

**Potsdam Revisited:
Overture to the Cold War**

STUART CANIN

interviewed by

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Helene Wickett: Stuart, I'm curious what happened when you were in Paris that you found out about Potsdam? How did you get to Potsdam? Tell me that story.

Stuart Canin: [00:08] Oh, that's kind of interesting now that I look back because I was plucked out of a rifle regiment that was ready to go to the front but the war ended, luckily for me, and I was sent back to Paris because in my Army records they saw that I was a violinist and they were looking for entertainment. People who could entertain: comedians, actors, tap dancers, whatever. And so they sent me back to Paris because they thought maybe musicians would do well in an entertainment unit since that's what we do do, and...when I got back to Paris they were developing this soldier show company and they had people – Mickey Rooney was in it – they just pulled out from the Army records. They pulled Josh Logan who was a big Broadway producer at the time. Frederico Rey, a famous Spanish dancer at the time. They pulled in people like that. So we were all part of this company. I mean it was a fantastic company.

Wickett: And you guys were all about the same age?

Stuart Canin: [01:15] Yeah, more or less, yeah. Well we were in the Army so we had to be of a certain age. You wouldn't want too old a person in the Army, and we all came from different branches of the Army. I happened to come from the infantry. And little by little...my first job was cataloguing costumes that they had commandeered from the French theater after the Germans left. They had all these costumes and they figured that one day they would need these costumes for Army plays that they would put on for the GIs, and I was set to work cataloging them. In other words, from the 18th century with the hoop skirts, to the 19th century, whatever the difference in style was, right up to the 20th century I was asked to kind of catalog, which was pretty boring, as you can imagine. **[02:04]** Eventually though Eugene List, the pianist, came over. He was a very well-known American pianist at the time and he came to Paris, they sent him over just to do what I had done, except I was coming from Germany, he was coming from New York. And we got together because we knew of each other, and we started to play together, and our captain heard us and realized that he had a good, small section of entertainment value there and we eventually worked up a program of little pieces that would be entertaining for troops. We didn't want to give them anything like the Kreutzer Sonata, Beethoven or something like that because they were in the mood for short encore pieces. So we eventually started to...we got together, we went out to hospitals, field hospitals in the area and we began to play for wounded GIs, you know hoping to brighten their day a little bit by bringing music. **[03:06]** They would wheel in a piano, some upright piano, and I would have my violin with me and we played a lot of these encore pieces, because we thought that they would be the best to play for the troops. So we did that and we did it quite well and we did it for quite a while, a couple of months we did

that. And then we got to be sort of a team and the commanding officer knew of us – and then eventually one day in July he said, “We’re going to Berlin, to Potsdam, to play for the president,” and that was the beginning of the Potsdam story.

Wickett: So did you go there by jeep, by bus...?

Canin: [03:47] We flew in a C54, which normally held probably three tanks and four jeeps, but at this time it only held three people plus the pilots. Mickey Rooney, Gene List and myself. And we just flew up to Berlin, landed in Tempelhof Airport which is in the center of Berlin, and looked down and of course the Russians had taken the city. Just three months ago they had fought their way into the city so you could imagine what the city looked like. It was just a desert, hardly a building standing. And they jeeped us over to Potsdam and they put up a tent for us and Mickey and Gene and I stayed in the tent for a few days and then one day our commanding officer said, “The president is coming to Berlin, perhaps to review the troops.” **[04:41]** Nobody really knew why he was coming except that this was his first visit to Europe. So one day we were having fun in Berlin, I mean you know, looking at all the famous— Hitler’s balcony, the chancellery, the reviewing stand, the Russians had put up a tank to memorialize the first tank to enter Berlin. All those kind of things. I mean they were all war-related. Then one day the commanding officer came to us and said that we’re going to play for the president and to get polished up, and we went of course that evening and it was a nice, three-story German house where the living quarters were on the second floor. The ground floor was probably for the servants, the kitchen, and all that sort of thing. And we were on the second floor, and then there was a porch right outside that people used to sit on and enjoy the sunset or whatever, the garden. **[05:38]** And about 7 o’clock in the evening, 7:30 in the evening, we heard motor noise and we looked down the street and there was— you know, the traditional big, black limousine that royalty used to travel in. And anyway, a whole string of them came down the road. We were stunned.

