

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

March 27, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener who is critical of ER's stance on working with nations who have trade agreements with Russia. In the opening segment, ER's guest is Charles Berlitz, linguist and executive officer of the Berlitz School of Languages.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Charles Berlitz

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Our subject for discussion today, Mother, is uh from a Mrs. Childress, who doesn't give her address. She writes, "The enclosed clipping shows why so many American citizens do not agree with you and your radio guest today about helping the nations of other countries. Senator [Herbert] Lehman says they want to work with us and you say we ask too much of them. But why work with them when they sell to Russia, which helps to kill American boys? America was made America of the-of the free by hard efforts, yet no one seems to admit that today. Sorry, but uh one cannot go along with you and others with your ideas of helping other countries and breaking down the American way of life." Mrs. Childress softens her disagreement by concluding, "Thank you for your many interesting programs." Uh now, here is how the clipping reads: "The United Nations has rejected bids by American firms and has awarded two-hundred and fifty thousand dollars in contracts to three foreign firms, two British and one French, to carpet the UN headquarters on East River Drive, it was learned today. The leaders of the US rug industry voiced deep resentment as the awards went to these suppliers." Uh and then it lists the suppliers. "A spokesman for the American industry declared, 'Consider the facts. The UN, financed largely by American dollars, awards the contracts to foreign firms which will use American Marshall Plan dollars to buy the carpet wool with which the rugs are to be woven. The wool will be purchased from three countries not in the Sterling Bloc: Argentina, India, and China, all of which demand payment in US dollars. Note further, the rugs scheduled to arrive here about May 1 will enter duty-free by arrangement of the UN.' The American spokesman then pointed out that US manufactures must pay duty on the carpet wool, whereas the British and French firms can get it duty free because it is intended for export to the UN. Moreover, he said, 'Wages to labor are the highest in the world in the US. He pointed out the awards for thirty-five thousand square yards of solid color rugs, without designs, went for four dollars and sixty-two cents to eight dollars and fifty-four cents a square yard. The American price would range from twelve dollars and a half to twenty-two and a half per square yard.' He remarked the UN had received the property at Forty-Second Street and East River Drive entirely free as a gift from the Rockefellers, and in other respects had benefited continuously from American generosity." (3:18)

[ER:] I don't think it occurred to the rug gentleman that we have probably been paid back in wages, in building the buildings, and will continue to be paid back a very much larger sum than will be spent on all the furnishings that go into the United Nations building. And that, after all, in the long run the United Nations has borrowed from the United States, but all the nations will have to pay that back in assessments, little by little, over the years, so that it is quite natural that those nations should be awarded certain contracts. Uh we have to buy from other countries. As-as a nation, the United States occasionally must buy products that are made in the United States from other countries to encourage trade and make it possible for other nations to live. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] And it's more important that the United Nations, which has spent um other people's money for years to come eh in getting these uh buildings built. [Elliott Roosevelt: And furnished.] And in buying supplies in this country for those buildings, should do something for the other nations involved, but I think that our rug gentleman forgets -- I'm sorry for him, he didn't get the contract -- but he forgets that um he probably sells quite a lot rugs to other countries, and uh in return, sometimes we have to buy rugs from other countries.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well uh, I think there's another point that is forgotten. The largest single item that will be paid out will be paid out for the physical construction of the buildings themselves, [ER: Well, that's what I said, in wages.] The buying of the steel and the mortar-mortar and so forth –

[ER:] Goes to wages throughout this nation.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's right, and those people receive money with which to buy rugs for their homes, so he's probably going to sell far more rugs as a result of the uh [ER: UN building.] of the UN being built than he would have on just the uh awarding of the UN contract to American uh rug manufactures.

[ER:] Well, I feel that way. I think it's a very [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] um very short sighted thing. Now to come back to the letter, that-that's so much for what the rug people felt -- a natural reaction, but nevertheless not a very sound one. Now, [ER laughs] let's come back –

[Elliott Roosevelt:] No, and rather misleading [ER coughs] in the newspaper article itself.

