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Page 1
Date 05-May-2005
Time 1:04:59 PM
Login Name Upasana Young (RAM & Hist Proj. Assist. Consult



CF-RAD-USAA-DB01-2005-00000039

Expanded Number **CF-RAD-USAA-DB01-2005-00000039**

External ID **CF-HST-BIO-HEP**

Title

'Hepburn's Relief' Sunday Express Magazine. 1 May 1988

Date Created
01-May-1988 at 5:13 PM

Date Registered
04-May-2005 at 5:13 PM

Date Closed

Primary Contact

Owner Location

Home Location

Current Location/Assignee

Executive Director's Office, Group UNICEF = 3001

CF/RAF/USAA/DB01/2001-04735 (In Container)

Executive Director's Office, Group UNICEF = 3001 since 04-May-200

F12: Status Certain? **No**

F13: Record Copy? **No**

d01: In, Out, Internal Rec or Rec Copy

Contained Records

Container

Date Published

Fd3: Doc Type - Format

Da1:Date First Published

Priority

Record Type **A03 DOC ITEM: CF-RAD-REPOSITORY-WORTHY-ORG-SERIES**

Document Details **Record has no document attached.**

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Hepburn's relief

She's never been happier with a new role, and never has any been so demanding. Audrey Hepburn is fighting for funds to ensure her latest success — ending hunger in Ethiopia. Photograph by Brian Moody

It all started on 9 March this year. Audrey Hepburn had been to Tokyo to attend a gala in aid of UNICEF — the United Nations Children's Fund — and UNICEF director James Grant asked her if she would be willing to do more. What sort of more? Well, for instance, become UNICEF's "Special Ambassador", a role that had been honourably fulfilled by Danny Kaye, Harry Belafonte and Peter Ustinov before her. Audrey Hepburn said yes.

So, on 21 March, she left her comfortable farmhouse home in Switzerland, her beloved dogs and the cherished garden in which no red flowers are allowed to grow, and flew to Addis Ababa. In her Hollywood days, she used to fly round the world with trunks of couturier clothes and a retinue of make-up and hairdressing assistants — when she made *The Nun's Story* in Africa she even took her own bidet. This time she took a single suitcase.

She flew in lumbering Hercules cargo planes to Tigre, to Eritrea and, to Northern Shoa to see the food distribution camps which are struggling gamely to cope with Ethiopia's second disastrous drought in the

space of three years. And then she came back to tell the world what she had seen, and to help raise the \$22 million (half has already been raised) that UNICEF so desperately needs.

She has been in more or less permanent orbit ever since the Ethiopia trip, giving press conferences in New York, Washington, Toronto, London, Turkey, Belgium, Holland, Finland and Los Angeles.

The London press conference was held at 10 on a Monday morning, the day after she flew in from Toronto. She had already done breakfast television and radio interviews. Nevertheless, she looked groomed and elegant in a navy blue Givenchy suit (Givenchy lends her clothes for all her public appearances), her hair pulled back in a tight chignon. Her face has aged of course (she is 59) but, from a distance, her slight, strong, ballerina's body could still be mistaken for Gigi's.

I was a little cynical about the set-up at first — a former film star, dressed by Givenchy, staying at Claridge's, talking about starving children — but as soon as Ms Hepburn began speaking, all doubts fell away. Her commitment is passionate and sincere. She seemed near tears as she talked about the "heart-rending . . . and also heart-warming" sights she had seen. Someone asked a rather hostile

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Grit is now more important than glamour, but the camera still captures her gamine grace in the busy round of public appearances for UNICEF, Hepburn's filmstar training is invaluable

"The beauty of the people, their stillness in this vast, empty, moonlike landscape – that image stays with me"

question about the Ethiopian government's controversial resettlement policy, but Ms Hepburn fielded it intelligently, admitting that the government had panicked in the famine of 1985 and had mishandled the mass evacuations at first, but that conditions were now improving. She had obviously fully mastered her UNICEF brief.

Later, I met her privately in her suite at Claridge's. It was four in the afternoon, but she seized a large Scotch thankfully. "I'm not a *lush*," she explained in that distinctive, faintly-foreign accent, a legacy of her Dutch upbringing, "but I've been up since four and I *need* a pick-up." She chain-smoked too, clearly ragged with exhaustion.

