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Cover Sheet

Long Distance Telephone Interview with Peter Ustinov in Switzerland

by Judith Spiegelman

at UNICEF headquarters, New York on 17 June 1985

Ustinov: Hello?

Spiegelman: Hello. Am I speaking with Mr. Ustinov?

Ustinov: Yes.

Spiegelman: Mr. Ustinov, it's UNICEF in New York calling, Judith Spiegelman.

Ustinov: Yes.

Spiegelman: How are you?

Ustinov: I'm fine, thank you.

Spiegelman: That's good. I'm recording our conversation so if it sounds a little strange, it's because it's a conference room box here.

Ustinov: Oh, I see.

Spiegelman: It's a pleasure to talk with you. I have enjoyed very much reading your books and all your clippings and everything I could find out about you.

Ustinov: Oh, that's very nice.

Spiegelman: And you've also been on television twice last Saturday night and it was back-to-back. First it was as Monsieur Poirot and then it was as Nero.

Ustinov: Oh, really!

Spiegelman: Yes.

Ustinov: My goodness!

Spiegelman: Far into the night.

Ustinov: My God! Well, well.

Spiegelman: It was fascinating to work backwards.

Ustinov: Yes, I'm sure.

Spiegelman: Mr. Ustinov, what was your reaction to the material we sent you?

Ustinov: Well, I think it's fine. What do you want me to do? Do you want me to answer questions on it or do you want me write you something and send it off or what?

Spiegelman: Well, if you are prepared to write something, that's the very best because that is what Mr. Harold Evans is asking us from each of the Ambassadors. I just thought I would do the ground work for you and maybe try to make it a little simpler.

Ustinov: Yes, I'm very grateful for that, because I'm off to Russia again on Saturday and off to Paris tomorrow night so it is a bit rushed but if a sort of a concrete little essay might be some sort of help putting certain things into the kind of words I would use when I'm writing and not just when I'm talking—I can easily send something off as well as an amplified thing.

Spiegelman: Shall we use this opportunity to talk about this today?

Ustinov: Yes.

Spiegelman: Well, did you think the titles were okay? A third one came to mind, "Peter Ustinov: Hooked on UNICEF".

Ustinov: Well, that's alright.

Spiegelman: Do you like that better than the other two?

Ustinov: Wait a minute, I've got them here, sitting on the floor as usual. Which are the other two?

Spiegelman: "The Pleasures and the Pains of a Goodwill Ambassador" or "UNICEF Good for My Soul".

Ustinov: Well, I think "Hooked on UNICEF" is simpler.

Spiegelman: Okay, fine.

Ustinov: Yes.

Spiegelman: In other words, what we had hoped, Mr. Ustinov, was that you might be able to give us fifty to a hundred words about what are the pains and pleasures (even if we don't use the title) of being a UNICEF goodwill ambassador and then, it the photos that we have plus as many of the list that we hoped you could find with the letter we gave you a list of eleven pictures.

Ustinov: Yes, I know.

Spiegelman: Some of those of you as a young boy, as a child, if some of those are available, we're still trying to get pictures of you at the first gala, which we hope we can retrieve.

Ustinov: What's your deadline?

Spiegelman: I beg your pardon?

Ustinov: Well, they're telling us the middle or end of September.

Spiegelman: Well, that would be wonderful if you would be able to naturally in a better way than we could, put together pictures and quotes that seem to make some sense and we may have left out things that are very important to you. As I know the theme of disarmament, peace, and UNICEF are.

Ustinov: Yes.

Spiegelman: We may not have hit it hard enough.

Ustinov: Oh no, that's up to you. I mean, I'm not, I don't think one is going to hit it very hard if one is representing a non-political and a-political and non-religous organization. I mean UNICEF is little bit like a chameleon and so it should be.

Spiegelman: Well, should we take the opportunity to maybe talk about some of the things that I was so curious about?

Ustinov: Yes.

Spiegelman: Thank you. I wonder particularly, about all our three goodwill ambassadors connected with UNICEF in their early or mid-forties. Do you think that there is a common thread? Does UNICEF answer the mid-life crisis, Mr. Ustinov?

