the two minutes we have left today I would like to read to you a letter I received from Mrs. George E. Davison who heard my discussion with Amelia Igel of the Department of Welfare. She writes: Hulses Corner Rd, RD 4, Freehold New Jersey "Dear Mrs. Roosevelt, Regarding a discussion you had long ago about a training period for all girls similar to a training period for boys in the army, I hope it never becomes an actuality. If we are really a free country it should never be. Men have always been the protectors and if it's necessary for all men to have army training it's necessary and that's that. But to have our daughters regimented seems distinctly anti-free to me and very much like the system Russia has and we know they are not a free country. Many girls volunteered during the last war and if that's what they want to do and feel an urge to serve their country in that way then they should be allowed to do so, but I

doubt that many people feel every girl should go through a training period of any-of any kind that is compulsory. We really can't call our country free if girls training is compulsory." That's a very fine letter, but just the last part of it makes me a little sad because she seems to have turned against giving girls a chance to have some kind of community training because she thinks it fits into the rations system. Now we mustn't be blind to the fact that um none of us are free--eh we are free to the extent that we in this country do what we do because we decide it's good to do and we do it of our own free will. In Russia it's true they are not free because the individuals do not make the decision--it's made for them by a very small if group of people. But here if we found that our girls were happier and better able to face the world by being given a period of civilian training of any kind um they would do it of their own free will. Just as they went in in the last war and therefore I think we need to have a little more discussion on this point to clarify what we really mean uh by a free country because no one loves a free country more than I do but I think uh we have to really understand what we mean by it.

[Break 39:32-39:50]

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