

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

May 7, 1951

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a question from a viewer of her television show. The letter suggests ways that American propaganda could influence American interests abroad. In the interview segment, ER discusses the Bureau of Child Welfare in New York City with Amelia Igel, director of the Bureau of Child Welfare, and Mrs. Townson, a foster mother.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, Amelia Igel and Mrs. Townson (unable to find full name)

[ER:] This is Eleanor Roosevelt speaking. Elliott and I are very happy to be able to bring you this program each day from my living room here in the Park Sheraton Hotel in New York City. I hope you find the program we've planned for today an interesting one. Elliott will you tell us about it please?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Mrs. Roosevelt's guest today is Miss Amelia Igel, director of the Bureau of Child Welfare in New York City. She has brought along with her one of the welfare department's foster mothers, Mrs. Townson. You'll be inspired by their story when you meet them both a little later on in the program. Now for a few minutes, however, we're going to take a look at the mail. We'll come to it as soon as we've heard from the sponsors who make this recorded program possible.

[Break 00:55 – 1:01]

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Our letter for discussion today, mother, comes not from a listener, but rather from a viewer of your television program. You'll remember that when you had Mr. [Edward W.] Barrett, the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs, and Senator [William] Benton on your television program, an idea was proposed for an American Deminform. Mr. and Mrs. T. Richard McGraw of Forest Park, Illinois have written about it as follows: On your program last Sunday you were discussing the Cominform, and asked about a UN publication which could be named Deminform. Uh we suggest such a publication be put into existence, so how about the title Freedomform? It would represent all free countries. We also think we need a Boost America Club. Seems as though our sincere citizens do not realize how public bickering must look to the very people we wish to draw to our side. In your private life, you wouldn't fight in front of your neighbors, so why in public life should we quarrel before the world? Certainly we have freedom of speech, but why use that very freedom to harm ourselves and our beloved country? Let's stop knocking and start boosting, and really sell ourselves and our democratic way of life to the world. (2:31)

[ER:] Well I-I think one man took that advice, um and probably hadn't actually uh heard this, but he evidently felt the same way because he sent me a clipping the other day in which he headed a little article he wrote-- um "US War Mongers, Eh?--" and then he went ahead and explained how in every war we'd always been caught unprepared and we always got unprepared as quickly as we'd built up our might and fought the war and won it. Then we promptly got rid of everything we had and became weak again prepar-- uh which was the first step towards preparation of another war and having to build up our strength again. But he did it very cleverly by actual um figures in each war, you see. [Elliott Roosevelt: Yeah.] And it was really um uh a very good answer to the accusation which is always uh put forward by the Soviets that we are the war mongers, and we are the ones who are preparing, and we are the ones who are doing all the things to bring on another war. And um I think that what is suggested here um is really a very-a very wise plan. I think it would be a very good idea. Particularly now, when we've had all the exposés of crime, and when most of us are extremely conscious of the fact that throughout the world they are probably saying that moralities, to very particularly public moralities, to very low ebb in this country.

And I think it would probably be a very good thing to point out that um we put everything bad that happens to us in streaming headlines across the page-- front page of every paper. The British, when anything-- or the French, um or almost any other nation-- perhaps the French are a little more like us, but the other nations mostly, uh put any malfeasance or wrongdoing uh without any headline, as a rule, in a small article on the back page. Uh Mr. So-and-so uh may have done exactly what was done in the United States but he gets very little notice in the paper.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You know, I was very much interested uh in that the short time ago I was in Cuba just at the time that uh they arrested uh the former President of Cuba. And uh everybody was talking about it uh and the Cuban papers dealt with it uh in the middle of the paper with a little uh- uh story that uh you would pass over immediately. Uh they arrested him because he had um been accused of uh appropriating or misappropriating for his own use some forty million dollars during his tenure of office and uh he and his cohorts and uh of course everybody else in Cuba was telling the story that really he made only 180 million dollars out of a period that he was president and that uh another man who had been president uh had only made about 50 million so he was going to run again so that he could catch up and make as much money in the next election. (6:22)