Ustinov: I don't think it's necessary a crisis. I think it's maybe a change of gear. It's simply that I think the whole process of life you begin to see things from further and further away which is quite normal because you've covered more and more ground. And through your rear view window, you see things in a continually changing proportion and you begin, I think, eventually to understand what really matters and what is just cosmetic and nonsense.

Spiegelman: When you work with children, you once said that children bring out the best in you? Do they always?

Ustinov: Not necessary. I mean one has to be very logical about this. If there is a particularly obnoxiously brought-up child which tries to get its own way by taking advantage of somebody who doesn't know it well, then I would say it isn't a particularly wonderful experience to be with that child alone. In other words, I can't be sentimental and say that anything that is young is to me absolutely irresistible and adorable. No, I don't think so, but I don't think that's what UNICEF is all about, in any case.

Spiegelman: Right. On your UNICEF trips, did you ever find a difficult child?

Ustinov: Oh, yes. You always find difficult children, and since you find difficult adults, why shouldn't you find difficult children? I would say this: one thing I've discovered on all my trips is that children have a great deal in common with each other, that babies have an enormous amount in common. When you a hear a baby

crying, you can't tell from its voice whether its black, white, yellow, or whatever it is. But then gradually, as it grows up, it begins to inherit national traits and education and so on, changes take place in the child, but at the same time, children of about ten and eleven and younger are instinctively such good raw material—they're so well-inclined towards each other on the whole and their intentions are so laudable that I find a great deal in common between children and old people, too. Very often, they reach the same conclusions, one by experience, and the other by instinct. One is near the beginning of life and the other is near the end. And there is even a complicity very often which everybody must have noticed in their own families where the mother reproaches her mother for spoiling the child and the grandmother seems offended, but shoots the child a look saying, "Once your mother is out of the way, I'll go on spoiling you, don't worry." and I think this is the kind of complicity between the very young and the old which is a perfectly natural one and the butt of all that are the people in the middle that really create nearly all the trouble in the world by being in full possession of their faculties.

Spiegelman: Tell me, when you work with children have you found that barking like a dog is what works best with them?

Ustinov: No. I think it's a very good substitute to language, because, if you're suddenly presented to a whole lot of Thai children or Kenyian children or whatever children and you don't know their language, you don't know what's expected of you except that they

look at you in such a manner that they know that if their studies have been interrupted for this introduction, it must be worth something. You then feel, immediately slightly on the defensive, because you really have nothing to contribute to them. You don't know their language. You can't just grin and bow—everybody does that. No, I try to find something out of common experience, and common experience is often the dog.

Spiegelman: I've often wondered if you have a special affinity to dogs, because you've used the imagery so often.

Ustinov: I use it often because a dog makes a noise which everybody recognizes. It's more difficult to do that with a cat. Especially in an audience of three or four hundred children. Try and get a cat through to that lot, because it's really very, very awkward. Even a cat finds it difficult. Dogs make much more noise and are much more extroverted and much more visible than a cat.

Spiegelman: And you've been an airplane and a car too and that works?

Ustinov: Yes, I mean things which are more or less, a dog is a living thing which you can express a kind of mnemetic veracity because I can transform myself into a dog by looking puzzled and barking at things that I don't understand, and I've watched dogs long enough and children watch dogs long enough. It's much more difficult to be a cow or something like that because there's no direct communication between children and cows. You see them bringing

cows home occasionally but they're just tapping them with a stick and there's no great relationship between them. Between dogs and children, there's very often a relationship.

Spiegelman: And has it happened often that children brought you a bone while you were pretending to be a dog?

Ustinov: Brought me a bone?

Spiegelman: Yes, I thought I read that. That they actually came over and gave you a bone, whether they were playing with the fantasy themselves.

Ustinov: I think if a child has a sense of humor, it is liable to do that because he wants to get a laugh from the other children.

Spiegelman: I see, but it didn't actually happen?

Ustinov: No, I simply take the bone. I reject doggy bags and take bones.

