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Interview with Mrs. Zena Harman*
by Jack Charnow
at UNICEF HQ on 16 April 1985

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* Mrs. Zena Harman served as Israel's representative on the UNICEF Executive Board from 1950-1959 and again from 1962 until 1968 when Israel left the Board. She was First Vice-Chairman of the Board in 1954, served five terms as Chairman of the Programme Committee (1955, 1956, 1959, 1962 and 1963) and was Chairman of the Board in 1964 and again in 1965. As Chairman of the Board she delivered a Nobel Lecture in Oslo on 11 December 1965 at the ceremony of award to UNICEF of the Nobel Peace Prize. Mrs. Harman was the founder of the Israeli National Committee for UNICEF in 1969 and was its Chairman until her retirement in 1984.



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Initial interest in UNICEF

CHARNOW: Zena, you were actively involved with the UNICEF Board, the Secretariat and our programmes for more than sixteen years. You started at a crucial period in the evolution of UNICEF as we were moving from pre-occupation with our work in Europe to emphasis on developing countries, to finding out our own identity in the UN family, and to broadening the scope of our programmes. Would you like to talk about how you saw UNICEF when you first came, and how you saw it as it developed over the years?

HARMAN: First of all, I was tremendously excited by the fact that the UN had established an agency which was to concern itself solely with needs of children. That interested me: an agency which directed its concern to the needs of children, to focus on the problems and on the suffering and misery of children, and which did not lay down or in any way indicate that there would be an iota of politics, or an approach which would be dependent upon government political positions. In other words, the sole concern was the condition of the children, and the objective was to somehow provide for their needs -- first of all to understand what their needs were. Of course the fact that UNICEF was born in the aftermath of the war in Europe was particularly meaningful to me as a Jew whose people had suffered so incredibly. So many of these children who had been orphaned and were starving at that time were assisted by UNICEF.

Pate

Maurice Pate had a passionate devotion to his task, which he seemed to regard almost as a sacred mission, and yet with a simplicity, with modesty and understanding which I felt at that time was quite unique. He set standards which, I believe, to this very day characterize the uniqueness of the spirit that has pervaded UNICEF and has affected not only the staff -- those who are privileged to work within the Organization in a professional capacity -- but the members of the Board and also governments who have cooperated with UNICEF. There was no question under Maurice Pate's leadership that there was to be no distinction of any kind -- the only criterion was the child's welfare.

Sinclair

There was a second person who influenced me very much at that time, the Chairman of the Board when I first came to UNICEF -- Adelaide Sinclair. She was an incredibly well-organized and professionally competent woman with her heart in the right place, and who was well suited to give support to the approaches that Maurice Pate initiated. Adelaide was practical, she was

down-to-earth, she was very clear thinking. She was able to translate problems into very practical terms, and help us in moving along to proposals for solutions.

It was very gratifying that she subsequently was taken into the UNICEF Secretariat as a Deputy Executive Director where her abilities had a profound influence on the planning and the thinking that went in to developing the programmes.

Board atmosphere

The atmosphere among Board members was one of cooperation, of thinking together, irrespective of where we came from, of plunging into the problems and removing ourselves so to speak from a point of view that might have been expressed in other parts of the UN. A few of us had position papers but the discussions were much freer and enabled a more spontaneous reaction in the debates to problems. We were able to be objective and this too was a contrast. I found it enormously refreshing in comparison to what I'd experienced in the General Assembly where there was a more fixed approach in discussions.

Awareness of child needs in developing countries

The other thing which influenced me deeply at that time was my introduction to the terrible realities of hardships of children. I had experience, of course, with serious social problems, poverty and special problems of the children of my own people, but I had no idea about the appalling conditions of children in developing countries, the extensive incidence of chronic diseases, hunger and malnutrition the death and morbidity rates, the high mortality rates from infectious diseases, some of which I had never heard of. I remember my own reaction when I first heard of yaws, the terrible swelling of the sole of the foot, and then the excitement when we learned that it could be treated so cheaply by penicillin. Today yaws has been eliminated. Of course, tuberculosis was a known sickness in Europe. Many children living in slums and poverty were affected by it. But there was a huge incidence in various parts of the world.