[ER:] Well um it seems as though having great power was not a very good thing for our moral um uh stability. [Elliott Roosevelt: No.] I don't believe-- I-I think it's very good that we've brought out-- I think it shows a healthy thing in us that we've brought out um what is wrong. For instance, I think we couldn't go on letting dope be sold to our young high school people. We couldn't go on letting the gambling actually um the gamblers fix games with-with uh young men in colleges and so forth-- that we couldn't let our sports be used in that way. And I think the final thing of finding that there are tie-ups between uh criminals and men in office because the criminals happen to be um materially powerful through the money that they made in illegal ways. Um I think this angered a great many people and has opened their eyes to a-a situation that perhaps they knew existed, but they hadn't actually wanted to face. And um I think it's probably very good, except from the point of view of what it does to us in the eyes of other nations. Now I don't question that practically in any nation you could find exactly the same amount of corruption, but they would not put it on the front page of their paper. And um I think that we must, now having shown was is wrong, and having acknowledged it, which I think is good for us, show what we do to correct it. And um show that there is a great deal of real, genuine moral stability in this country.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I would like to see some kind of effort made uh to point out--I think uh we had a conversation, you and I, yesterday with Mr. [Allen] Kline of the-- of Farm bureau, and I think he made a very good point, and that is that uh when uh Europeans are receiving aid from us, it's very hard to convince those Europeans that we're really doing anything because they think of us as a great, rich people. Very rich. Uh and that we grow all these surplus materials and food and supplies and so forth, and that if we didn't get rid of them we'd throw our whole system out of whack. So then really we're not doing anything for them. (9:18)

[ER:] We're just helping our own economy.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] We're helping our own economy. And uh so they don't look upon what we're doing as being a sacrifice on our part and we're having a hard time selling that around the world. And his idea uh is that when we go to these people we would gain their respect a whole lot more if, for instance, this a business of uh a million tons of wheat to India [ER: Two million.]. If we went to uh to India and we said, "Now look, uh we want--we're not quite as rich as you think we are. Now we need some things that you're very wealthy in. But you have to develop those. So we'd be very glad to help you out and give you wheat right now, but we want you in turn to build up your Manganese business and uh agree to deliver a certain amount of Manganese in repayment over the next few years. And that the Indians would uh-

Indian government would respect us a whole lot more than uh than our just turning around and giving it to them. (10:28)

[ER:] Well I have felt that we should give them this because it's needed quickly. But I would agree that as—

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well there's no reason why we can't give it immediately, but—

[ER:] I think we should give it immediately, but I would agree that a bargain of that kind was a very good thing.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And that we oughta have that as a basic tenet of our relationship with these other countries.

[ER:] But I think--it should be a basic tenet--but I think we should do what we do much more quickly. I think all this argument that's been going on and the fact that the people in India may starve before the wheat gets there um is [Elliott Roosevelt: That's very true.] very bad. I think if we said "We will send you tomorrow two million tons of wheat, but we will negotiate with you as to how we can develop certain things in your country, [Elliott Roosevelt: That you-] which you are rich in [Elliott Roosevelt: Which we need.], and then we will expect you to repay a certain percentage in return for this wheat by exporting it to us. (11:35)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] That's right. Uh so uh I think further than that- that uh- that the world should know just what we do do in the way of uh good things and they should have a little bit more of our history of non-desire to be aggressive and the example that you used uh of uh the fact that we always strip ourselves, make ourselves weak. Uh that should be told and told and told and told—

[ER: I think it should be repeated over and over again but I also think that um uh we should tell the story of what it means in sacrifice to all the people of our country when they go in for a program like the Marshall Plan and the Four-Point program with the UN [Elliott Roosevelt: Right] and what it means in the UN because it does touch the pockets of every single citizen of this country. (12:39)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well I think that answers this question and uh I think we have to move on to another portion of the program now.

(Break 12:46 – 12:54)

[ER:] The Bureau of Child Welfare of the Department of Welfare in New York City is responsible for the care of children away from their own homes at public expense. This means that many thousands of children each year must be placed somewhere where they will receive real care and real love. I'm very happy that with me today to tell us about this tremendous program is Miss Amelia Igel, director of the Bureau of Child Welfare.

