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Interview of Peter Ustinov

Conducted by J. Spiegelman

30 July 1985

Spiegelman: —Yes, I think you're going to have to talk in this direction about barking like a dog for children of Siberia.

Ustinov: Yes, again I had to visit the ???? there. They have series of kresh-type things which run awfully well for families in which both parents work, and they come and fetch their children for the weekend and spend the weekend with the children. The children are often there all week long, and I've found the barking absolutely invaluable.

Spiegelman: Even though you speak Russian? You could have spoken—

Ustinov: Well, I don't speak well enough to convey any subtle thoughts, or even simple ones. Children are very odd because they will very often understand something rather subtler than you think they will, and when you're explaining something very simple they're not listening to you. They have to be interested to hear it like anybody else. This is in Jordan.

Spiegelman: Yes, yes. So could you go into a little more detail? Did you get down on your hands and knees for these Siberian children?

Ustinov: No, I didn't have to, I was sitting on a very low bench. I had obviously been allowed up on the bench.

Spiegelman: What kind of a dog did you imagine yourself to be?

Ustinov: I can't very well play a Chihuahua, that's obvious, so I played a rather large mongrel which is exactly what I am. This is Jordan, that's a very advanced and well-run kresh.

Spiegelman: Was that in ???

Ustinov: No, no, that's in Amman.

Spiegelman: So did you just tickle the fancy of these little children there, did they do anything different from the Thai children or were you —

Ustinov: No, exactly the same, and that's what leads me to believe that what I had said on previous occasions, that one of the interesting things about observing children all over the world is that they have an enormous amount in common with each other. In other words the raw material that we've produced has enormous similarities. Also old people have a great deal in common. They seem to have reached the same conclusions by experience that

children reach by instinct, and they're awfully unaggressive on the whole, unless they're given aggressive toys and they love imitating what they see on television, but the real trouble in the world happens obviously to people in between old age and youth, the people that are in full control of their powers and are therefore tactically as well as intelligent and often strategically ?????.

Spiegelman: Did you try it anywhere else, besides Siberia and Russia?

Ustinov: No, I just did it because that was the only real kresh we visited. A dog has another value, and that is you can attract their attention by suddenly barking at the chaos, if they're all fighting over the same thing. You can do it with dogs, too. I've stopped several dog fights by barking. They're so puzzled by the intrusion of a third dog that they stop what they're doing-----

Spiegelman: --- Because they didn't smell a third dog. So, this sequence will be in your T.V. series?

Ustinov: Yes, yes.

Spiegelman: Well, any child that could start by being a ????? - what age were you when you hit on this ---

Ustinov: I was about 6 when I started being an ?????. I don't know how long it went on except that I remember I had a pang of sorrow when I bought my first car. It meant the full illusion of being gone forever.

Spiegelman: Well, you must have been a big boy by then?

Ustinov: I was twenty-two, twenty three.

Spiegelman: How did your mother and your father respectively react to your being in ?????

Ustinov: They didn't like it at all. My father was very worried that I was pretanist? That I wouldn't get up at all, that I would have the car instead. My mother got upset, also neither of them had a car or could drive, they didn't like cars at all, they detested the things. So I think a part of it was the fact that I'd realized that we would never have a car, and I loved cars right from the beginning, I knew all about them - I still do of that period. I can tell them far better than now even. It was my grandfather who came to the rescue. My grandfather, who was at one time the court architect of the Tower and then became the Chairman of the Soviet Academy of Fine Arts, and I remember him because he was the last to come out as far as ??? and spend the

summer holidays with us, and one day my mother had a wisdom tooth or something which was giving her a lot of trouble. She had toothache anyway, and she was wearing a yellow cloche hat, and she suddenly, which was very rare for her, flared up (because I was busy being an Amblecar and changing gears which was particularly depressing) -

Spiegelman: ---For you or for her?

Ustinov: For me. I loved changing gears, they had a higher engine term when a lower gear was engaged - and she suddenly flared up, and she said, "Do stop that noise. I really can't bear it any longer." And her father put a restraining hand on her arm, and said, "Don't shout at him ever. Think of it not as a motor car but as the noise of his imagination developing, and you'll see you'll find it tolerable."