Moving beyond supplies

At that time, most of our work was directed to providing supplies to meet the immediate need. It became abundantly clear, however that we would have to go beyond that. The supplies certainly brought assistance and relieved immediate suffering, but they didn't provide solutions to the on-going problems. We would have to delve much deeper and take decisions that would in the long run enable the countries themselves to produce the instruments that they would require for the infrastructure and programmes that would enable them to come to grips with the problem. Feeding

children, immunizing them was the tremendously important thing to do, but we had to know that this would be on-going, continuing.

Interrelationship in self-help

There was another aspect of this that personally I came to believe in very strongly; the people themselves have to take a hand in understanding that their fate really is, up to a point, connected with their own behaviour. We use the term "self-help". But when you began to think along these lines you came up against the huge statistics of illiteracy and lack of fundamental understanding or knowledge of simple needs within the family. You came up against the shocking problems of the general environment, of water supply, environmental sanitation. I remember when we began to work on the problem of latrines, there seemed to be quite ingenious work at that time to provide very simple mechanisms to be used.

Then all this began to fit in with the question of basic nutrition. A person who was starving or semi-starving is incapable of concentrating even on the basic elements of learning about the availability of food, the knowledge about food. I remember when we started our nutrition programmes, we went on to deal with applied nutrition, helping people to have their little auxiliary plots in the gardens so that they could grow themselves what they need. To get to the point where they understood the importance of all this themselves and to act on their own behalf was itself a long term and not an easy process.

As these things began to become more understood we also, moved towards appreciation of the fact that dealing with each individual sectoral need -- health needs, sanitation needs, nutrition needs, educational needs, social needs, was insufficient, that in fact each one was dependent upon the other. They were very, much interrelated.

Integrated country approach

And then we move forward to the whole concept of the vital importance of country planning an intergrated comprehensive approach towards the needs of children. And as we developed in our understanding and moved forward in the direction of proposing solutions and setting up projects within countries, we had to engage in a lot of pilot studies.

Training

We had to involve ourselves in something that was vitally important and crucial for success -- namely providing indigenous people who were capable of undertaking and working with the project with at least a minimum of knowledge. I remember our first approach was that we needed professional staff, and our

concept of "professional" was the Western concept. Of course it was very important to have qualified people, but the reality showed us that it was going to take us far too long to provide all the top professionals and that we would have to find interim solutions such as training of auxiliary staffs.

Western standards/developing country realities

I shall never forget Dr. Adeniyi-Jones -- Tunji, as he came to be known affectionately by us all -- the representative on the Board from Nigeria. Very highly professional and qualified, he was a doctor from Nigeria who became terribly impatient with our lack of knowledge, about the applicability of Western standards to the reality of the countries which historically were so different in the pace of their development.

Breast feeding

We invested a lot of money for programmes such as local production of powdered milk. Of course in order to use powdered milk you need clean water, and how could you ensure that there was clean water? Then when we got the bright idea that maybe we should encourage the use of various infant formulas and again Dr. Adeniyi-Jones got very excited and brought us down to earth and helped us to understand that we were encouraging the people to move away from what was certainly the healthiest and best way of nourishing a child -- breast feeding.

Field observation

The material and the materials that were provided for us at the Board meetings were particularly helpful, especially the reports by regional directors, who got to know the realities in their regions extremely well and provided us with many insights which were very perceptive. Nevertheless, nothing really substitutes for seeing things for yourself.

I remember one of the first field visits of the Programme Committee. This was to the Central American countries.