[Amelia Igel:] Thank you Mrs. Roosevelt. I consider it a real privilege to be able to talk with you and about- to our audience, about the many children who are in need today in the city of New York.

[ER:] Well I'm delighted to have you here, Miss Igel, and I'm very glad that you brought with you one of the Department of Welfare foster mothers. I'm very glad you could be with us today, Mrs. Townson. (13:52)

[Mrs. Townson:] I'm very, very pleased to be here Mrs. Roosevelt. Honor and a pleasure to meet you and also to tell about the great need of homes for those poor little babies.

[ER:] I think perhaps we'll understand the part you've played in this work better, Mrs. Townson, if we learned first about the overall program from Miss Igel. I know there must be many, but about how many New York City children are there who need care away from their own homes, Miss Igel?(14:23)

[Amelia Igel:] Every day, Mrs. Roosevelt, the Department of Welfare gets calls from troubled parents who must have some care for their children. About four thousand children each year must be placed away from their own homes through the Department of Welfare, and about one thousand each year are committed by the childrens' courts as neglected children.

[ER:] That's quite-- uh quite a big program, isn't it?

[Amelia Igel:] Indeed it is. In all, there are about fifteen thousand dependent and neglected children cared for at any one time in the city of New York.

[ER:] Well now uh ordinarily, why can't the children's own parents take care of them?

[Amelia Igel:] Well when tragedy strikes a home, the illness of a mother, the desertion of a father, the many things that bring about family discord, it becomes necessary then to protect and care for those children. Now we really believe that children should be with their own parents whenever possible, so that every help is first given the family to keep their own children. Sometimes if it's temporary illness, the Department of Welfare will put in a homemaker to keep the home together until the mother can return home. But oft times there's no home, the mother lives in a furnished room. (15:49)

[ER:] Isn't there an allowance, for instance, if a mother's uh husband deserts her or- or um uh if he's incurably ill or something of that sort—

[Amelia Igel:] Yes indeed, the aid to dependent children, and almost one hundred thousand children receive that assistance in their own homes.

[ER:] Well then a mother--is-is it sufficient for a mother to keep her children at home?

[Amelia Igel:] The allowance is a marginal allowance, but it is adequate. And it is not, for reasons of poverty alone, that children are ever placed away from their own homes.

[ER:] I see. It's more uh when uh something uh else comes about.

[Amelia Igel:] When-when [break in recording 16:38- 16:40] are unable. Now sometimes as I say it is illness. Sometimes it's the pressures of modern life, which become so much that parents themselves desert. [ER: I see.] Let me tell you about David here, because while he's a child we placed several years ago, it seems to me he illustrates a child whose difficulties we want to prevent today. David was four years old when he came to the Department of Welfare. He was brought by a neighbor. He'd been a child born out of wedlock and his mother had tried to keep him with her from one thing and another. She boarded here, she'd been in this furnished room, she'd left him with a friend and so forth, and finally she walked off and left him with this neighbor. When he came into the department he was so undernourished and in such poor condition he had to go to a hospital. And after that, there was a period of building up in a convalescent home. At the convalescent home, it was the custom for the children to write letters to their parents one day a week. Well for those children who couldn't write, the nurse took the dictation from the child. And on letter day, David in the loudest voice [break in recording 17:57-18:00] wrote a letter to his mother. And then when the nurse said "Where shall I send it?" he said "You can tear it up. I ain't got no mother." Well now I'm glad to tell you there's a happy ending. We were able to find a foster mother for David. It wasn't all easy sailing. Once the foster mother was a little late getting home and David came

home from school, didn't find her, and immediately the whole back history of his mother leaving him came up in his mind again. He created a minor riot. It took a long--quite a lot of persuasion for the social worker to help the foster mother to go on with David but she did. And later it was able to have David placed for adoption in his own family.

[ER:] Tell me a little bit about foster care. What is foster care, Miss Igel? (18:51)

[Amelia Igel:] Well foster care can be either care in foster boarding homes with substitute parents or in institutions. We're particularly interested now in trying to get the foster boarding care. Families who live in the community and who are ready to take a child temporarily as their own.

