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Interview with Mr. Ralph Eckert

Conducted by
John Charnow
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Interview with Mr. Ralph Eckert*

Conducted by Jack Charnow at UNICEF Headquarters

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* Before coming to UNICEF, Mr. Eckert, a Swiss National, had worked in the pharmaceutical services of the International Red Cross Committee and also a Swiss voluntary agency for several years, and as ICRC delegate to Germany and Austria. He started with UNICEF in 1951 with the European Headquarters in Paris as Assistant to the WHO Medical Adviser. After some two and a half years in UNICEF Paris, Mr. Eckert went to Beirut as a Programme Officer where he remained for five years, returning to Paris in 1958 as Field Representative for Programmes in North Africa. He later became a Programme and Supply Officer and in 1964 transferred to Cairo where he remained for over four years, for part of the time as Acting Representative. He went to Dakar as Representative in 1969 and three years later (September 1973) went to Saigon as Representative. In December 1975 he came to Headquarters as Senior Programme Officer in charge of Operations and Logistics. In the Spring of 1977 he became Director of the Programme Division. Beginning in the Spring of 1979 he also became responsible for preparation of programming in China and in January 1981 he became UNICEF representative in Beijing, a post he held until his retirement at the end of December 1981.

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Pre-UNICEF interests

Charnow: Ralph, how did you happen to get involved with UNICEF?

Eckert: That dates back to 1959 during the dark days of the Berlin Blockade where I had the opportunity of meeting the Executive Director, Mr. Pate. He came to talk with Willy Meyer and his staff and since UNICEF and the International Committee of the Red Cross shared the same office for some time, it was quite natural that we met. And that was my first contact. Two years later, without warning, when I was being briefed by the Headquarters of the International Committee of the Red Cross for assignment to Korea, I got a phone call from Paris. It was Gene Canade and he said, could you come, and without aiming or angling for it, I became a UNICEF staff member.

Charnow: Well, obviously, to be in the ICRC someone had to have some sort of feeling about its humanitarian tasks. What were the influences in your life that led up to the ICRC and then to UNICEF?

Eckert: I would say that with regard to the ICRC, my association with it started in the '40s during the World War when I was responsible there for assistance to British prisoners of war and I had this responsibility because, before I joined the ICRC, I had studied medicine for some time in my home town, Basle. I interrupted these studies since the family had major financial difficulties and joined the ICRC which was something many young people did during the War years in Switzerland. It was an Organisation which we knew was concerned at this time particularly with prisoners of war, and I thought that I would stay there for a few months to somehow repair and correct my financial situation but it led to various assignments with the ICRC and from there, the step to UNICEF came as a surprise, but I see in retrospect that it was quite a natural transition.

Early UNICEF impressions

Charnow: Well, you came to UNICEF in 1951 at a period when we were winding down in Europe and also when the future of UNICEF was uncertain. What were your feelings about that and your impressions?

Eckert: Well, one has to take account of the fact that I was recruited and hired on a monthly basis when I joined UNICEF in the summer of 1951. I just knew that I would stay for one month since the future of the Organization as such seemed to be, if not at stake, it was not quite certain at that time. I accepted this. I realized from the start that I had become involved in an evolving kind of Organization, its purpose, the focus of UNICEF's

activities were changing and I could observe this change from very close range. The fact that the future was at stake for the Organization - as a whole, was something which I saw from a very great distance and I was perhaps more concerned about my own one-month contract.

Relations with WHO: Sachs, Borcic

Charnow: Well, would you like to say something about some of the people that you directly worked with and what you actually did?

Eckert: The people I was directly working with were related, were in fact WHO staff. I became the assistant of Dr. Michael Sachs who was the WHO Medical Adviser in the European Headquarters and in a way I rather worked for and with WHO being UNICEF staff member than for UNICEF and at times I really had the impression that I was working in another organization. This was the time when WHO very largely "dictated" to UNICEF what could and should be done. I remember very clearly that there was no recommendation, no plan of operations, no supply list, which could possibly be processed or made ready either for submission to the Board or for approval by Headquarters without the approval of the WHO Medical Adviser. We were concerned at that time, as you mentioned earlier, with the sort of winding down of programmes in Europe.