If I may be permitted an aside, when we were coming from San Salvador to Guatemala we got stuck, bogged down in the mud on the main road for hours. The delegation which was waiting for us in Guatemala City, dressed formally, had to come out in cars and together with us take off their shoes and socks and wade in the mud in order to pull us out. That in itself was something that told us how difficult communications are even on the main road between one country and another. I remember seeing cars abandoned on the side, particularly near some African and Asian villages I remember thinking how terrible it was to leave them to rust and disintegrate But people told us that once it doesn't go it's dead and the fact that it could be mechanically brought to life again,

was something they just couldn't understand. I was struck by the superstitions and the simplicity and also the tremendous trust these people had in their own traditions. There was difficulty for them to rely on the doctor rather on the local midwife. Powdered milk, for example, wasn't popular in some places and we were told that powdered milk couldn't be used because it came from cows.had a special status and meaning for them.

The field visits greatly increased my understanding of the complexity of the problems.

Local responsibility

Also reinforced was my initial feeling for the villagers themselves; when they assume responsibility for services they develop their own understanding of what is possible. Our UNICEF professionals in the field were extremely well qualified; the special spirit that has always pervaded UNICEF and their dedication and commitment was moving. On the other hand they came from the outside and communication within the villages was difficult sometimes causing misunderstanding and resentments. I think gradually the belief has been strengthened that everything possible has to be done through UNICEF programmes to encourage the villagers' responsibility for or participation in their own services.

Milk conservation

Another programme from which my own country benefitted enormously, which I found exciting was milk conservation which in the 50's was very, very popular and rightly so. In so many countries, there was little or even no milk. Milk powder was provided, but I've already mentioned some of the second thoughts about the milk powder and some of the problems which occurred, lack of clean water, boiling facilities, etc, and in any case it was provided from outside.

How to develop a milk supply? Let me give an example from my own country. Well, we really had very little milk, there was no bottling or pasteurisation. The cowsheds and dairy plants were clean, but the milk was delivered at homes in the morning from urns and poured into a saucepan left out side the door. By the time a person arrived home after work it was often sour. Also the milk supply was insufficient. The mutual assistance between agencies was extremely important. the expert input of the functional agencies especially WHO and FAO in UNICEF projects. FAO provided experts to help breed dairy herds, to teach our people how to feed them with what was available until the supplies of milk became quite plentiful, Then work with the dairies on processing and sterilizing so the milk could be delivered clean to the homes. We now have a surplus of milk and export dairy goods.

I remember how important this was for India. I remember one night, the board sat until eight o'clock in the evening; it was a Friday night, I'll never forget it, learning about a huge programme of \$7 million for milk conservation. Then we went out and saw in Bombay what had been done, how tremendously important this had been. But in some countries the supplies of milk would never be sufficient and then we moved on, of course, to dealing with protein substitutes. Remember, Jack, how exciting it was when we produced soya milk powder and it was brought to a Board meeting and we tasted it. And then there was work with cotton seed and fish flour. I recall in Latin America, Tegucigalpa, when we visited there and saw the fish, the efforts to make fish into a powder, to provide a valuable protein substitute, but it had to be accepted to the population tastewise.

Continuing problems

So the developments in that first period of my association with UNICEF were tremendously exciting, tremendously challenging. As we moved forward to understanding better what the needs were and understanding better what UNICEF might be able to do in order to be of the greatest assistance, we always found that there was another problem which emerged. It's a continuous on-going fight, as was apparent, quite frankly, sitting in the Board meeting yesterday hearing Mr. Grant's report. We initiated programmes to deal with many urgent needs yet 'still' so many of these problems persist and manifest themselves in different ways. Also new problems come to take their place.