Spiegelman: Oh isn't that beautiful. You see he intuited you.

Ustinov: Yes, he was an extraordinary man. He also did a thing he - there was a lot of sour milk around because the Russians loved drinking that, but there were also a lot of flies in the summer and he was near the end of his life, and he took a fly swatt and was just hopeless. Missed them, and I took it over, because I was

already, even at that tender age, very keen on tennis, and quite good at the net even with a toy racket, and I began killing flies - not by the hundreds but I killed a lot. And he said, 'That's it, give me that thing back again.' I said, 'You said that they were unsanitary, that they were polluting food.' He said, 'Give me that thing.' I gave it to him, and he said, 'Better that we should be ill than you should start taking pleasure in killing,' and he put it out of my reach. I remember that very well.

Spiegelman: He was a Buddhist in spirit?

Ustinov: He was a Buddhist in spirit, yes.

Spiegelman: You didn't speak at all once you became the car, from the moment you got up in the morning, but you had already spoken before you were six years old.

Ustinov: I had spoken, but my father thought really that I had taken again, and he dominated everything.

Spiegelman: Were you not at school at that age?

Ustinov: At six I went to school, yes.

Spiegelman: You couldn't be a car there?

Ustinov: No, that's why I was all the more a car at home, and on vacations we didn't even speak about it.

Spiegelman: Why?

Ustinov: I had the car all the time.

Spiegelman: You had a good time; you really hit on something, eh?

Ustinov: I did indeed, yes.

Spiegelman: Your ears must be very attuned to - I guess it's the same ability to imitate or mimick accents. It's auditory accuity?

Ustinov: ????????

Spiegelman: I loved your street-side santas.

Ustinov: Yes, that was very funny. That was worthy of er - what's-his-name? The Macabre cartoonist, Charles Adams. Oh yes, with Maggie Smith.

Spiegelman: Were you a Canadian forest ranger there?

Ustinov: That's right. I ??????. I did several different ones. That's it. I was the bad man ???.

Spiegelman: Do you have a good time as the bad man? You were not the cowboy?

Ustinov: Oh, I always have a good time as the bad man, especially if Reagan's around.

Spiegelman: You could take him on, I'm sure.

Ustinov: "Yes, I'm representing the evil empire." We did one very, very funny other one. You haven't got stills of that? Well, I played a very faggoty cooking expert.

Spiegelman: You had a big white hat on?

Ustinov: Yes, and Maggie was my lesbian wife.

Spiegelman: Really?

Ustinov: We loved these things, though it wasn't easy in a minute.

Spiegelman: I can't believe that the Canadian Committee for UNICEF is that pro-minded.

Ustinov: Oh yes, they didn't mind at all. I don't think they know.

Spiegelman: Some of them might. Gail Smith would catch it.

Ustinov: Yes, Gail Smith caught it. Well, that's what it is.

Spiegelman: What were you saying to her when that was taken?

Ustinov: That was in the Savoy Hotel in London. I was playing Beethoven and she was coming to see it that night, and I rushed over for this and I don't really know what the idea was to bring us together A better caption

Spiegelman: Yes, we'll just put that you go to the safer places or the less difficult -

Ustinov: Yes, because she went to Somalia which fascinated me. I thought of arms full of bloated children and so on, and they have tended - now they're better - to send me to rather safer places. Thailand and not Vietnam, that sort of thing. Perhaps now that I've been on the borders of outer Mongolia they'll be a little more adventurous. Guatemala, I must say, was not all that pleasant. There appeared to be a terrible friction in the countryside.

Spiegelman: We're trying to get a golden ??? on that picture of er - we're calling you're agent - you have a William Morris agent in Los Angeles? Do you think she will have it?

Ustinov: And there's a press agent here.

Spiegelman: Yes, who is that? Because my Assistant called William Morris and

Ustinov: —No, not William Morris, Rogers and ??.

