

CF/HST/1985/044

CF/HST/1985-044

3 September 1985
HIST 44

Reflections on Dr. Ludwik Rajchman's contribution to UNICEF

A personal memoir by John Charnow,
former Secretary of the UNICEF Executive Board*

It is eminently right that on the eve of UNICEF's fortieth year we recall the enormous debt that UNICEF and the world's children owe to Ludwik Rajchman.

In 1946 when UNRRA -- the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration -- was facing imminent liquidation, a handful of people sought to continue some of its post-war relief work. Herbert Hoover, the former U.S. President, Fiorello LaGuardia Director-General of UNRRA, and Dr. Rajchman, Polish delegate to the UNRRA Council, with the valuable help of some others, were able to arouse sufficient social conscience among the decision makers to get agreement on the establishment of a children's emergency fund within the United Nations.

The fact that the agency was considered to be temporary, and that its financing was shaky, did not discourage Dr. Rajchman. His vision was that UNICEF would become, as it did in fact, a global partnership for children of a kind and on a scale never before achieved in human history.

He also, I am convinced, had another motivation. Having lived through two World Wars -- and knowing their effects on his country especially -- he was profoundly committed to building a better, more peaceful world. What could be better than starting with children in a practical, down-to-earth way? What could better transcend political differences? What could better symbolize the larger purposes of the United Nations.

This motivation was strongly shared by Maurice Pate, UNICEF's Executive Director, who on occasion referred to his own work with children as "Service to Humanity". The staff Maurice Pate brought into UNICEF -- many of them in their early 30s, and for whom the Second World War and its aftermath were fresh in their consciousness -- were inspired by the same ideals and high hopes.

Dr. Rajchman was 65 at the time he forged the strategy which brought UNICEF into being, and he brought with him to the organization some four decades of solid professional, administrative and fund-raising experience.

The League of Nations' Health Section which Rajchman had directed for 18 years, was one of the notable successes of the League. Along with a small group of other public health pioneers -- which included Dr. John Grant, father of UNICEF's present Executive Director -- Rajchman was in the forefront of those who believed in social medicine. In the League he directed and promoted a broad view of public health, dealing with such related issues as nutrition,

*Delivered at UNICEF National Committee Colloquium. Warsaw, September 3, 1985.

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sanitation, and housing. He fought for and secured the collaboration of the chief health ministries of the world. Through attracting special contributions for the work, he was able to overcome the handicaps of diplomatic indifference and official penuriousness.

Dr. Rajchman had a tough-minded devotion to his ambitions for UNICEF. But he was also a practical and realistic politician and had an extraordinarily radar-like and judicious sense of what was possible at any given time.

Some of the agencies in the United Nations' system at first had misgivings about UNICEF. They felt that Dr. Rajchman was leading UNICEF to impinge on their mandates. He and Maurice Pate, however, had a pragmatic view. They were less concerned with the prerogatives of organizations than with the results of concrete actions that would benefit children. If there were serious child needs that could be met by international support, then that support should be forthcoming. If others were not in a position to take on the task, then UNICEF should do so, and in the process they hoped it would act as a catalyst stimulating the others to assume a larger share.

This approach worked. Before long WHO, FAO, and the UN Bureau of Social Affairs began to see that there were real advantages in working together with UNICEF. A relationship developed which has been described as something resembling a marriage that was not always very affectionate but was very fruitful.

Traditionalists and those guarding the exchequers of the main contributors sometimes thought that Dr. Rajchman wanted to move too fast and too far. In addition to his unflinching persistence, Rajchman could be very persuasive -- equally so in five different languages, and with great charm. He also had a genius for understanding the functioning of bureaucracies, and he used this when needed to neutralize opposition. In this he frequently enlisted the help of his large circle of influential friends -- friends who came from all sides of the political spectrum.

During the crucial early years when the shape of UNICEF was being hammered out, and its major policies adopted, Dr. Rajchman worked closely in a collegial give-and-take relationship with a half dozen or so representatives among whom the key ones were: Katherine Lenroot, Chief of the United States Children's Bureau; Dr. Robert Debré of France, an outstanding leader in social paediatrics; Adelaide Sinclair, a senior official in the Canadian Department of Welfare; and Auguste Lindt, a ranking Swiss diplomat who earlier as a foreign correspondent had travelled extensively in Asia and the Middle East.

Dr. Rajchman played a key role in the selection by Secretary-General Trygve Lie of Maurice Pate as Executive Director of UNICEF. Mr. Pate was a superb choice -- a practical, dedicated humanitarian with long experience in the large scale distribution of food and supplies--including relief for Poland following the two World Wars--, a deep concern for children, and close personal ties to Herbert Hoover and many influential members of the US Congress. Mr. Pate remained Executive Director for 18 years until his death in January 1965.