I remember there were programmes in France, in Italy, Yugoslavia, Greece and a winding down in certain other countries such as Hungary, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. At that time the kind of assistance that was provided was sophisticated assistance to help activities of a rather complex nature. I found in Mike Sacks a very dynamic, well-informed person who had close and, I would say, most relevant and productive contacts with WHO Headquarters in Geneva. Mike himself took direct interest in all phases of what UNICEF was doing, he was listened to, and was also very outspoken on certain issues. He certainly made sure that UNICEF was not stepping out of what, let's say, he considered to be the framework of its mandate.

Another interesting person, a staff member at that time in the Paris Office with whom Mike in particular had much to do was Dr. Borcic who had been Regional Director and Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF. I don't remember exactly his title, but Dr. Borcic had close contacts with WHO. Somehow at times it would seem to be difficult for me to distinguish the limits between WHO and UNICEF since the presence, the influence, of that Organization through people like Mike Sacks and Dr. Borcic was a permanent, daily fact, a stark fact at times and I think that UNICEF was very much controlled at this time by WHO - at least as perceived by a junior staff member in Paris.

Charnow: Was there any restiveness that you could detect in UNICEF with this kind of arrangement, or with the feeling that our function was to provide supplies and let them do the thinking and planning?

Eckert: I don't think that there was restiveness - don't forget I worked for the WHO Medical Adviser. When I refer to restiveness I associate this with a kind of lasting state, lasting attitude. There were confrontations, there were disagreements but on the whole, I would say that there was no resentment. There was no organized deliberate or discernible effort or movement from the UNICEF side leading to a kind of disengagement or a detachment from WHO. I have seen this in one office, and I am speaking of the Paris Office only, I do not know what it was elsewhere. As you will recall, Paris at that time was responsible not only for Europe but also the Middle East and Africa. So it was really a good part of UNICEF that found its presence and its expression through the Paris Office.

Rajchman, Debre

What was always mentioned both by UNICEF staff as well as by the WHO side was; "this is what the Executive Board has decided, these are the limits that have been imposed not by WHO but it is our own Executive Board that has said so," and at that time, as you know, we also had Dr. Rajchman as a frequent guest in the Office, there was contact with Professor Debré. There was a very clear and visible all-pervading WHO presence and it seemed quite natural at that time, although one could sense some regret in the face of that situation, I am not speaking of restiveness that we had this kind of relationship on the one hand, and that the field in which UNICEF could put its human and material resources to work was really limited compared with what it is today.

Charnow: I sensed another dimension of this which was great suspicion on the part of WHO of what Dr. Rajchman's ambition was felt to be and his ideas for moving forward in many fields which either WHO was not technically ready for or had technical reservations about. One of them was BCG. So we have a kind of double picture here.

Keeny and Asia

Eckert: I can only accept what you say - I was not aware of these developments. What seems to me of some interest now, were the noises which came through from Asia where Sam Keeny was obviously running a kind of show which seemed to differ in many ways from what happened in this very large part of the world for which the Paris Office was responsible. We had the impression that there was a greater assertiveness from the UNICEF side, that the personality of UNICEF had a clear profile and perhaps the kind of work and the way in which it was carried out were different, less inhibited than in Paris.

Egger

Don't forget that Paris was in the middle of a Europe that was still recovering from the war, faced with a Middle East in an uncertain state, faced with an Africa in turmoil and largely also an unknown entity. I recall the first visits that were made by, for instance, Dr. Charles Egger and other staff that was like an expedition, it was an exploration of countries, one did not know where UNICEF was going, something new was coming up and I think that these factors all together perhaps led, vis-a-vis WHO - if we pick out this aspect - to a relatively more accepted, I would say, passive role, and one accepted more easily the fact that we were working within what now appear narrow limits. The needs which UNICEF discovered and faced in the health, nutrition and education fields were of such magnitude that the organisation did not "resent" these limits.