[Break in recording 19:14-19:17]

[ER:] That's what Mrs. Townson does?

[Amelia Igel:] Exactly what Mrs. Townson does.

[ER:] Well now, Mrs. Townson, tell me how did you become interested in being a foster parent?

[Mrs. Townson:] Oh well, Mrs. Roosevelt, I'd heard numerous um uh appeals for children, but it didn't strike me as much as it did this Sunday I was in church and a- a social worker got up and she told how badly homes were needed. And then she gave out the pamphlets with the pictures of these little children on said "We need you." And uh I went home and I took the pamphlet home with me and I got to talking it over with my husband and the children, and I said now, "I have a large home here, and all of you are grown now, I have no more babies, wouldn't it be nice if mother took a few of those poor little babies?" And they all said "Oh yes mother, do." So um I called up the agency the next day and made an appointment and uh they investigated me. And in no time at all then I had one of the little girls. But she's gone off for adoption already.

[ER:] Uh the only thing that I should think um-- I know you've cared for a number of children. How many have- [break in recording.] Well now, don't you find it hard to let them go, that's what-- when it comes time for adoption.

[Mrs. Townson:] Very hard, Mrs. Roosevelt, very hard, but of course uh the little girl that I had, she had no parents at all, she was a little foundling. And it just delighted me to know that she would get a real father and mother. And- [ER: And be really adopted.] Well yes uh yes. It really- it really made me feel good that way but took a long time

[ER:] I can't help feeling that it takes a very unselfish person to be a good foster parent, because your inclination would be to hold back um your-your love and affection because you know you're going to be hurt when they were taken either back to their own parents or adopted. And uh on the other hand uh it's only if you give them the love and affection that you can prepare them for the other things, so [Mrs. Townson: Oh, yes.] it must be though- it must require a great deal of unselfishness-

[Mrs. Townson:] Thank you. It really does, Mrs. Roosevelt. It really does.

[ER:] Well uh Miss Igel, does the Department of Welfare itself place all these children?

[Amelia Igel:] No, the pattern of child care in New York City traditionally has been for the private aid [break in recording 21:55 - 21:59] so that for all these children who need care at public expense, the

Department of Welfare determines that they're eligible for that care, and then selects the appropriate private agency. And the agency gives the direct care.

[ER:] I see. Well now why is there such critical need present for foster homes? (22:23)

[Amelia Igel:] Well it began with the Second World War, Mrs. Roosevelt. When so many foster homes were lost because families were broken up uh when they moved to defense industry areas, when sons went into service, husbands went into service, and women went into industry. [ER: Yes.] And we have never been able to replace as many homes as were lost during that period. And now, with-- after the war, with the difficulties in finding proper housing, many families say to us "I would be glad to take a child if I only had additional room."

[ER:] And it's the housing question that very often keeps them from being able to take—

[Amelia Igel:] In many situations it is.

[ER:] Mhm.

[Break in recording 23:14 – 23:23]

[ER:] Very- very bad housing conditions for families and I can well see that to take in an extra child would a-a very difficult thing. And um yet foster homes are better than institutions, aren't they?

[Amelia Igel:] Indeed they are, particularly for young babies.

[ER:] Particularly for young babies. Uh a foster home will give that sense of security that a baby really needs where an institution will never give it. [Amelia Igel: That's right.] That's very interesting to think about. And always interesting to me how interrelated problems are-- housing is interrelated with the problem of the care of children. Um I must uh stop this interview for a minute and give our announcer a chance to say a word, but we'll come right back.

(Break 24:18 – 24:28)

[ER:] Now we are coming back to our talk with Miss Amelia Igel, director of the Bureau of Child Welfare in New York City, and Mrs. Townson, one of the foster mothers for the Department of Welfare. And um I think this question I want to ask you now, Miss Igel, is what steps has the department taken to meet the need of um this added number of children that you have on your hands who really should be in foster homes?