[ER:] Oh the newspaper just uh -- I don't know what newspaper it was, but it was stating his point of view, and it wasn't trying to evaluate whether it had any value or not. [Elliott Roosevelt: That's right.] But now, to come back to her letter, um neither Governor [Herbert] Lehman uh nor I are trying to change the way of life in this country. Um we are simply trying to make it possible to preserve the way of life in this country. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm. All right --] You'll have to reread the definite question.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I-I'd like to reread that. Uh she says, "Senator Lehman uh wants uh s-uh -- believes that these other countries want to work with us and you say that we ask too much of them. Uh but why work with them when they sell to Russia, which helps to kill American boys?"

[ER:] Well, the very simple reason, as I explained the other day, that some of these countries have entered in to trade-agreements with Russia. Just lately, you'll notice that the United Kingdom stopped exporting to Russia any goods which could be used for war purposes, and Russia complained that uh it infringed on their trade agreement. Now, I think -- I don't remember if it was a complaint against the United Kingdom or against one of the other nations that had a trade agreement.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I think it was against Great Britain.

[ER:] And um that um-uh is something that nations have always done. We proceeded, because we didn't want to go to war with Japan, to continue to sell them scrap iron, which we had agreed to sell a long while beforehand, [Elliott Roosevelt: Well, and I think --] and for a long while, simply because we felt if we stopped we might find ourselves immediately involved in war and we wanted time for preparation.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And I think you'll find, if I'm not mistaken, that America, the United States of America, has continued to ship, maybe not as largely as before, but has shipped materials to China, communist China, and to the Soviet Union, which could be used in war.

[ER:] Well, we-we um complain -- I saw in the paper the other day that there had been complaints against private firms that had had contracts and had continued to deliver their contracts and now that has been stopped, but we did do it um through private individuals in the United States, through private firms, because they had contracts, and I suppose it didn't occur to them uh that they couldn't go on indefinitely carrying on those contracts [Elliott Roosevelt: Yes.] uh with enemy countries.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] But the important thing that I'd like to hear from you is uh Senator Lehman says "they want to work with us," would you just uh -- quickly because we have just a minute or so left -- uh state what you feel with regard to the desire of these countries to put forth --

[ER:] Of course they want to work with us. And of course they depend upon us [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] for a great many things. Now, I didn't say that we expected too much of them in a general way. What I said was uh that without our help uh we could not expect nations which had been occupied by an enemy to, of their own initiative, do um some of the things which we were now asking of them, um but which we would have to provide a certain amount of initiative in order that they would be able to go ahead and work with us. [ER coughs] [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm, mhm.] That was what um was in my mind, if I didn't express it correctly, and I'm sure is what is in Senator Lehman's mind.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, I'd like to close off on this one note: uh that I feel that unless we are successful in arousing people uh who want to be our allies to fight with us with a great deal of zeal and zest, and unless we're successful in doing that, we're gonna stand a mighty poor chance of withstanding the onslaughts of communistic countries. (10:46)

[ER:] Well, of course, it's impossible to stand alone, and the lady should know that.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yes, well I think that that answers as well as can be answered your attitude and that of Senator Lehman to her disagreement with you.

[Break 11:00 – 11:19]

[ER:] One of the greatest barriers to the peoples of the world understanding one another is that of language. Not even being able to say "good morning" is really a hardship. So today, I have invited Mr. Charles Berlitz, executive officer of the Berlitz School of Languages, to be my guest to tell us something about the study of languages. I'm happy to welcome you, Mr. Berlitz.

[Charles Berlitz:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt. I am very happy to be here.

[ER:] Mr. Berlitz, you look very young. Are you the founder of the Berlitz School of Languages, or did your father start the now world-wide school?