Supplies

Sophisticated equipment

Charnow: You mention sophisticated supplies. I distinctly have the impression that when Dr. Borcic was Head of the Programme Division at Headquarters he spent a good deal of time going through supply lists and culling out and striking out sophisticated equipment all the time feeling this was not for UNICEF. Now it may well have been the Asia programmes that we are talking about rather than the European programmes but in any case, there, I think, he was disagreeing with either the WHO people who were putting these things in the supply lists or the national officials who wanted the latest or the best.

Eckert: It's an interesting topic. You can look at this from quite a number of angles. A supply list, whatever it refers to, is often open to interpretation. One can consider requirements in various perspectives. Programming is not a science it is largely an art. One can assert one's authority, which cannot possibly be questioned, in a hierarchical context, as one things. When I referred to sophisticated equipment before, I spoke of European countries where UNICEF assistance was coming to an end. An important aspect is that many of the Programme staff and Supply Officers that were working on Supply lists came from what we call the industrialized nations, were used to certain standards, a certain sophistication and it may have been the case very often that one applied the same criteria, the same approaches to the countries with which one was now faced and which led, if we apply this to supplies, to the selection of items which make sense in an industrialized context but which had definitely not a place in the poor, war-devastated countries into which we were moving and I would think that Dr. Borcic's scrutiny, under which I have also

laboured, at times with difficulty, of supply lists is to me today in retrospect an expression of one of the better qualities and, how should I say, the qualities characteristic of UNICEF - that is, the flexibility we adjust ourselves to the countries where we are working. In earlier times we thought that with the right type and quantity of supplies and equipment many if not most problems could be solved and needs met.

We did not have a pattern which we imposed on all countries, and I think, maybe he understood this very easily, coming himself from a more devastated country. Then let's not forget that while Dr. Borcic clearly endorsed the kind the kind of sophisticated items that were sent, for instance, to France where we helped with the production of gamma globulin in Paris itself, and where the most advanced type of equipment was provided, he was very acutely aware that we could not do the same in certain Middle Eastern or Asian countries. There, what we were providing or what made sense was of a more basic nature. I think Borcic was somebody who understood this, you know, what this gradually led next to, they were the standard lists of supplies, Anna, Bertha, Clara, etc. Then we moved, as the years went by, to the Copenhagen Warehouse where there were stored primarily, at least at the beginning, the basic kinds of items which were used in large quantities. I think Borcic knew what he did, he differentiated at least, I was unhappy at times with his decisions, but I see that he simply had in many cases the right approach and the right kind of vision.

Screening

- Charnow: Has this difference in emphasis persisted with some modifications throughout the history of UNICEF in a somewhat broader context of Headquarters feeling that it had a responsibility, an overall responsibility for where UNICEF money was going as against a Field Officer's sense of responsibility that he knew what the country was doing and needed and is there also an element here of not getting our act together in terms of the relationship of our Procurement people and our Programming people in outlooks?
- Eckert: There has certainly been change, there have been most profound modifications although I consider it hazardous to compare the present situation, 1984, with what happened more than 30 years ago and what was current practice at that time. Nevertheless, it is interesting to compare these two situations although in the process one will have to skip some of the stages in between. In the early years, as I said, with regard to the selection of supplies, the selection was at the outset in the hands of the Programme Officer or Field Representative in the country itself. It was screened at the regional level, it may have gone back and forth between the field office and the region until the region

was satisfied and sent it on to New York where it underwent another type of screening; perhaps there the screening was concerned with standards that were applicable worldwide; whatever the way they did it, there were various levels of screening before a given Supply List, was approved.

WHO veto

That was a long, drawn-out process; it made matters difficult, it delayed them enormously, the more so since the specialized agencies, mainly WHO, had a hand in this and could practically veto the List or change the specifications and quantities and very often they decided there were too many syringes and not enough needles, and this quality is not right, we should not have this, and much of the time of UNICEF offices in the field and outside the region, and I presume, at the Headquarters level, was taken up by this screening and clearing of Supply Lists, not to speak of the plan of operations and other documents.