[Amelia Igel:] In 1949, uh at the recommendation of the mayor's committee on foster care, Mayor [William] O'Dwyer asked the Department of Welfare to set up an additional foster home service to supplement the efforts of the private agencies. He asked us particularly to find homes for the infants because so many of them had-had to be sheltered in hospital wards. So, uh—

[ER:] And that is bad, because of course the child isn't really ill and uh take a uh bed away from an ill child—

[Amelia Igel:] From an ill child, it-- although they give excellent physical care to our babies in hospitals, it takes, as you say, a bed from an ill child. The child is subject to cross infection, and he does not get that individualized care that baby needs. The babies in the hospitals are more apt to be apathetic, listless, not to learn to walk or talk as quickly as other children. I'm glad to say we've been pretty successful. We've

placed 152 babies in the two years we've been in operation, but I must say that is not enough. We still have, really, hundreds of babies to place, and particularly the young baby, the newborn. At one time we thought we'd licked the problem of babies in hospitals. We had them almost all placed. Now I regret to say there are ninety-five infants. (26:45)

[ER:] In hospitals?

[Amelia Igel:] In hospitals. Who are waiting placements.

[ER:] Well are there- are there also babies and children in other institutions waiting--?

[Amelia Igel:] Yes, the- the temporary shelter is a recognized time-- a place of giving temporary care for a child. And there are- there are babies and other children in those shelters. The shelter is good if it's for a short period of time. But when the child has to remain for many months, then it's bad. Young children can't take living with groups of children twenty-four hours a day, day after day.

[ER:] Well now, um who-who may become a foster parent? [ER coughs] (27:28)

[Amelia Igel:] Well, in New York City any person who lives in New York state and within about fifty miles of New York City. And we say fifty miles because there must be some supervision of the children in the foster homes. Any person who is in any family where the mother and father are under sixty years of age, where they're in good health, where they have adequate space for the child, but most important of all, where they really love and care about children, and are ready to accept them even if they aren't the perfect blue-eyed, blonde youngster, and are ready to give him up to his own parents or to let him go for adoption-- if that is necessary.

[ER:] Now how long do foster children remain with the families with whom they are placed?

[Amelia Igel:] That depends on each individual situation. We believe that as quickly as possible a child should get back with his own family and do everything possible to help the family reestablish themselves. So sometimes it might be a few months. Sometimes it might be a few years. Sometimes, for some of our children, it may be during their minority.

[ER:] Well if it's during their minority it's almost like keeping a child then having it for adoption because um uh—

[Amelia Igel:] That's right. I'm glad you raised that point, because so many of the children we now have to place, particularly in the protestant group, are negro children. And it is extremely difficult to find adoptive homes for negro children. (29:17)

[ER:] Oh I thought it was easier, because uh I've always been told uh that friends and family were so ready to take them.

[Amelia Igel:] Well, perhaps the cultural pattern is changing. But while we hear all the time about the many more families who want children than there are children eligible for adoption, that is not true for the negro child. We hope very much that families who would be interested in adopting a negro child would apply. Now the Department of Welfare does not place these children for adoption, but would refer any eligible child to an adoption agency, and any family inquiring to the suitable agency.

[ER:] But you do place them in foster homes.

[Amelia Igel:] We place them in foster homes.

[ER:] Well now, Mrs. Townson I'd like to ask you did you pick out the children that you-- you say you had three, did you pick them out yourself? (30:19)

[Mrs. Townson:] Well no Mrs. Roosevelt, the worker tells you about the children and then she brings them to you. Now the first little girl that I had, she asked me if I wanted to go see her in the hospital. And I said yes, and I went to see her and my heart just went out to those little babies lying in the cribs there, just uh knocking their heads for nothing but better to do. And if I'd had room I would've even taken more.

[ER:] And what- what do you feel is the thing that you get out of taking these-- that you have got out of taking your three foster children?

[Mrs. Townson:] Well-well, uh Mrs. Roosevelt, it's a great deal of joy and satisfaction to see a child that's sober and doesn't smile to begin to play and laugh and-and sing and-and then the little girl that I have now, she was nineteen months old when I got her and she couldn't even crawl. [ER: She couldn't crawl?] Couldn't even crawl. You'd put her on the floor and she couldn't even move. Now in four months that child walks, talks, goes up and down the stairs and goes outside to play like any normal child. So it just goes to show that just lying in the bed-- and even though they have good care, they don't have that- [ER: No.] that love and individual attention that-

[ER and Mrs. Townson overlap]

[ER:] They don't have freedom and movement that a child in a home has.