[Charles Berlitz:] My grandfather, Maximilian Berlitz, did back in 1878. Contrary to popular belief, the first Berlitz School was not started in New York, but right in Providence, Rhode Island.

[ER:] Oh. That's interesting, I didn't know that! Uh well, I understand that you are quite a linguist in your own right. When did you first start learning foreign languages?

[Charles Berlitz:] From the time I learned to talk. My grandfather decided that I was to be an experiment in teaching a new baby how to talk.

[ER:] Oh, that's interesting. Did he uh teach you uh foreign languages at the same time as he taught you English?

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, except that different people were assigned to speak different languages to me. My grandfather always spoke German, my mother spoke French, my father spoke English, and my cousin spoke Spanish to me. And each one --

[ER:] And you learned all four?

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes. Each one would limit themselves, always, to speaking that one language to me to the extent that I thought when I finally reached the age of three that everyone had their own language. And it wasn't until then that they explained to me, uh rather than have me invent one of my own, that that certain people spoke certain languages.

[ER:] Oh, and you were-you were on the way at the age of three to finding a language of your own?

[Charles Berlitz:] I thought that was the natural thing.

[ER:] Oh, I see! I think that's wonderful. Uh how many languages can you speak now?

[Charles Berlitz:] About a dozen fluently, a few more not so fluently, and I hope eventually to speak most of the important ones.

[ER:] Well now, what uh-what do you call the important ones? How many, for instance -- or give me the names of those you speak fluently.

[Charles Berlitz:] Well, I should uh say fluently, of course, the Latin languages: French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and uh German, of course, Russian. Then I speak Japanese, Chinese, Arabic, and uh-uh some of the other languages.

[ER:] Good gracious! I think I think that is perfectly extraordinary. Eh-um it must uh it must give one a sense of the most tremendous um-um comfort, really, to know that in almost all parts of the world, uh one can be understood and one can understand what's going on. You must feel so much more at home.

[Charles Berlitz:] Well, you have some interesting experiences.

[ER:] Yes? Because uh -- do you sometimes, or have you ever made believe that you didn't understand a language?

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, that has happened to me in several countries, and you have a rather unusual idea of what people are saying about you.

[ER:] Yes, well that I've always thought would be -- I can remember one-one occasion when my little boys and I were abroad. When the boys were sure that some people on the little boat we were on, going down the Rhine, were laughing at them. And as a matter of fact, of course, the people hadn't even noticed them, probably. Eh uh, and that was because they didn't understand the language, they couldn't understand what people were saying. But to be able to understand and hear what people say about you must be very entertaining, [ER laughs] must give you many interesting times. Um I suppose you've had a great many interesting assignments because of this great um uh ability to talk in different languages, could you tell me about any of them? (15:30)

[Charles Berlitz:] Well, one of the most amusing occurred uh when I was in the army during World War II. I was assigned to the Canal Zone at the time, and one of my duties was to act as liaison officer between the army and foreign ships passing through the Panama Canal.

[ER:] That must have been interesting.

[Charles Berlitz:] This was during the early part of 1942. Uh one day we heard uh that a Russian ship was coming through the canal, and I was a little weak in Russian at the time so I devoted several days to brushing up in it. When I finally boarded the ship, wondering uh what sort of a captain it would be and if

the captain would speak uh too difficult of Russian for me, I arrived in the captain's cabin; I found the captain was a young and pretty girl.

[ER:] A young and pretty girl? Oh that- [ER laughs] that was an experience. Of course, that was true on Russian ships.

[Charles Berlitz:] On some of them, as a matter of fact, she explained to me that not--that also the third officer and the chief engineer on the ship were also women. During the time we went through the canal, we had some conversations, and uh towards the end of our--of my visit uh we touched upon the status of women in Russia and the United States. She mentioned at the time that she thought that women did make full use of their possibilities here, but I jokingly said to her that uh perhaps Russian women were a little too masculine, such as being ship captains and the like. However, as I was leaving the ship, she asked me over to uh the closet of her cabin, threw the door open, and said, "You say that Russian women are not feminine, look." I looked and there was over a dozen very pretty dresses and coats. I asked her where she had come by this feminine wardrobe. "At a wonderful shop in New York City," she said, "Klein's." It is really a small world.