Infant mortality rates have dropped tremendously. That was one of our major goals in those days, but it is a problem that keeps coming back. Of course we dealt with the question of family planning which caused us to run into controversy due to traditional and religious beliefs. I think UNICEF's policy and definition was the first which most people could accept in this field. Everybody has the right to education and available knowledge

Immunization

The child had to be immunized, the mother wouldn't bring the child if she didn't understand what we wanted to do and what would happen after the shot. The mother had to understand this. I'll never forget the visit to a clinic in India in view of the magnificent Taj Mahal; many had tracked miles and miles, maybe even hundreds of miles and were lying exhausted, waiting and waiting their turn. They get the injection once, and they need to come back again to complete the series. Their knowledge and their own experience of that day, what that shot meant in terms of health, this was especially important to convey.

Movement to towns

As they acquire a little more knowledge and understanding people want a more satisfactory way of life and not too far away are the towns and many began to move to towns. There was a feeling that the medical services, clinics, maternity/child health care centers available in the cities were superior to those in the villages. Apart from jobs and recreation we used to say that we would have to see to it that the villagers were getting just as good services in every respect. But that trek from the villages to the cities of course was the beginning of a whole new set of problems and challenges.

Social problems

In the early days, we weren't really too much concerned with the social problems. We were much more concerned with the elementary task of coping with disease and malnutrition. The quality of family life within the kinship family in the villages was something that I had to see and understand to appreciate. So much of this self-support was within the family itself. The discipline within the family, the love within the family, the warmth within the family, the baby always kept close to the mother's body something which has been lost in Western society -- had somehow however, to be retained within the context of a much more advanced environment in terms of living conditions. Of course the first terrible thing that happened was the breakdown of this family support which plunged us into all the social problems -- loss of values, starvation of a different kind, and some appalling habits were acquired. This, I think, was perhaps one of the major influences in helping us to move forward to active support in social work.

Handicapped

I haven't said anything about the handicapped in which UNICEF obviously had to become involved because so many children were handicapped. I had no idea that trachoma was treatable by a very simple and very cheap method. The whole question of blind children was agonizing for me. And there was also leprosy.

Relations with Governments

UNICEF has encouraged governments to give a higher priority to children. Unfortunately this competes with very many other needs and political pressures each day. To persuade governments about the priorities for children's needs is a continuous job. But there has been development. The Country Planning Approach has played a very important role. It was important in bringing together all the factors, including many programmes which were

either directly or indirectly related to the kind of thing that UNICEF was doing.

NGOs, National Committees

Of course many non-governmental organizations were concerned primarily with children. And as the years went by ways were found of bringing them more and more into UNICEF's orbit. The setting up of National Committees began in the 1950s, with a major emphasis on disseminating understanding amongst the people in their countries and the work that they could do with their governments such as lobbying. And, of course, the countries that contributed have made a wonderful contribution to UNICEF's development and finances, when viewed from all angles

Harman's contribution to UNICEF

CHARNOW: Well, Zena, that was a remarkable account of the development of UNICEF. But what you omitted was your own personal contribution to that development. As I observed your involvement in UNICEF both in the Board and in your relations with other Board members and your relations with the Secretariat, you were enormously helpful initiating, or picking up, ideas and expanding them, and getting them accepted by the Secretariat and the Board. At times with gentle questions, you would prod us to move forward. For whatever reasons in your own experience and personality, you had the knack of advancing ideas in UNICEF much earlier than most other people. Some of these later became conventional wisdom not only in UNICEF and in country thinking but I think in the international development scene.

I don't know whether you recall it or not, but something like twenty years ago you made a statement which I then picked up and used in one way or the other in UNICEF literature. I think it is perhaps the best concise statement on the premises upon which UNICEF has developed its programmes that I'd ever seen. I have it here: "The child's needs cannot be compartmentalized, the concern of one ministry or another or one agency or another, or this or that project." It has been really the whole basis of our evolution.

Cooperation with agencies

CHARNOW: Would you say something about how you saw our relations with the other agencies in the UN system and the anomalous situation of an organization which doesn't fit into a tidy sectoral structure of health, education, nutrition.