Since then, enormous changes have taken place and we are now at the point where any field office may call forward the items which it considers necessary. There is no screening of any kind at the regional level nor is there any screening at Headquarters level. It is a matter of processing a document, scanning it in the perspective of the financial implications but in terms of suitability and adequacy of quantities of specifications, there is no real screening taking place. It is possible that in the Supply Division the procurement people when they receive a given request for procurement, now called a Basic Assistance List, Supply list with Supply Call Forwards, they may question the size, dimension, the quantities if these are outside what one can consider as corresponding to normal standards.

But there is a permissiveness today which to somebody who has lived through the early years of UNICEF when it started working in the developing countries is utterly surprising, and it is also a permissiveness which is certainly leading, in many instances, to the provision of the wrong kind of equipment, or equipment in quantities which are not adapted to requirements, well, to mention only these two which I consider to be negative consequences of the way Supply requests are being handled nowadays. Don't forget, also, that we have had at the beginning in the early '50s, Supply Officers in various regional offices. George Mar was a very well-known person.

I myself started as Medical Specifications Officer in the WHO Representative's Office in Paris, and I therefore know from my own experience, both as one who did the screening but also in later years as somebody who underwent the screening by Region and

Headquarters, that there was certainly a justification for it; it was necessary. Evidently at times one went too far in this concern with specifications, with quantities. It had a paralyzing, delaying effect, it also showed that UNICEF was very much concerned with the need for providing the right kind of equipment. We didn't have much money, there was no elbow room, the amounts that were available for a given country or project were very much smaller than what we are used to today and we felt the need, and we agreed with it, to accept these delays in the interest of ensuring that UNICEF assistance performance, UNICEF's handling of funds were in the best interests of the whole operation.

Slow communications

This was also the time when, of course, it was inconceivable that one would call Headquarters on the phone. To receive a phone call from Headquarters was something the office would be talking about for days after it happened, which was an indication of the distances which separated us from Headquarters or even the Region. We were very often admonished, reduce the number of your cables, shorten your cables, the cables came back with words crossed out because it was spending too much money on cables and we needed the money for something else, don't waste our money. Not that this affected the entire work of UNICEF but it must be understood that this had also a very clear impact and repercussion on certain tasks we carried out such as selection of equipment and supplies at the Field office level and then their clearance and final approval by Headquarters. That was a long, drawn-out process and all of this had to be done in writing.

Role of supplies

Charnow: As we added other inputs to that of equipment and supplies, did we then that we pay less attention to it? Were they considered of less importance for UNICEF's objectives. Have we have gone too far to the other extreme?

Eckert: I don't think one could reach such a conclusion. It is certainly not mine. You must recognize that today also UNICEF would not exist and would not have the standing and reputation it enjoys if we were not providing in a massive way supplies and equipment. One must also realize that supplies and equipment can be used and are used in certain situations as an instrument, as a weapon, almost. There may be certain developments, certain orientations which seem desirable in the work of a given Government, Ministry or Department and which one may advocate and promote which, however, would not be accepted and adopted by the Services concerned if there were no visible material input of UNICEF.

One can bring about certain changes by using the supply and equipment as a kind of instrument. They can be used for bringing about certain developments and not in the first place to meet certain requirements as evident and as confirmed as they may be, requirements in terms of equipment for health stations or hospitals or training centres, or other institutions. It may be necessary to provide certain supplies and equipment to, to put it bluntly, satisfy a Minister because a Minister may have certain obligations towards certain parts of the country, to his constituency, to certain provinces. At the same time one may be discussing with the Minister a certain agreed, i.e., agreed by UNICEF, by any technical advice that we can marshal, agreed orientations or innovations but one would not be able to convince the Minister if one did not show in some situations, at least, some, what shall we call it, leniency, with regard to requirements, in terms of supplies and equipment which are dear to that Minister for very personal reasons. These may be exceptional situations but this has happened and it certainly is still happening today.

Also UNICEF's name is, be it wanted or not, associated very largely with the provision of material assistance and when any contacts are made or discussions are initiated with a given Ministry in most countries the Government partners know in advance and expect in advance that there will be a material input which may be in the form of supplies and equipment or some cash grants for training and related purposes.