[ER:] Oh, that is really funny. That is [ER laughs] very amusing. Well, I imagine, after that, you were a little bit careful um-um in talking to the ladies, at least!

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes. [ER laughs] Now I talk only to my wife about feminine attire. [ER laughs]

[ER:] Well now, um did you go in as an officer into the war, and-and?

[Charles Berlitz:] No, I-I was a -- I started as a private and hit all ranks up to captain.

[ER:] I see. Well then uh, did they know about you languages right away and use you in that way?

[Charles Berlitz:] Sometimes I was, quite occasionally, sometimes as a teacher, and sometimes a liaison and other army work.

[ER:] Because that um would seem to have been such a special uh ability that it would have be a won-wonderful thing to have had in almost any outfit in the army, I should think, someone who could talk in all of those languages. Well now, you mentioned at the very start that the first Berlitz School was in Providence. In 1878, did you say?

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, that is right, Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Well, how large has the organization grown to be since [Charles Berlitz: There --] that time?

[Charles Berlitz:] There are now about four hundred schools located throughout the world. We have here in the United States more than twenty-five in full time capacity, and they are in practically every major city.

[ER:] Well, do you manage all those four hundred schools?

[Charles Berlitz:] Uh no, uh I'm with the American section.

[ER:] You're-you're with the American section? Now does each country have a separate um-uh head, so to speak, and-and work by itself, or do they all report back here?

[Charles Berlitz:] Most of -- most of the European schools report to Paris, but because of political difficulties, the uh schools uh are more or less restr-restricted to their local administration, to the country they are in. (19:24)

[ER:] And um how-how many people would you say um attend these schools in the United States today?

[Charles Berlitz:] About twenty-five thousand a year.

[ER:] And what kind of people are they in the whole?

[Charles Berlitz:] Well, there are people from every walk of life: uh teachers to increase their teaching ability, diplomats for uh diplomatic reasons, uh business people to include--to improve their business relations with the countries with which we trade, and uh we have some very interesting students. Recently, Admiral [William] Halsey for German, Nelson Rockefeller for Spanish, Duke of Windsor, uh Sinclair Lewis, and uh one of our best known students is uh Mrs. Roosevelt for Spanish. How is your Spanish going?

[ER:] Yes, that's quite true, when I was in-uh in Washington. I never gave it half a chance though, because I never had enough time because I never had enough time. [ER laughs] But that's very -- I can understand quite well. All I've done since I took the few lessons in Washington is to uh listen in the United Nations, when they talk in Spanish I always turn it on in Spanish and listen. And I'm still terrified to say anything, but I can understand quite well, I don't have any difficulty with that. [ER laughs] Well, that's very, um-that's -- it must be an interesting thing to run schools of this kind. And I wonder how uh you came to study quite so many languages, because uh -- you must have done it because you liked it.

[Charles Berlitz:] Well, I started that way, and now I study them principally to keep our textbooks up to date and to write new ones. Recently I have written, along with Robert Strumpfen-Darrie, our vice president, a new series called "The Berlitz Self-Teacher," which enables one to learn a language at home. Of course, I don't mean this is to be considered a substitute for the Berlitz schools.

[ER:] Well, you mean that um -- uh my trouble with that, I think, would always be the difficulty of accent, because uh unless you talk a language um you can make perfect gibberish out of what you learned in a book. [Charles Berlitz laughs: That is true.] I remember once um-uh taking a little niece of mine who was doing very badly in French at school and asking her to read me something. And I couldn't understand one word she read, not one single word! [ER laughs] And I realized that it had been just um a case where you learned out of the book, you see, but you never got anything at all in your ear. And that has always been the wonderful thing to me about um what you're able to do with people, that they really uh get it so that they can talk and-and understand what people say.