[Mrs. Townson:] Yes that's right, and the freedom of movement. So uh and then I also think it's wonderful uh to take them when you have children of your own, because it teaches your children to share and not be selfish.

[ER:] Now how old are your children?

[Mrs. Townson:] Well I have four, Mrs. Roosevelt. My youngest is eight, uh Ronald, and I have a little girl, eleven, Florette, and a boy, Ossie, fifteen, and my oldest son, nineteen, Finley, has just uh recently been accepted for the army air corps. (32:13)

[ER:] Army air corp. Well you have uh quite a family, and do they uh enjoy having the baby in the house or-or do-do they resent it at times?

[Mrs. Townson:] Oh no they definitely enjoy having- and uh if you'd have seen how pitiful they were when the first baby left, but I was so glad that they uh replaced another one right away so that that love could be fostered on her that they had put on that other child.

[ER:] Well uh that's- that's- that was something I was going to ask you. Whether they um uh didn't feel bad there, I mean—

[Mrs. Townson:] Oh yes- [ER: They felt bad then.] they felt very badly. [ER: Cause when--] In fact my oldest son even said "Oh mother I wish Daddy wasn't so old so you could adopt." [ER laughs] But there's a limit to the age of when you can adopt. (33:07)

[ER:] Yes, that you can adopt. Well that's um uh-- I can see why uh you would be a good um foster parent, but um I also can see why it must be very difficult to find good foster parents, because if they have the love and affection to give, uh it makes it so much harder to give the child up.

[Amelia Igel:] That's right. We uh ask a great deal of foster parents, Mrs. Roosevelt. [ER: Well now-] And foster parents give a great deal.

[ER:] Um I wondered whether-- when a child is in a foster home, Miss Igel, um can-can any relatives of that child visit the foster home, or what happens?

[Amelia Igel:] Yes, we encourage the relatives to visit. [ER: You do.] And um that perhaps is another chore for the foster mother, because sometimes it is upsetting. But working on the principle that as early as possible the child should get back to his own family and own home, we do everything possible to encourage the relatives to visit and to take the child. (34:19)

[ER:] And um do you find that um children uh more often do uh get back into their own homes, that you can build homes again?

[Amelia Igel:] Yes we are reasonably successful there. And we think it important that for every child, that every effort be made for the family to get the child as quickly as possible because if too long a period in foster care elapses, then it becomes very difficult for the family to be reunited.

[ER:] Well we have very little more time but I'd like to know what board is paid for foster children and how medical care and clothing is provided.

[Amelia Igel:] Yes. The department pays fifty-five dollars a month for children under two years of age, and fifty dollars a month for children over two years of age. And in addition, all the costs of medical care, clothing, and other incidental and authorized expenses are met. And that's the same rates of board as paid by the private agencies. (35:25)

[ER:] Oh well that um-- I-I would feel that that is not a very large allowance, but I would feel that it might be adequate. Well now I'm sorry to say that our time has come to an end. But I want to thank you, Miss Igel, and thank you, Mrs. Townson- [Mrs. Townson: Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt] for coming to tell us this story and I'm sure it will encourage people to think about these children and to become foster parents, which I know is what you want, Miss Igel.

[Amelia Igel:] Thank you, Mrs. Roosevelt. If anyone is listening, we hope they might call us at Digby 48700.

[ER:] Thank you.

[Break in recording 36:06-36:34]

[ER:] It's a terrible thing to see a little child who is too exhausted, too starved, even to cry. But that describes thousands of youngsters in Korea today. Care for Korea is working night and day to help these babies. Do your share. Contribute today to Care for Korea.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] And now it's time to close the program and to remind you that you've been listening to the Eleanor Roosevelt Program, which comes to you each Monday through Friday at this same time. And this is Elliott Roosevelt speaking and wishing you all good day.

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