Spiegelman: You've been a lot of different characters for UNICEF in TV spots, a magician, a chef, a football player, a hippie, a union leader, a big business man, Santa Claus, and a cowboy and I think a Canadian forest ranger.

Ustinov: Yes. Something like that.

Spiegelman: Yes. Have I left anything out?

Ustinov: I doubt it.

Spiegelman: Is there any character you haven't done that you would like to do for UNICEF?

Ustinov: Well, I don't know. It depends on what they come up with. The hippie and the business man were very bright ideas of Canadian publicity people who were doing it for nothing in the finest tradition of UNICEF, and it was a challenge to do all three or four different roles. If they come up with something else, I could certainly come up with something else, too. I think I played a football coach, too. Or is that part of it?

Spiegelman: Yes, a football coach, but they just asked you to be a London postal box? Is that right?

Ustinov: Yes, it took place inside the postal box. That was another series of commercials for UNICEF. I was being "posted" and half went to UNICEF and half went to something else--I can't remember the exact details of it--but it was set inside a postal box.

Spiegelman: Was that particularly difficult to imagine yourself--I don't think you're in favor of the Staniseavsky method--but how do you "think yourself" into becoming a postal box?

Ustinov: Well you see, it isn't easy for me to fit into a postal box, quite frankly. I was supposed to be seated inside it. If there was something less than tourist class on airplanes, that would be it!

Spiegelman: You've done a lot of unfavorite things, not favorite things because UNICEF asked you to do them, Mr. Ustinov, MC-ing galas, telethons, children's drawings . . .

Ustinov: Yes, I'm not very hot for those sort of things or auctions. I'm very bad at that. I usually let things go in order to get it over with. I have a tendency to panic and wish to be rid of whatever it is that they're hoping for a huge sum for. I'm very bad at that kind of small talk, kind of auctioneers' encouragement talk. I'm a rotten salesman, in fact.

Spiegelman: Well, some might dispute that.

Ustinov: I'm sorry?

Spiegelman: Some people might dispute that. You've been a wonderful salesman for UNICEF.

Ustinov: Oh, only because I'm not concentrating directly on UNICEF. If I was trying to spin a hard luck story about all the—well, if I'm interested in what it is, then I can do it, but I can't do it if I'm supposed to use the techniques of an auctioneer. I find <u>that</u> much more difficult and the idea of raising money for good causes or starving people, community singing, or things like that, I'm absolutely hopeless at! I was hopeless at it during the war and in fact only went into an air raid shelter once. I was so appalled by the things that went on there in that sense of spirit-maintaining communal activities that I preferred to be out with the bombs.

Spiegelman: You mean, you found it a forced attempt to overcome the terror of being in an air raid shelter?

Ustinov: No, it wasn't being in an air raid shelter. It was the fact that the people where community - singing and doing all sorts of communal things of that sort to wile away the time and to suppress their fear, but I prefer to be alone with my fear, outside.

Spiegelman: That's a wonderful bit of Ustinovia, wonderful.

I'm interested in your own children. They must have been in 1969, I don't know what their ages were, but they must have been small children when you first got "hooked up" with UNICEF.

Ustinov: In 1969, well, my eldest daughter was 24.

Spiegelman: Is that Tamara?

Ustinov: Yes. The next one, 15 . . .

Spiegelman: Is that Pavla?

Ustinov: then 12, and the youngest daughter would have been 10.

Spiegelman: And Igor would have been?

Ustinov: Twelve.

Spiegelman: And Andrea would have been?

Ustinov: Ten.

Spiegelman: And Pavla would have been?

Ustinov: Fifteen.

Spiegelman: Are they all in the theater today? Are they all actors?

Ustinov: No. Well Pavla does different things. She does that as well, but she lives in Hollywood and she does lots of different sort of things which are not necessarily connected to the theater. She works part-time for Vogue magazine and things like that.

Spiegelman: And the other three are in the . . .

Ustinov: Tamara is in the theater in London and does television and things. And the little one, Andrea is a jeweler, designs jewelry and Igor is a sculptor. So they're all in the arts.

Spiegelman: Fine. Is it easy or hard when you have to go from being Monsieur Poirot out into the slums of Cairo or outside Cairo? Is that a hard transition for you to make?