[Charles Berlitz:] That's why we have native teachers.

[ER:] That's -- you have uh native teachers for-for that um real ear development, I think that is really an ability to develop. Well now, we have to let our announcer have um a break, so we'll have to stop for a minute, and then we'll come right back to this talk.

[Break 22:44-22:54]

[ER:] And now we'll come back to the second uh part of our talk with Mr. Berlitz. And um the thing that I am most interested in asking you is whether you feel that your ability to learn languages was something entirely unique, uh or whether you feel nearly all people could acquire the knowledge of languages uh if they were taught properly?

[Charles Berlitz:] Well, [Charles Berlitz clears throat] I think, Mrs. Roosevelt, that anyone can learn any language if they study with a native teacher, by our method, whereby you never speak anything else but the language uh which your teacher is teaching you. I'll know more about it when I finish an experiment of my own.

[ER:] Oh well now, that's very interesting. Um what uh -- is this a secret or can you tell us about the experiment?

[Charles Berlitz:] No, it isn't a secret. Uh my wife had a daughter three weeks ago, and Valerie and I have decided to use the same experiment that was performed on me to see if we can get our daughter speaking four or five languages by the time she learns to speak. Uh, that's probably spoken like a new proud father.

[ER:] [laughs] Well, three or four languages, that's um -- if they do the way they did with you, she will-- she will learn those. But do you consider that that means that she will then be so trained that she can go on and learn an indefinite number?

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, if she learns uh languages, uh the important key languages, say one of each group for the three languages --

[ER:] Well now, what would you call one of each group?

[Charles Berlitz:] Of the European languages, say German, uh French, and maybe one of the Slavic languages at the same time that would be uh -- and English, of course.

[ER:] Mhm. I see. German, French, and possibly um-uh Russian, and-and English. Uh then from that, you think, she could go on and learn the others, yes?

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, because the Latin languages being so closely related.

[ER:] Yes, I can uh I can imagine that that uh would be. Now do you have schools behind the iron curtain?

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, we do. We [Charles Berlitz clears his throat] uh we had schools in Russia in 1917, uh which we have not heard from since, and uh we have schools in Hungary, Romania, Poland, and Bulgaria, and such countries.

[ER:] Do you hear from any of those?

[Charles Berlitz:] Sometimes uh we hear from them indirectly. Uh we cannot have any more direct communication with them because of uh-uh restrictions against the educational field in those countries.

[ER:] Well, um now you-you had those staffed almost entirely by uh natives of the countries?

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, of course, our teachers are always natives of whatever language they teach. So, perforce --

[ER:] Must be -- if you taught uh -- do they teach any English there? Because that must mean you have [Charles Berlitz: Yes.] Americans there, then.

[Charles Berlitz:] Americans or English.

[ER:] English. And uh, they can stay? Um, I should think they are in a good deal of danger if they are out of sympathy with the government.

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, there is considerable difficulty to staying [ER: There is.] in those countries.

[ER:] Yes, because otherwise um I-I should think it would be quite a-quite a dangerous thing for people. What are the languages that are being studied for the most part today? (26:29)

[Charles Berlitz:][clears throat] Spanish is still the principal language with us here in the United States; uh after Spanish, uh French, German, and Italian. Recently, there has been a great upsurge in the study of Russian. In fact, for the first time since the establishment of the American schools, Russian is the leading language in one of our biggest schools.

[ER:] Um, do you find much um upsurge in the-in the learning of Chinese or Japanese?

[Charles Berlitz:] A great many of our soldiers returning from World War II uh expressed an interest in learning the language of the country where they had been stationed and perhaps had picked up a little bit while they were there. And uh because of these veterans we have had an upsurge in Chinese and Japanese to the point where we are writing a new text in Chinese principally to take care of the veterans' interest in Chinese.