Spiegelman: Who at Rogers and ??.

Ustinov: If you tell me the name I'd remember, but I'm so rarely in New York.

Spiegelman: William Morris does not handle you anymore?

Ustinov: Yes, they do, but not like that. They wouldn't have pictures of me getting the golden ????. William Morris might, it's ????? in London, and the woman here is — I'm wondering if this Samantha Dean who keeps calling me isn't Margaret Gardner.

Spiegelman: Margaret Gardner is with William Morris in London?

Ustinov: No, no, Rogers and Cowan.

Spiegelman: Rogers and Cowan in London? I see, if we don't get it in Los Angeles I'll just call Rogers and Cowan and we'll just ask them who is concerned with Mr. Ustinov.

Ustinov: That's right. These things are so extraordinary. While I was there I was invited to lunch at the British Embassy, and they also had the heads of the Polish National Theatre, the head of the opera, and one or two other people, and afterwards the British Ambassador drew me aside and said, "Thank you so much for coming, most especially because in the normal run of events we never meet any Poles."

Spiegelman: Oh, so you'd brought them in contact with the Poles? Well, that's so ??? for God's sake, these people. You're getting the thorns.

Ustinov: And I was as hot as I am here. I'm like a sponge.

Spiegelman: Now about your children. When Jonathon Power did an interview with you, yes I found something. "I was very touched, my children when I was young and so were they of course, had a whole lot of brochures which were given away free by UNICEF. They sold the lot of them and gave the money to UNICEF which is perhaps a more economic way of running things." Now first you said they had a whole lot of them which UNICEF had given away, then they stole a whole lot of them —

Ustinov: No, no, no. What they did was, we were given a whole lot of brochures by UNICEF and the children asked me how much did they

cost, and I said they're given away, and they had a conference with themselves, and said how do these people make any money if they give them away. So they took them away from me without my knowing it, and I found out then from them that they'd not only sold them for money but given everything they had got for them to UNICEF.

Spiegelman: Very enterprising.

Ustinov: Through their intervention UNICEF sold them and didn't give them away at all.

Spiegelman: And were they small?

Ustinov: Oh yes, they were from eight to thirteen. Not very small, but small enough to begin to realise that if you can make money on something why give it away.

Spiegelman: They're perfectly ?????? Are any of them particularly interested in UNICEF, now that they've grown up? Of course, we just got the transparency from this which I hope will —

Ustinov: What is that?

Spiegelman: It's a cartoon. Isn't that nice?

Ustinov: Is that a child or what?

Spiegelman: No, it's a Canadian artist. They use this in the Air Canada magazine and we sent away to Madeline whatever-her-name-is - Corbiet? and she said please use it, by all means. This will amuse you, talking about capitalism. She said can you send me like a tax deduction that I made a \$900 contribution? I almost dropped my teeth.

Ustinov: Who's that?

Spiegelman: This gal, who's the artist on this? She said you're more than welcome to have it. What is her name? Martine Corbiet or something like that? You think it's that amateurish? Is that what you're saying?

Ustinov: No, I didn't think so at all. I wish I had ears that size.

Spiegelman: If you look at it too closely it doesn't look like you, but right away ---

Ustinov: It does have a little of the expression, I suppose.

Spiegelman: Anyway, it's just for a little variety. Now this was a picture from People Magazine, of you with the curly hair, which I hope you could find because maybe we'll use something about your being a motor car on that one, and this is - we're hoping that either

you with Mrs. Gandhi or you with a single child for that one.

Are there other pictures of you with Mrs. Gandhi?

Ustinov: Yes, I think maybe I can get one.

Spiegelman: Okay, maybe I should — How old were you in that picture, do you know?

Ustinov: Two.

Spiegelman: And in the other one?

Ustinov: I don't know, I think four.

Spiegelman: And that was in London.

Ustinov: No actually I think that was in Germany.

Spiegelman: Now that was in your book?

Ustinov: That's right. That was in Copenhagen.

Spiegelman: What were you thinking when you were holding those two dolls?