Ustinov: No, not at all because Poirot is not me and Poirot would be very squeamish about that because he himself is so meticulous about his personal appearance and nails, and Heaven knows what, and I

find it very much easier than Poirot would. So it is quite fun to play somebody who finds that whole thing very difficult. I don't think transitions are very difficult.

Spiegelman: I see. I'm wondering, you mentioned that you've gone to very many safe countries for UNICEF and that you felt a little sad or sorry that you hadn't, that Liv Ullman had gone—there's a nice picture of the two of you—that you regret UNICEF not having sent you to any really bad places.

Ustinov: They have a tendency to always send me to places which, they might have become bad, not bad—bad is probably the wrong word to use—everytime I did anything for them, it always seemed to me a rather safe place.

Spiegelman: And is there some place that—do you have a longing for some danger, some . . .

Ustinov: It isn't even danger. I mean I think that Somalia at the time that Liv was there was probably more dramatic than Kenya when—I wasn't really there for UNICEF but I did things on the side for UNICEF—but after that, I went to Jordan which is a civilized part of the world really and India which of course is—that's a challenge but for different reasons. But Thailand seemed to be to be a very tidy place compared to some of the others, a very organized place and even westward leaning. And Guatemala that's the one which I found really challenging when you were away from Guatemala City, you saw all sorts of things going on. But apart

from that, I've usually taken the opportunity when I travel not for UNICEF to do things for UNICEF, like in the Philippines and in Egypt.

Spiegelman: When you received the Order of the Smile it appeared to be a very serious occasion.

Ustinov: It was a serious occasion because it was all started by a child in a hospital saying aloud so that he was overheard obviously—I think it was a little boy who said, "Why do adults always give the Orders to each other? Why aren't the children able to express their own particular predilections?" and this was taken up by a Polish newspaper and every year they award this Order of the Smile which is a kind of "mock serious" thing that the Poles were always hot on—all kinds of medieval courtly rituals, like initiations and things that went on in the Middle Ages, and you're knighted with a rose with all its thorns on and then you have to drink a large tumbler full of unsweetened lemon juice and continue to smile with a whole lot of laughing and mumbo jumbo.

Spiegelman: And were you able to smile?

Ustinov: Yes. I don't mind lemon juice. I rather like it.

Spiegelman: So you confirmed that you were a suitable recipient of the Order of the Smile?

Ustinov: Well, apparently and afterwards, there's a demonstration of Polish folk dancing by tiny children representing every province in Poland and after the third hour of this, one of the previous beneficiaries bent over to me and said, "You will have noted by now that Poland has many provinces."

Spiegelman: You received another award, **The Golden Hazelnut at an Italian film festival.**

Ustinov: Yes, that's a very extraordinary film festival because it's a little, I've heard you call it a little town or a large village southeast of Naples which is officially famous for its hazelnuts and they had the bright idea of combining all their resources to present a children's film festival every year in which the jury is made up of children and that is really quite extraordinary, I was expecting something rather amateurish and I found to my amazement, a village in which there were many Italian and Chinese flags and about thirty Chinese children from the People's Republic of China living with families and sent to this village and many other delegations speaking all sorts of different languages. It's really the most inspiring place and an inspiring festival.

Spiegelman: And what was the name of the town or village please?

Ustinov: **Giffoni.**

Spiegelman: And what year do you think this might have been?

Ustinov: This was last year, 1984. They offer this Golden Hazelnut every year or several Golden Hazelnuts and I thought well I'm in the reach anyway because I was on holiday in Ischia and I went there with a little bit of misgiving but since they had made that effort, why not give them the benefit of the doubt? I became absolutely sold on it. I think it is an absolutely brilliant idea. Because if the children were very emancipated and also frighteningly intelligent in their assessment of the film. I was much slower and some films I didn't understand at all. It was the children's reaction that showed me what they were all about. They were very contemporary films, sometimes meant for children, but more usually meant for adults, not just retarded adults but young ones.

Spiegelman: Were you also judging as well as receiving the awards?

Ustinov: The children were judging.

Spiegelman: The children were judging?