With regard to the advocacy role of UNICEF I do not believe that we could play that role even today if we could not back it up, if we could not enhance it by the provision of supplies and equipment.

Decentralization

Charnow: Ralph, you mentioned that in some cases, because of the interest of a particular Ministry and a project or a programme that there may be a tendency of UNICEF to go along with that because we have larger goals. I wonder if you would like to comment on how this is related to Field, Regional and Headquarters responsibilities. As you develop greater and greater autonomy at the Country level, do you not place the Representative in a more vulnerable position because he does not have a buffer to say, well, my Regional Office or my Headquarters say that we cannot do this, therefore he is more subject to that. Is that one of the negative features of greater Country responsibility?

Eckert: I wouldn't say that this is a negative feature. I believe that the sort of permissiveness that has become more and more pronounced in the '70s has turned UNICEF into what it is today.

It was only possible because so much trust, if this is the word, was placed on the Representatives. It was up to the Representatives with very little, if any, how should I say, participation, or call it interference of the Regional Office and of Headquarters to identify needs, to work out programmes in cooperation with the Government.

This was certainly in many instances a blessing, not for the Representatives, but for the country concerned since one could respond to the needs as they were perceived by the Government, tempered by the perception of the UNICEF Office, the Representative and his staff, without being obliged to clear the various steps and decisions that necessarily had to be taken with regard to the possibility of UNICEF involvement with the Region or with Headquarters.

It is also clear that there may have been, there have been certain instances where the UNICEF Representative may not have been in a position to guide the cooperation with the Government, or somehow orient the cooperation with the Government in an independent way, became dependent on Government Ministries and thus cooperation with certain Ministries once it had started almost automatically, seen from the Government point of view, continued year after year irrespective of what the overall national priorities could have been. However, I am convinced that these were exceptions. On the whole, the independence of Field Officers, perhaps also and here, the situation is perhaps more serious, the absence of a clearly spelled-out procedure and even policy framework, the permissiveness that was built into it made it possible to branch out into any field of need, whatever these needs were.

We pride ourselves with reference to the flexibility which UNICEF has. Wasn't flexibility due to a large extent to the absence of binding guidelines and perhaps also the lack of supervision of what field offices are doing? Given these circumstances, there are certainly different aspects, but I would think, looking back and seeing where UNICEF stands today, that positive repercussions predominate.

Enlarging UNICEF's scope

- Charnow: Earlier, you referred to the dominance of WHO during the period you were in the Paris Office in our Supplies, and I assume also, our Programming. At what period in UNICEF's history did this begin to break down and what were the factors which led to UNICEF's emergence as its own entity?
- Eckert: There were various stages and throughout the '50s, there was a certain evolution taking place, I think conditioned by the turnover of personnel, on the one hand, and the disappearance of

certain strong personalities; also the recognition that the health field in which UNICEF was at work in order to be fully, or let's say, more beneficial in its results and impact, required corollary and reinforcing activities in other fields. UNICEF was gradually acquiring a personality of its own.

You know that in the late '50s such areas as education and nutrition education became of concern to UNICEF and this gradually led and built up to this unique and decisive turning point which took place I think it was in 1961 when UNICEF, for the first time, took a look at the whole child. There were a number of studies carried out in different parts of the world and one tried to see what the most important needs and most important ways of intervention for UNICEF could be. This was during Dr. Sicaults' time and it was there that UNICEF, today's UNICEF, UNICEF as we know it now, gradually started taking shape. It was there that also UNICEF was breaking out of the rather narrow field into which it had been confined and in the early '60s, such matters as education, primary education, pre-vocational training became areas in which UNICEF could become active and which widened the scope of the intervention, changed its personality, needing new procedures and also additional staff. It is then that really, I would say, in 1961, that UNICEF of today started taking on its characteristics.

Charnow: We no doubt will get back to some of these issues later in the interviews. We left you in Paris in the early 1950's. What then?