Ustinov: I was awfully glad they weren't alive.

Spiegelman: Because you thought they might wet on you ...

Ustinov: Absolutely.

Spiegelman: Is that where you want to leave that picture? Well we don't want to be profound about everything.

Ustinov: Well, no, I don't think one can be that, but this is India.

Spiegelman: That's Michael Kerr.

Ustinov: No, this isn't a good quote. My quote was - "I hate the phrase 'underdeveloped'. There are so many people in underdeveloped countries who are highly developed, and so many people in developed countries who've never developed at all."

Spiegelman: Half of it's been dropped out. Where were those pictures?

Ustinov: I don't know, but I imagine it was Paris.

Spiegelman: And was that the little girl that pulled your beard?

Ustinov: Yes, I seemed to recognize her from the other picture, but I think it's Paris, it may have been in Geneva but I think it was Paris.

Spiegelman: Have we already passed the ????? for UNICEF?

Ustinov: Yes.

Spiegelman: And that was for some kind of UNICEF Greeting Cards . . .

Ustinov: It must have been, yes, because I remember I was one of the judges that judged the composition. Oh you have that already.

Spiegelman: Yes. Yeah, that was in the newspapers, after you came back from that trip that took you to Egypt, Jordan.

Ustinov: That's India. In the middle of all these children milling around, and elderly gentleman came. And he was just wearing a shirt which is tied in a kind of knot. And he said, "isn't it disgraceful that the economic conditions don't allow me to buy a pair of trousers?" What am I to answer in the middle of the children? (Laughter)

Spiegelman: Where was that?

Ustinov: ...???, but he looks African.

Spiegelman: The hat. Might be a giveaway to somebody. He doesn't look to happy.

Ustinov: No, but he's a European doctor. Looks Italian or something.

Spiegelman: North African? Were you in North Africa? You were in Kenya, were you?

Ustinov: Yes. But that isn't a Kenyan. He looks sort of — I don't know.

Spiegelman: Could he be Egyptian? Could it be somewhere in India?

Ustinov: Could be somewhere in India. He could be Indian. He looks absolutely whacked. Worn-out, shattered. Don't know what that is.

Spiegelman: (Laughter) You don't like the picture.

Ustinov: I don't mind the picture but I can't identify it. Say India, say India.

Ustinov: (Reads something)

Spiegelman: Thailand or Burma?

Ustinov: No, I think that has to be Thailand. This looks like an enormous old-fashioned camera, but it's actually a gong, I think. I think they are Buddhists who ??? doctors or something.

Spiegleman: Do you remember going into anyone's house?

Ustinov: Dan wot (???). Yes. In that case, it's Thailand.

Spiegelman: I think that was the UNICEF award.

Ustinov: Yes, that was the UNICEF award. ????, and Mr. Labouisse to my right. They are all there.

Spiegelman: You know they named a rose after Kurt Waldheim, in the UN garden.

Ustinov: Did they?

Spiegelman: The roses are named after --- there's the "Peace" rose, and there's one named after Dr. Waldheim.

Ustinov: I did a television with him the other day. It looks as if he stands a very good chance of being the next president of Austria. That's a sinecure, it's not a ...

Spiegelman: I see.

Ustinov: Yes, I appeared with him. It was very funny, hysterically funny. Christmas, this Christmas. With Waldheim, and Walter Shale who is the Chairman (??).

Spiegelman: But, your comment about awards, before ...

Ustinov: Oh, comments about awards. I think it was Spaak, the Belgian foreign minister. He said about medals, that they are things that you don't refuse and you don't wear. And I think it's always very pleasant to receive something like that from UNICEF for instance, because I never feel anybody rates medals of any sort. Having just come back from the Soviet Union, I've seen more medals than people, I should think. I'm always rather skeptical about that kind of thing and I think probably it's true proportions are that represented by the fact that when I was given a high Yugoslav decoration, a journalist afterwards with a knowledge of English language which was not only inadequate but also because of that fact rather accurate. He said to me, "they tell me that today Marshall Tito awarded you a badge."