Her companion Robert Wolders was with her. "We've done all this together," she explained. "He's just as passionate about it as I am, and so supportive." He is eight years younger than her, a handsome Dutch actor turned businessman who was previously married to Merle Oberon. They have been together for the past six years and I asked if they were living in sin. "We are living in *love*," Ms Hepburn corrected me, with a smile.

Her marital history has not been particularly happy. She was first married to actor-director Mel Ferrer (by whom she has a son, Sean, aged 28) and then to Italian psychiatrist Dr Andrea Dotti (by whom she has another son, Luca, aged 18, who lives with her in Switzerland). She tried hard to make both marriages work but admitted after they were over that "Dotti was not much of an improvement on Ferrer". Perhaps that's why she seems in no hurry to marry again.

Her involvement with UNICEF is unpaid and uncontracted, but she says she hopes she can go on doing it

as long as possible. I said something about her "sacrificing her time" and she jumped at me: "It's *not* a sacrifice! Because a sacrifice means you give up something you want for something you don't want: This is no sacrifice, it's a *gift* I am receiving. Forgive me for these flowery words, but I feel so strongly. You know, when I gave up movie-making to stay with my children, people said I was 'sacrificing' my career but they were wrong. I was so miserable when I had to leave my son, *that* was the biggest sacrifice."

There is an almost frightening intensity in the way she talks; she seems like a violin string tuned tighter and tighter till you fear it will snap. I was tempted to say, "Look, don't talk to me; go to bed; get some rest; take a tranquilliser," but then she would feel that she had failed UNICEF, and she is genuinely desperate to help.

As a film star, she was always nervous of journalists, insisting on working on a closed set and avoiding interviews as much as possible. Since retirement, her private life has been genuinely private ("I'm not social, sociable – what's the word? – I *never* go to cocktail parties, I live quietly at home"). But for UNICEF she has relentlessly exposed herself to the media: "Even when I had to do the publicity tour for *My Fair Lady*, I did only three or four interviews a day. But for UNICEF in New York and Washington I did 15 a day. You don't sleep or eat – there isn't time. And I get very nervous, you know, when I have to speak at these conferences. All the flying . . . and I have to get up at four to put on a nice face to help cameramen, because there's always photography."

Yes, this is the strange part – the film star training. Almost automatically, when our photographer asked her to sit by the window, she said, "But the other way round, eh? Because that is my best side." As an



actress, she always lacked confidence in her looks, insisting on her own make-up people, hairdressers and lighting cameramen, and cancelling sheet after sheet of studio stills because she found them unflattering. She belongs to the era when Hollywood studios really protected their stars, when every nuance of the public image was moulded by teams of publicists. All the braver of her now, nearing 60, to go out and face the world alone.

But of course before she became a film star, she was herself a hungry child. As a teenager in Holland during the war, living with her mother and grandfather (her parents had split up, and her English father had gone back to work as a director of the Bank of England; she stayed with her Dutch mother), she remembers the gradual diminution of rations, the "one little piece of butter and one egg per person a week" and the last terrible winter when her home near Arnhem was left devastated with no provisions at all.

"We talked about food endlessly – what meal we would eat when the War was over. I think mine was a whole chocolate cake. And I remember when the War *did* end and we got a care package from the Red

Cross, I ate a whole pot of jam by myself. Oh I was aware of hunger, of fear. I was 15 when the war finished, but I had been a grown-up from the time I was 12."

So, in Ethiopia, she remembered the dull ache of hunger as she saw the patient lines of women and children waiting at the food distribution camps. "That terrible silence, the beauty of the people, their stillness in this vast, empty, moonlike landscape – that image stays with me."

That is why, she says, when UNICEF approached her, "I *jumped* at the opportunity, I was *thrilled* to go. I'm a happier person for it – it has brought me enormous relief. Because all of us, surely, when we read about something, we want to do something to ease the pain, the pain that one feels for other people? I wish I could be a doctor and make people well. I can't do *that*, but it seems I can be useful just because of this sort of baggage left over from all my years of movie-making. And so I'm thrilled – exhilarated – to be able to use my time and whatever energy I have left to do this." 

If you would like to send a donation to help UNICEF's work for famine relief in Ethiopia, send it to UNICEF, 55 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London WC2A 3NB.