Middle East assignment

Eckert: If you wish so, yes, I have never asked for an assignment, I have never asked for a promotion. It so happened that one day in Paris I was informed that it had now been decided to build up the Middle East and the East Mediterranean area and that they needed somebody to help them as a Programme Officer. I was transferred to Beirut in 1953, and shortly thereafter that office became a Regional office for the Eastern Mediterranean. This was a small office in Beirut and the sub-offices were very small too and were under Martin Sandberg and Adeba Moosa and Fuad Awad in Baghdad responsible for Iraq. There was an office in Iran, another one in Cairo and as a Programme Officer with no specific country responsibility, I had, however, the responsibility to look after, as we say, and to visit Israel. So the period I spent in the Middle East was one during which UNICEF was evidently changing, changing from an Organization which, I am referring to the Paris Office, which had become concerned with post-War Europe. Here, in the Middle East, obviously we were in developing countries some of which had also been affected by the War, but there, the main difficulties were really related to the poverty of great segments of the population and perhaps to the fact that these countries had been cut off during the War years from their bases and from Europe and from in fact the rest of the world. Also, many of them had seen the presence of other Powers on their soil

and there was at least in certain countries, decolonisation was taking place or had taken place a short time ago.

It meant that we were in contact with countries that were very much aware of their independence. They took pride in their independence. They made it known and felt. At the same time it was evident that in many respects they were short of experience, of knowledge, and of trained manpower. In this context in the early '50s, UNICEF tried to help in certain fairly well-circumscribed areas, most of it were related to health.

Charnow: Were these circumscribed areas, because of constraints on what was possible or limited policies of UNICEF. I gather that in Asia a strong Regional Director like Sam Keeny had a free hand in carving his way in deciding what he could do, limited only by the circumstances and money. Charles Egger tells me that when he went into Africa he had a fairly free hand also in developing in other directions, some in East Africa, some in West Africa and both in relation to the metropolitan powers. What was the situation in the Eastern Mediterranean?

Eckert: I would think that the Board policies corresponded to what UNICEF had the capability, experience and knowledge to do. It's one way of looking at it, of course. One can turn this argument around but we were also in an area where health problems were the sort of expression of need which were striking any visitor, even a casual visitor, to these countries. It was something that could not be disputed. It was a priority requirement. Such matters which are of interest to us today and I am not referring to the Child Survival Revolution but other fields embraced today by UNICEF just did not, were of no relevance at that time even in the Middle East and the Middle East included Lybia, Egypt, Sudan; we were also responsible for Ethiopia and Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Iran to which later were added Yemen and South Yemen. Their health was of overriding concern to any country.

WHO Regional Office

There was, of course, another aspect. This is where what happened in the Middle East probably differs from the Asian situation to which I have just referred, and that is the very visible, permanent, I would say, almost ever-present existence of WHO. WHO had a Regional Office in Alexandria and Alexandria was within easy reach of Beirut or the other way round, and Alexandria also took the relationship with UNICEF very seriously. They were organized in a way which was adapted to catering to UNICEF's needs and also to, in a way, controlling what UNICEF was doing and there was a Regional Director in WHO, Dr. Taba, who had very clear and precise views concerning the role of his Organization in terms of its cooperation with

UNICEF. Do not forget that in the Middle East at that time we were certainly less than 10 international staff responsible for all these countries and it was most difficult then to envisage, not that we actually did, but it would have been most difficult to envisage anything in terms of activities to be supported by UNICEF outside this general framework and that framework in the 50's looked to us most of the time as even more than we could reasonably handle.

Hungarian assignment 1956

Charnow: Well, then, Ralph, after being in the Middle East for about 5 years, you returned to Paris and, as I understand it, followed our programmes in North Africa.

Eckert: Well, if you will allow me .. something happened in Beirut which I think I should mention: I was in Beirut in 1956 when what may be called the Hungarian crisis or Hungarian uprising took place, and I then got a cable asking me to report to Geneva because UNICEF had lent me back to the ICRC where I had originally come from and I then spent some time in Budapest trying to put together some relief, some emergency relief activities on behalf of the ICRC. UNICEF was not directly involved in Hungary at that point.