[ER:] Now uh do you um find that if you are giving people lessons, uh you give them uh outside texts to work on, um they progress faster if they're able to do more work outside?

[Charles Berlitz:] Of course, the more work they do in a language, the better for them. But we prefer to have them stick to our textbook while they are studying because it is graduated [ER: Yes.] from the easy words, which are easily explained, to the more difficult. And after they finish our textbook, of course they can read any modern books, magazines, papers -- the more the better, in other words.

[ER:] Well now, I know that besides teaching, you also have a translation service for business firms, and um that in itself must be quite a-a -- keep quite a staff busy. Um I'd like you to tell our listeners, if you will, any stories about the letters that come in and that you have to translate. I'm quite interested, because I get a great many letters from abroad and send them down to the US Mission to be translated when I either haven't -- they're in a language I could translate if I took the time but I'm busy, I'll send them down, and-and of course there are many languages that they come in that I don't know at all, and I send them down for translation. Sometimes they come back and they are the most astounding letters I have ever read! [ER laughs] I would like to know if you have um among your translations uh any strange stories that come up. (29:13)

[Charles Berlitz:] Well, we get letters of all kinds, uh some of them we have been surprised to find have-been uh love letters which uh soldiers, ex-soldiers, have received from across the sea uh in uh, some many different languages. But one-one letter we received the other day is extremely interesting because it's almost uh a voice from behind the Iron Curtain. It was brought to us by an American friend, rather a second-generation American, of -- who had forgotten his native language but was still corresponding with one of his family in Bulgaria. He writes to them in English, and they write to him in Bulgarian. This letter was translated just the other day and gives a good idea of perhaps what the attitude is in Bulgaria about the United States at the present time. I quote from the letter: he said, "I am convinced that your people, the Americans, hate us and would have every right to do so because we have forgotten your good deeds on our behalf. I'm extremely sorry about my country's relations with America, but here they don't let us know anything that is going on in the world." That was taken verbatim from a letter [ER: Now that uh --] we received the other day.

[ER:] That, of course, uh is a very good little item uh for publication in this country, I think, because it shows what life behind the Iron Curtain is, which we don't publicize half so much as they publicize any failure that they can find in democracy over here, and I wish we did publicize it. Well, I-I have um -- I don't know if I can match uh your story exactly, because I don't get letters from behind the iron curtain. But I had a lady the other day who wrote me pages and pages about a suit for an estate in Germany eh uh that uh she felt her family should have inherited, and uh one of the members of the family who was not uh in the direct line was going to get it apparently, as far as I can make out, and she felt it should go in the direct line. She saw no reason at all why, since we had government representatives in Germany, if I had any heart at all I would see to it that um justice to her was done. And I had to write back and say that, after all, we didn't interfere with the courts [Charles Berlitz and ER laughs] on civil decisions and that if we did it would be very wrong, and that this was something which had to be decided in-in their own courts. But um I was amused because it showed what so often happens, that when you have a personal interest, the very thing which you would think wrong if it was done and you didn't have any interest, uh you will advocate just as though it is something you want and thought right. Do you have many odd things like that?

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, we certainly do, [Charles Berlitz clears throat] but uh mostly uh in the translation service we have a great many interesting anecdotes like that that I don't know if--even if I would have time to tell you them all.

[ER:] Well, I don't think we have uh time for any more. I wish we had, because I think they're um very interesting. But I think, on the whole, you must have an interesting time in your contacts with people and in your contacts through the translation service with people all over the world.

[Charles Berlitz:] Yes, that is true, [ER: You do.] Mrs. Roosevelt.

[ER:] Well, thank you so much for coming today, and I do really appreciate you.

[Charles Berlitz:] Well, thank you, and it was a great pleasure being here, Mrs. Roosevelt.

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