Ustinov: Yes. The adults had no say in this at all. They just appeared only to say a few things and to do whatever they could and create some sort of impression and that was all. They were just given their medals, but it was extraordinary to see how resourceful and excellent the general level was.

One charming incident, too. There was one Chinese child who was obviously miserable and was getting awfully thin and wasting away

and wouldn't eat and they phoned the Chinese consulate in Rome and said, "What do we do about this?" And the Chinese officials said, "Give him rice. He won't eat pasta, give him rice." And the Italians said, "Yes, but what sort of sauce does he want with it? "No sauce, just rice." "You have to have some kind of sauce." They said, "No, it's no question of 'rice bolonese' or 'rice napolitano' just rice. And much against their own inclination, they gave the child just rice and the child ate three bowls full a day, grew, played sports, got very active again and the Italians were just baffled. How can that child eat rice without a sauce?

Spiegelman: You received an award for a particular picture or for a series?

Ustinov: No. Just for activities in favor of children.

Spiegelman: When you played Santa Claus, Mr. Ustinov, you said that, "Children are sophisticated and it's inconceivable to conceive of a man who is entirely good playing Santa Claus. You have to imagine a man who has weaknesses. Otherwise he won't be believed." When you play Santa, which you do occasionally, what kind of weaknesses do you envision your Santa as having?

Ustinov: I'm sorry?

Spiegelman: What kind of weaknesses do you imagine in your mind your Santa could have?

Ustinov: Well I don't have to imagine them, I've got them. I must say it's very difficult to force children to believe in Santa Claus nor did I ever wish to, but any hopes that I might ever have entertained of that were dashed in New York when I took all three of them—they were quite young then—around the corner at Christmas time and there was a union meeting between about fifteen Santa Clauses who were wondering whether to go on strike or not.

Spiegelman: And your children saw these fifteen Santas?

Ustinov: Yes. They were having a meeting by the side of the street. They came from various big department stores and they were being addressed by one Santa Claus who said, "Brothers, this is not good enough."

Spiegelman: That's wonderful, Unbelievable.

Ustinov: They had an appointment evidently there because they knocked off to have a meeting and they were either going to go back or go on strike—that was quite clear.

Spiegelman: Mr. Ustinov, it's been really a pleasure to talk with you. I think this has been extremely helpful. I don't want to impose on your good mood and your good nature to extend the conversation when you must be ready almost for your supper.

Ustinov: Oh no, that's alright. Don't worry about that. Anyway, I'll answer your letter and I'll see what sort of photographs I can find to go with what your requests are.

Spiegelman: Yes.

Ustinov: And I'll send them all off before the end of the week.

Spiegelman: And do you think it will be possible for you to write some captions for the photos that you have in your possession? The only thing I really wanted to ask you that I haven't was your own ambitions when you were a child, your dreams for your life when you were young, what they were.

Ustinov: My real dream was to grow up, because I was very impatient.

Spiegelman: But your particular ambition?

Ustinov: I didn't really have any because I couldn't put it into words. I was and I still am a very instinctive sort of person with reactions which are instinctive, and I knew which direction I wanted to go in without really being able to really describe it even to myself. I wanted to try and find the kind of work in which I was not dependent too much on other people and I really found that kind of work. I've been extremely lucky.

Spiegelman: You're extremely modest.

Ustinov: No, no, but I mean to have a very neutral point of view. When I was quite young still, I invented a country of my own which has remained a sort of secret place as far as I'm concerned and which has very real problems in the world as it is today. It's not a dream world, but it enables me to have a neutral point of view about most things. As I was able to tell Mrs. Gandhi just before she died, unfortunately, I said, "Your position as a non-engaged nation is very known but I don't think you've met many non-engaged people and I'm one of them. In other words, I believe that most of the contentions in this world are much easier to solve than people imagine and that they wouldn't exist if people took a realistic look at why they exist. In other words, I think there is much greater danger in a confrontation between North and South than between East and West."

Spiegelman: And what did she answer you?

Ustinov: I'm sorry?

Spiegelman: What did she answer?