Another major contribution Rajchman made to UNICEF was his prompting of Pate early in 1949 to share the direction of UNICEF's expanding work with a Deputy Executive Director in the person of E.J.R. Heyward--an economist who had been the Australian Representative on the UNICEF Board. Mr. Heyward continued as Deputy Executive Director during the 15 years Henry Labouisse was Executive Director following Maurice Pate, and for the first two years of James Grant's administration--a total of 32 years.

With his own background in bacteriology and epidemiology, Dr. Rajchman looked at programme potentials from the perspective of a scientist and was especially alert to applying new medical discoveries to combat endemic diseases. He started UNICEF on the path of surveys by experts on child nutrition and health needs, and on assessing experience in order to learn from mistakes. It was he who conceived of a UNICEF partnership with the Danish and other Scandinavian Red Cross Societies to fight against tuberculosis through BCG vaccination campaigns -- campaigns in 22 countries which from 1948 through mid-1951 performed some 30 million tests and 17 million vaccinations.

Many of the longer-term public health thrusts in the developing countries with which UNICEF's name became synonymous in the 1950's were initiated by Dr. Rajchman. I well remember a conversation one afternoon when he talked about the promise of penicillin to cure yaws -- a highly infectious and disabling disease affecting millions of children in tropical countries. In addition to their great intrinsic importance, mass campaigns against yaws, he explained, could considerably step up public consciousness about practical approaches to public health, and could stimulate greater financial support for UNICEF.

It was Rajchman who also conceived of the idea of UNICEF aid for milk conservation programmes so that countries could develop their own supplies of milk rather than having to depend on imports. For the same reason he promoted the idea of UNICEF support for other production facilities affecting child health, beginning with a penicillin plant in India which would serve the region as a whole.

The General Assembly resolution creating UNICEF -- for which Rajchman was the principal drafter and an indefatigable lobbyist--contained some far-sighted features which have stood the test of time. While the resolution made UNICEF an integral part of the United Nations it also gave its governing body considerable autonomy. It provided that UNICEF's assistance be given on the "basis of need without discrimination because of race, creed, nationality, status or political belief." The types of aid it could provide were set so wide that they have never needed enlargement; they could be "supplies, material, services, and technical assistance."

The provision in UNICEF's basic resolution which made it dependent upon voluntary financing has served over the years as a constant impetus to UNICEF to justify the confidence of its contributors -- both governmental and the public. Rajchman and Pate felt that it was important for the vitality of the organization to continuously have to prove itself to its contributors. In turn, that required that UNICEF support would be effective and valued by the countries aided. This constant obligation to earn credibility has been an important factor -- I believe perhaps the major factor -- in maintaining in the organization a spirit of self-criticism and a dynamic responsiveness to changing times and new opportunities.

Dr. Rajchman was convinced of the importance of training. He led UNICEF's first steps into this field through group training courses of health and other child care workers contributed by several European countries. On the basis of this experience, Prof. Debré and he conceived of the International Children's Centre in Paris, established by the French government with support from UNICEF. After he left his Chairmanship of the UNICEF Board at the end of 1950 Dr. Rajchman continued to work actively with the Center until his death in July 1965 at the age of 84.

Dr. Rajchman was convinced that the basic responsibility for programmes had to be that of the governments. Even though UNICEF's immediate task was post-war relief, its objective was to strengthen the permanent child health and welfare programmes of the countries receiving UNICEF's assistance -- not to lay down the law to them but rather to enhance their own capacities to improve the situation of their countries' children on a long-term basis. He was especially conscious that fundamentally it was the relevant Ministries and their officials who would bear the ultimate responsibility for the successes or failures of programmes.

This departure from the then traditional views about external aid has been a major characteristic of UNICEF from the very outset. It accounts for UNICEF's very considerable decentralization of decision-making authority to its field offices so that they can be flexible--and if need be, quick--in relating UNICEF support to particular situations.

I should like, if I may, to conclude on a personal note. During the three years from 1947 through 1950 when Dr. Rajchman was Chairman of the UNICEF Board, I worked closely with him as its Secretary. I found him invariably patient and helpful; it was, in a sense, a teacher-student relationship. He viewed issues with which UNICEF was concerned in a large context, and with a sophisticated sense of history. Sometimes a meeting with him was the intellectual equivalent of a trip around the globe. For me, just starting out as an international civil servant, it was truly a mind-stretching, learning experience.

I am very grateful for this opportunity to pay tribute to Dr. Rajchman, not only for myself but for the others of my generation in UNICEF who were fortunate enough to have had similar experiences with him.

Ludwik Rajchman was one of the truly great pioneers in international cooperation in public health and in finding ways to help countries give their children a better start in life.