(Laughter) I think they rather like badges — and awards. They are very nice to get. There is a slight melancholy attached to them because you feel as you get the Oscar or some other award, 'where do I go from here.' But at the same time, I like the moment when you get them, I must say, but I forget about them rather quickly afterwards. Except of course I see them on the —
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I don't have my awards on the wall in my office, because — not really because there are so many of them — more likely because my office is terribly small. But they make me feel like a

dentist — Now I've got nothing against dentists, but if I'm not one, you really don't want to have your achievements in your waiting room for people to mull over before they open their mouth. So, I don't take these things perhaps as seriously as I should.

Spiegelman: Very interesting. Nice.

Ustinov: I think it looks absolutely splendid but I'll still write you. The only thing is I mustn't quote things that I've already quoted there.

Spiegelman: Yes, well. I tell you if there's anything we can drop it from here. (???) is giving you a set of this and then all of them just by themselves.

Ustinov: Oh yes, how clever. My God.

Spiegelman: Well, you know this thing is my baby, Mr. Ustinov.

Ustinov: Oh, how fabulous. Well I hope for your sake they go out and sell it because they are not brilliant at that.

Spiegelman: They are going to sell it.

Ustinov: They are rather somnolent people.

Spiegelman: Well, no, I wouldn't think that that's going to happen. Atlantic Monthly. I don't know about the language versions worldwide, and for some years to come. You see, this is not tied to UNICEF's — this will be a coffee table book that will sit on your coffee table and UNICEF hopes that it will get in where we couldn't get in otherwise and interest people in children and UNICEF that wouldn't otherwise you know, and with this human interest approach. And so, what we hope for from you is whatever is on your mind. If you think back to yourself as a child, did you ever think about, did your mother tell you to eat everything on your plate, because there were starving children, or was that the wrong era, I don't know. Or, somehow relating you as a child, as a father to your own children. You've said that you learn about parenting and if there is any extension. But I guess mostly why you got so interested in the welfare of children particularly. I know you've said very fascinating, really clever things about your own — that you're a mixed blood due to your reckless father (laughter). ??? pleasure has been? of working for children and what the context for children has been for you. Anything. 500. Go to 700 words.

Ustinov: I won't argue with you!

Spiegelman: You won't argue with me! And where this has fit into your life? In your scale of values. I asked you about mid-life crises and

you gave me — I didn't want to push the point over an international telephone call. You answered something about, it really wasn't that but putting things into perspective and sorting out what was nonsense and what wasn't. But personally, to make it as personal as you care to be. No one's asking you to do a psychological treatise (laughter). But the picture would be of great interest, in other words, what you said about a rear-view window, it's almost like that. I mean you know the story, there was a story about the man who was born old, and the rest of his life as he progressed he got younger and younger, I don't know whose story that was.

Ustinov: I think that's Thorn Smith or whatever his name was.

Spiegelman: And then the moment of birth was his moment of death. I mean just the reverse. Now I don't know why that sort of came to mind but when your comment about seeing things in a rear-view window and getting things into a kind of perspective — all of these images kind of merge and a part of this book is going to be children in the year 2000. And you, you have the kind of — you're not only a rear-view but a forward a view.

Ustinov: Perhaps I'm still (???), I have to have that, otherwise I have to put myself in reverse.

Spiegelman: What is this amel-car? Is it a collector's — is it a sports car.

Ustinov: A very very small sports car.

Spiegelman: That you hankered after ...

Ustinov: That I hankered after. Yes, I enjoyed it very much.

Spiegelman: Did you play with little cars?

Ustinov: Yes, I had a little pedal car, of course.

Spiegelman: What do you mean, like electric trains...

Ustinov: No, I hated electricity. Very frightening, gave me shocks and things. I was very haunted by all sorts of things. I would never eat fish and drink water at the same time because I thought it would reconstitute itself in my stomach and I would go around and around as a goldfish bowl.

Spiegelman: That's an unusual anxiety.