However, UNICEF was working on the other side of the border, that is in Austria to provide some assistance to refugees that had fled Hungary and were now in the eastern part of Austria. In Budapest we went through a difficult period. I was occupying an office not far from the Parliament building and we looked out of our windows, we looked right into the tanks that were standing there with the motors running, tanks which were protecting the Parliament building.

Pate in Hungary: influence on staff

Eckert: I will never forget this sight and the rumbling of the motors which were running day and night. But something happened there which I have not forgotten because one evening, the door of the office opened and in walked Mr. Maurice Pate, our Executive Director and he came to me and said, "Is there anything I can do for you, or help you with?" I was evidently quite embarrassed. How could I tell the Executive Director that this or that had to be done, and this or that was urgent. I said, no, no, we have everything under control. But he insisted, he said, "I am here to help you, whatever it is, just let me know. Is there anything I can do right now?" Well, I think he finally realized that there was nothing he could really help us with, but I am sure that anybody will understand that when the Executive Director comes to a lowly Programme Officer and says "can I give you a hand, can I help you in some way" that person is prepared to do anything anytime, not only for the Executive Director but for the Organization he heads.

This was in fact true with regard to many other staff members. Maurice Pate knew everybody, the drivers, the office messengers, and that created an atmosphere and an ambience in Field offices I know which was absolutely unique and which held UNICEF together and made people accept the kind of shortcomings and difficulties which today lead to all sorts of diversions and grievances and what have you.

Charnow: I want to say that I very much understand what you have said as do all of those of our generation who have been influenced by Maurice Pate's personality which still has its effect on us. I had read some place that Maurice Pate was the only UN official during that period who welcomed in Hungary - that the Secretary General was not. Do you know that part of the story?

Assignment in Congo; Willie Meyer

Eckert: I know it but not intimately and in detail. I was told that this was the case. If I may take a few more seconds on this period, the fact that I had been received by Maurice Pate in Berlin during the Blockade in 1949, that we worked so to say in Budapest together in 1956 led me to become part of what he called his emergency team because after Budapest, there was the Congo, in 1960. There I also received a telegram one day saying the Executive Director expects you to be in what was Leopoldville at that time as early as possible. Subsequently, I have become involved in many more localized emergencies related to earthquakes, floods, refugees, food poisonings, etc., and all of this took place as part of the emergency team of the Executive Director. The third member of this team being, as you may have guessed, Willy Meyer.

Charnow: I want to get on to Willy Meyer and get a picture of him because so many people who knew him have mentioned him and he obviously was a very important person in the development of UNICEF in many ways.

Eastern Europe

But before we do that, raised by your discussion of Hungary, can we get back to Eastern Europe and UNICEF. Now, when we began phasing out of Eastern Europe we said that the reason was that the countries were getting back on their feet. While there were a few countries that we would continue with projects rather than large scale deal, on the whole, they could manage. We had other tasks to do in the developing world, something which was reluctantly accepted by some of our large contributors.

But there is another side to the story which was not really discussed very publicly and that was the fact that with the onset

of the Cold War it became difficult for us to operate in a number of the countries under the principles that we had. It was hard for our people to get in, it was hard to observe the supply distribution, the new officials met us with a great deal of suspicion. The question that really occurs to me is if this had not occurred, would there have been tasks for us in Europe? Would we have been able to continue and develop? And the second question that arises is despite all the difficulties and friction UNICEF began to be warmly remembered and welcomed in these countries at this stage. Perhaps you might want to comment on these things that I have speculated about.

Eckert:

Well, what I can say - I am not generalizing, but I am specific now - is that in spite of the atmosphere that prevailed that may have been engendered by or related to the cold war, we restarted cooperation with Poland in 1957 or 58 when Charles Egger and Kenneth Sinclair Loutit were invited to Poland. I was asked a few months later to come in and do the programming work and the country that I found at that time was very evidently a country that had been hurt by the war probably more than any other country in terms of the millions and millions of people that had perished, had been killed. The country's own geographical borders had changed; great battles had been taking place, Warsaw had been completely destroyed and this country was probably the worst affected of all countries in what one commonly calls Eastern Europe. I was very well received at that time. It was also clear that we were called back to Poland at a moment when the interest had really started shifting towards Africa, Asia, Latin America. The situation was such, in terms of needs, that the kind of support that was required was really advanced, very sophisticated supplies and equipment. It could not be compared in any way with what, in 1958, was already currently accepted as the type, of supplies and equipment that was provided by UNICEF to African, Middle Eastern or Asian countries.