Ustinov: I did an interview with her which we're holding back because I want to try and finish it with Rajiv. I just left it when she was in the garden and the shots rang out.

Spiegelman: What timing.

In your country, the country you invented as a child, did you have a view of what life would be like for children there? Or what life was like for them?

Ustinov: No, I was really always fascinated with adults because being an only child, I think I was allowed to stay up with adults probably more than ordinary children were. I think that it's not always quite accurate to believe that only children are spoiled in that sense. I think the difference is that very often there's nobody who can look after them once they're a certain age. They are allowed to stay up which others aren't because there aren't younger ones to consider. Maybe the oldest one is, but I think one matures therefore quicker and but I think we miss an awful lot and I discovered that when I had children of my own and I was suddenly confronted with all sorts of distinctive struggles and oppositions within a family which I never had the opportunity of guessing at before. The whole area of human nature, I don't think it makes one very good partners—but I think that being an only child has certain advantages. It enables them to understand other only children and that was the whole basis of my approach to Mrs. Gandhi who I think is, was a very typical only child.

Spiegelman: You had that in common?

Ustinov: Yes.

Spiegelman: I'm curious about one more thing. When you did an imitation of Adolf Hitler, Mussolini, and Lloyd George, where you two years old or a little older?

Ustinov: I was a little older and I can't imagine how I did it because we didn't have a radio at home. I brought the first radio in the house and my father never wanted a radio and didn't understand what it was. And of course once I brought it with accumulated, pocket money, I didn't get much of a look in because he said you should be in bed by now and then played with the radio himself.

Spiegelman: Well, that's very nice that you bought it for him.

Ustinov: Well, yes. It seems to me that it's an example of what enormous strides we've made because it makes one feel quite old to think that one was brought up in a house with no radio so I don't really know what I was imitating. I must have been imitating something I heard elsewhere.

Spiegelman: You were imitating somebody imitating Adolf Hitler.

Ustinov: That's right or else I saw it from the newsreels because I sometimes played hooky and if I had fourpence, fivepence, sixpence to spare, I went to the movies. So I might have seen them in newsreels which was very prevalent.

Spiegelman: That's a fascinating bit. Mr. Ustinov, do you think that you would prefer to write something?

Ustinov: Well, I don't know. I don't know what I've given you now, but maybe from the basis of the material you sent me, I could write it even in a letter and you could make of it as you wished.

Spiegelman: We could send you another draft with the pictures. We want you to be happy with what it is and we must be honest people that it's yours not ours.

Ustinov: Yes, that's why I asked you when it goes to press.

Spiegelman: Well, they're asking us for September. I mean that was what they were talking about.

Ustinov: I will be in New York on the 29th of July and the 30th of July.

Spiegelman: And that would be an opportunity to go over this?

Ustinov: Well, I should think so. I mean I will be in your part of the world. Then I have to go to Toronto, but I'm very close.

Spiegelman: So do you know where you will be staying at that time?

Ustinov: I should think I would stay at the Windham.

Spiegelman: Should I try to call you there?

Ustinov: I will come in at about the evening of the 29th and I will be there all morning of the 30th.

Spiegelman: We could send this over there and . . .

Ustinov: It's on 58th street, I think.

Spiegelman: On the east side?

Ustinov: Yes, it's on the east side, between fifth and sixth. It's facing the back of all those hotels which are on the park.

Spiegelman: I'm sure we'll find it. Well, I thank you again for this wonderful opportunity and I wish you a wonderful stay in the Soviet Union. It's a country that's dear to my heart, too.

Ustinov: Really.

Spiegelman: Yes.

Ustinov: How do you spell your name so that I know.

Spiegelman: S P I E G E L M A N.

Ustinov: Spiegelman, that's wonderful.

Spiegelman: Well, I wish you a wonderful trip.

Ustinov: Thank you very much.

Spiegelman: And I look forward to seeing you or talking to you July 30th and whatever material, photos you can send us we would be very grateful.

Ustinov: I will.

Spiegelman: Thank you.

Ustinov: Thank you very much.

Spiegelman: Do-svedaniya.

Ustinov: Do-svedaniya. Spacibo.