Ustinov: That's a very curious anxiety, yes. And then I was really very young and uninquisitive. I accepted what I saw and I really didn't ask any questions. I was very puzzled when I was told the facts of life. I thought it had to do with a very ?? ties, ????? and there was another smaller fully dressed woman.

Spiegelman: You played with ???

Ustinov: Yes, yes I was given them, of course and they fascinated me, but then I saw the connection. It was a sort of education in a way. ????? I still am. I think that's a very good thing on the whole. To keep being perpetually surprised.

Spiegelman: I was interested in your comment about your mother — thought that you might be distracting yourself with UNICEF — until you told her that UNICEF was good for your soul. But maybe you want to save that for your main body of ...

Ustinov: No, that's fine. Yes, she didn't really know what it was I don't think.

Spiegelman: But if you could link it to the soul or it has that meaning to you. Everyone knows about the Russian soul. You know Steven Leacock, that wonderful parody he did of the Russian. I have a Russian soul, that's what I meant when I brought our transcript to my mother she said, "why did you say that — that the Soviet Union is dear to you?" I must have meant it. I meant the Russian soul, the Russian spirit, the Russian culture. Not the Soviet. There's something bigger than the government.

Ustinov: I think the Soviet, personally, is a great improvement on what it was before. I think that becomes abundantly clear when you go into it historically. The only trouble with a revolution is that it ??? a country only in terms of reference. And therefore couldn't really do much about it. It didn't get rid of a great many things inherent in Russian culture.

Spiegelman: You must have heard plenty about the old Russia.

Ustinov: Well, by now it has become almost — even the Soviets are sentimental about it — there's no antagonism left at all. Unless there's a retrospective film in which the bad guys are always Czarist officers but they don't really mean that anymore. But the trouble with it is it's much too large a country to be centralized. Even in the Crimea you find it easier, because it's localized. Or Lithuania, or Georgia. And, Siberia is full of people who just want to get away from Moscow.

Spiegelman: They certainly have gotten away from Moscow, haven't they?

Ustinov: So I'm not — the line between the Soviets and everybody else is rather blurred if you ask me.

Spiegelman: What's going to happen to your Gandhi interview? Are you going to use that for something else?

Ustinov: We're just trying to get Rajiv to finish it. He, of course, is incredibly busy. And is as interesting as his mother was. You see, even busier, but have more spare time. It's a very interesting interview, even though it lasts only 25 minutes.

Spiegelman: It's probably the last interview.

Ustinov: It isn't even an interview really. It's just a trip with her, with occasional comments from her.

Spiegelman: A trip with her?

Ustinov: Yes. We went on --- we never got the interview. The interview was about to start when she was shot. She was shot 50 yards away from me.

Spiegelman: I read you were on the other side of the wall when she was shot.

Ustinov: Yes. I was on the other side of the house. But everything that went before takes on an extraordinarily ironic tone, because when we set off we went on a recruiting drive with her at election time. And my first comment the morning we set off which was two days before she was shot, or three days, I said 'the security measures here are very personal, and behind me you can see them going through my luggage with every kind of electronic device but

they haven't touched me, nor will they.' So, I don't quite understand why there's such application granted one thing and none at all to the other. So we're off on this adventure and I can't wait to see what it will bring, I say. Then a little bit later talk while she is making a speech, the police chief. And I said, 'you never fear for her?' (Here, he mimics accent) 'Ah, no, no they are very good people, you know, they fear God more than the police.' Then I talked to her doctor who said (mimics accent), 'well, I've been with her since the beginning and I've always been with her, even when she was in prison, when she was out of office, I was still with her.' So I said that I suppose that she needed you more then than she needs you now. 'No, I think she has always needed me, and she always will right to the end.' This was the day before. And she makes an occasional comment to us too, when the screen is black with people who try to proffer caviar and glistening black, to the horizon you can see nothing but people, very primitive sort of thing. And she suddenly appears in front of that kind of background and says, (mimics accent) 'we are now in the one of the more thinly populated areas of our country.'

Spiegelman: So you travelled around the country with her.