HARMAN: I was really impressed by the cooperation between the agencies. I felt that UNICEF was acting rightly in obtaining and relying on the expertise available to it. Although there were certainly here

and there some ragged areas where inevitably there was a little friction between the approach of the people representing the different agencies, particularly in the field, generally speaking, there was a great deal of mutual endeavor, and the cooperation proved to be very beneficial.

The agencies helped us to understand the feasibility of many suggested approaches. Of course the public doesn't always understand the different roles. Inevitably WHO speaks of health services for children and FAO speaks of its nutrition programmes for children and UNESCO speaks of its educational programmes for children. This led to some confusion, but this is more than compensated for by the value of the cooperation. UNICEF's focus is on the whole child.

I think the agencies themselves would agree that they all gained as much from UNICEF's experience as UNICEF may have gained from them. Of course, there is a question as to whether or not UNICEF could have employed more people professionally itself but it had the judgment of first rate specialists. The experts themselves were, on the whole, very sensible and displayed a lot of tact and good sense, although here and there were inevitable problems. In joint meetings there was sometimes a tendency by some of the representatives of the other agencies to believe that all truth emanated from them.

WHO and JCHP

Of course as Chairman of the Board, and the Programme Committee, I took part in many of the JCHP discussions with WHO and had the opportunity of hearing the views and obtaining specialized knowledge from some of the top people in these agencies. I found this to be extremely important before we embarked on further development of the programmes. There were some diseases, for instance, that I think most of us on the UNICEF side had just simply never heard of unless we were medical people. Involvement in the planning in terms of the benefit to the individual, and what needed to be done and what could be done, what was feasible, that was very exciting.

CHARNOW: I'd like you to comment on the impression I've had about the JCHP. It started pretty much as a way of WHO trying to rein in UNICEF, particularly Dr. Rajchman. But, as it developed it seemed to me it became a means of the UNICEF Board and Secretariat of asking WHO to be more thoughtful on certain issues which it proposed for the Committee's agenda. Therefore in a way it was good for WHO because the people who had to prepare the papers usually welcomed this opportunity and the additional pressure on the powers that be in their organization to address themselves more to the issue.

The UNICEF delegation always included the Chairman of the Board and Chairman of the Programme Committee. Therefore, you were on the Committee more than any other Chairman because of the length

of your five year tenure as Chairman of the Programme Committee -- a record that I doubt will ever be equaled again. My impression is that the UNICEF delegation came much more briefed, much more understanding of what it wanted to get out of the meeting than the WHO delegation. In some ways we ran circles around WHO and maybe the only defense they had was to be condescending.

HARMAN:

I agree with you. That is what I was trying to say earlier but you said it so much better. There was also occasionally a feeling that they were trying to get money out of us for programmes that interested them. I think where the JCHP was concerned my most vivid memory is of discussions on malaria eradication. UNICEF put a great deal of effort in it and an enormous amount of money and yet the WHO regarded this as being its programme and it went to town on a big publicity campaign. It is true that we learned a great deal about malaria and the mosquito, and about the virtues of DDT and about epidemiology. But here I think there was perhaps a tendency on the part of the WHO to try and take advantage of us. I was very troubled to hear recently that despite the huge investment, not only in money and personnel by governments themselves as well as by the agencies, malaria was becoming a serious problem again in some places!

But to revert to the JCHP. We were also in a very good situation because we also had a very brilliant medical man on our team, Professor Debré was the central figure in many of those discussions throughout the years. He was certainly a member far longer than I was. We were so fortunate to have his expertise and knowledge. There was great strength in the UNICEF group. I think the composition of our delegations helped develop the right kind of relationships between UNICEF and WHO. And then there was Mike Sachs who worked in WHO and contributed considerably. And, of course, at the beginning there was Dr. Martha Eliot. She was of course a special favorite of mine, I admired her immensely. I think she was the first Deputy Director of WHO who afterwards worked on the UNICEF side, so she knew both sides. Her influence was profound, not only for us in UNICEF, but through the many brilliant public health experts who received their training under her guidance at Harvard.