In a way Poland, I found then, reminds me of China of today. It was also a country that had with its own means, without benefiting from the Marshall Plan, totally reconstructed Warsaw as it was before it was destroyed but also had made great strides in agriculture, industrial production, in terms of health services and other services for children. What they wanted to do was really catch up with what they considered to be the more advanced Western European and North American countries. There was little expected with regard to advice, with regard to the promotion of new ideas - I think that it was their conviction at that time although the overall health status was still uneven and since food and times were scarce and daily necessities were not always available that they had it under control. What they wanted really was equipment. This was true with regard to health, we helped them upgrade some of the children's hospitals, the Institute for Mother and Child in Warsaw. There was a large

MCP - Milk Conservation Programme - with plants in various parts of the country; there was a sophisticated handicapped children programme in Konstancin and what they were asking for was the most sophisticated, advanced, recent items one could possibly identify. From their point of view there was a place for UNICEF; from a UNICEF point of view, considering the relatively meagre resources at the organization's disposal the overwhelming needs in Africa, Asia and other parts of the world, it did not fit into the kind of vision one had of UNICEF's mandate and responsibility at that time but still this type of assistance to which I referred was provided; it was well used and it certainly has contributed in many respects to the advancement of the services that were provided in rather specialized areas.

When one looks at the other Eastern European countries, I think the situation was not as serious as in Poland, their destruction, their losses were not as paralysing and handicapping as in this particular country. There is also another aspect, and that is that in most socialist countries, and I include China in this group, the activities, services, facilities for children received a high rank of priority; there coverage is almost country-wide and considering the means at their disposal particularly in the early post-war years so much of a basic nature and essential nature had been achieved that they didn't really need any outside assistance. Possibly one could say that what UNICEF provided in Poland was equipment which otherwise they could not have obtained or they wouldn't have had the kind of foreign exchange and the fact that UNICEF provided it has had repercussions throughout the various levels of their services down to the local level. Poland had had thousands of children that had lost their arms or legs or otherwise handicapped, there were also many polio patients so I think it made sense in a post-war rehabilitation context and perspective to provide this kind of equipment. Also there were outcries within the organization - "We are not providing this; we are providing only the basic essential."

Aid to better-off countries: Polish example

- Charnow: Does the long range impact of what we did in Poland, admittedly for special reasons at that point, give us any lessons for what we might do in today's context with countries at a similar level of development to meet that kind of equipment; are you making a case for UNICEF to provide some sort of help along these lines to other countries not necessarily in Europe, but say in Latin America?
- Eckert: Selectively, yes. I don't think that Poland as we have been talking about it now, can serve as a guide, an inspiration or as an example of what UNICEF could possibly do. I think one must consider the political ideological circumstances to which I have

alluded on one hand, and on the other hand Poland had been fortunate enough to have had doctors, experts in various fields - health, education, in any you can possibly think of - which were certainly on a par with what one could find in Western Europe. The country had been paralysed, it had been weakened, it could not stand on its own feet but also many of the well trained, highly respectable people had been virtually eliminated during the war. There was still a good number of people who had a worldwide reputation and who were respected. Poland was not a country which was really underdeveloped; it was a country that had been weakened, had been deprived of certain of its human and material resources, and that was trying now to get back onto its feet. I think that there are few countries where UNICEF is active now that can be compared with Poland and I don't think that one can draw any generally applicable and valid lessons.

Charnow: Well, Ralph, we've covered quite a bit of ground, and I wonder if perhaps this might be a good place to end the first of our series of discussions, leaving you with your eyes turned toward North Africa. So thank you very much for this first installment; we will continue with our recollections and nostalgia and speculations at your convenience.

Eckert: Thank you.