Ustinov: Yeah, sure. Which is just the lead-in to the interview. All we got was the lead-in. That's why I asked to follow it up with Rajiv, but I have been extremely busy, and he has, of course. I've had to spend seven months in ???

Spiegelman: I'm looking forward. We will see it here on American television?

Ustinov: I hope so. It will be on Canadian television. In January. We've had CBS following us around to do a segment on 60 minutes about us. Also the Turner network is interested. So you never know what they may bring.

Spiegelman: Well, I'm sure that at least Channel 13 — if a network won't take it — I get cable and ... Well, I know you have to get to the airport, and I'm going to leave these things with you. You see I thought maybe — does it work all by itself, but then the pictures, you know, so then it doesn't really. If there is anything you feel that you need, we will just drop ... whatever picture it is...

Ustinov: And I will try to send you some from Paris. I have some additional color Thailand stuff and a photograph of Elsie at the time when she was still with me.

Spiegelman: Well I don't think we need it unless it... It's up to you, I mean if you see something that you think would make a wonderful addition here... There's going to be little color in the book, only the greeting cards. So if you want to say anything, you've been involved in greeting cards. Have you met Tarzie Vittachi? Have you had much contact with him? Our guru. He calls it

"messengers for children". You're an interesting man Mr. Ustinov. And now that you've shaved your beard, I bet people don't recognize you as readily.

Ustinov: The whole time. Yes, I don't think the beard made any difference at all. Many people say, 'where is it?' The Russians always say, 'where's the beard?' And I say, 'at the customs. You people confiscated it.' (Laughter) I've done eight interviews in this Russian thing which are very interesting. One with Peter the Great, played by a very good Russian actor.

Spiegelman: You have a copy of the dialogue with you? Very interesting.

Ustinov: Yes. And Peter the Great talks about shaving off beards, which he forced onto the Russians.

Spiegelman: Did he?

Ustinov: Yes. He said that a beard is a symbol of retrogression. Of inward-looking. He forced them to pay a tax on beards if they insisted on keeping them. And they had to have a tag on the beard saying that the tax had been paid.

Spiegelman: That's obscene.

Ustinov: Yes, it's very typical of him. And he says in my little sketch, 'the beard is a symbol of conventional wisdom, and I have taken them all off. Except those that want to keep them they have to pay the taxes on it. Some of them I shaved off myself and I can tell you that a pile of hair on the carpet doesn't look much like wisdom.' (Laughter)

Spiegelman: Well, this is going to be an interesting series if that's typical of what you've got in there.

Ustinov: Yes, we did one with Ivan the Terrible. I say to Ivan the Terrible, 'when you destroyed the town of Nograd, they told us that the river ran red with blood.' He said, 'yes, could be. Could be. When you're ill the doctor bleeds you. I am Russia's doctor.'

Spiegelman: No wonder the Russians are so — they've had such leaders — they've had such things happen to them.

Ustinov: Catherine the Great. I meet in the park in Pavlos. Her dog runs away. And the dog runs right in front of me and then her voice comes saying 'Russia's a large country, you won't get out.' And then the dog comes back again, and right at the end we have a slight battle about her presence, and at the end to get her back

on me she says, 'You amuse me. It's a pity you're not 40 years younger. And I ten years older.' And I say to her, 'Shall I find your dog for you?' She says, 'No, no, no. When I go he will follow. It's a dog you understand, not a bitch.' I think it's quite good in the middle of all this.

Spiegelman: Did you write all of this script too?

Ustinov: Yes, yes. We did three of them: Alexander the First was interesting, a very good actor; Tolstoy; Dostoyevsky; Lenin — Lenin at the age of 25; and Oblomov.

Spiegelman: Who was Oblomov?

Ustinov: Oblomov was a fictitious character out of a book of the same name. It was really the symbol of Russian slothfulness. And inability to go anywhere. Here he says at one point 'Go into the next room and find the whisky, I'm sure it's there, I never go into the next room, however, because I know in advance what it's like — what's the point of going there?' (Answers phone at this point).

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