Wickett: Were you dressed and ready to play at that point?

Canin: [06:01] Oh yeah, we were waiting, yeah we were waiting for President Truman. And of course the cars pulled up in front of the house and we looked out, and we recognized Truman when he got out of the car, but then the other cars held big surprises, because out of one car stepped Marshall Stalin or Generalissimo Stalin as he was called in those days, the Russian prime minister or premier, and out of another stepped Winston Churchill who was very recognizable – a short guy in a blue suit with a big cigar. We knew his face from the newspapers, and the occasion that we found out right then...nobody knew about this. Our commanding officer had no idea. This was a total shock and surprise to all of us who were sitting there on the

porch and seeing these limousines drive up with these people – the front page of the New York Times – getting out on your doorstep.

Wickett: What did you feel at that time?

Canin: [07:02] Well I said, my gosh! I mean, I may have used stronger words. I said, “What is this??? And why are they coming here?” I mean you know, when you see Stalin, whom you’ve heard about – he was leading the Russian Army, he was commanding the generals in his Army, and he was there, in person? This was three months after the war, after the Russians had captured Berlin in I think April, end of April of 1945, and he was there. And then they came upstairs. We didn’t see that, they just came upstairs. We were on a porch and there were glass doors that we looked into and there were tables set for dinner. Then we found out that the occasion was Truman, he was being host for a state dinner in which he was entertaining Stalin and Churchill. **[07:58]** They ate dinner and they came out on the porch probably 8:30, 9:00 o’clock, and we were ready. There was a little battered upright piano on the porch and I had put my violin behind the piano just to get it out of the way. Truman sat down on the sofa, and Churchill sat on his right and Stalin sat on his left. I always thought that was because of their political affiliations, the left and the right you know. But anyway that was only my own interpretation, that may not have been true. So Truman said “Gentlemen, play something.” So I went to get my violin behind the upright piano **[08:40]** where I had placed it and a Russian aide to Stalin leaped across the room. I mean when I say leaped, I still remember him flying through the air and landing at my feet right behind the piano to see what I was taking out of this case. When I opened the case he was looking at me very intently, and when I took out a violin and a bow he relaxed and he went back and stood behind Stalin, very happy that was all I was doing. Then we started to play. Truman said, “Gentlemen, play something now.” We tuned up and we played the program that we had been playing for the troops, the wounded troops and other GIs. So that was the story of the Potsdam dinner and of course we had no idea that it would make any news in the world. And curiously, we used to write letters home occasionally and it would take a week to 10 days for what they called V mail where they photograph each to reduce the size of the mail so the volume wasn’t so large. So my parents got these emails....V mails. Now I say emails, but I mean V mails, Victory mails I guess they were, and I sent it to them the next morning. **[09:55]** I said, you’ll never believe who I played for! And usually it took a week for them to get it or 10 days, and then it would take 10 more days for them to answer. But this time, I had sent a letter on the morning of the 20th of July, and I got back an answer like 10 days later which I said wow, what’s this, why would they...And they said they were shocked and to see Eugene’s name and my name in the New York Times and all the other newspapers, and we were called the Potsdam GIs. So I said I hope it makes the news. And they said boy did it ever make the news! So that’s the origin of the conference and how we

happened to be there, and poor Mickey Rooney, he never got around. Because they realized...they didn't know Stalin was going to be there but Mickey, they realized then that Mickey's humor or his jokes or anything probably wouldn't go over with either Churchill or Stalin. Stalin wouldn't understand his language. So that was really basically the story of the Potsdam conference, from our point of view.

Wickett: So Stuart, I have a question for you. How did you happen to have your violin in Europe with you when you left?

Canin: [11:13] A very interesting question. I was a rifleman, trained as a rifleman and came up to New York for my furlough after my basic training, and I was a violinist and I was getting along in my studies. I was a fairly decent violinist, and if I were going to Europe as a rifleman, I said, who knows how long I would be without the violin. And I decided to find, I found a fiddle that was probably worth a dollar and a half or maybe \$1.99 marked down from \$2.00 in those days, and I said I'm going to take this with me because it doesn't matter if it's destroyed while I'm there, so what. So I just didn't want to lose my agility, my left hand fingers didn't...I wanted to be sure that they would still work. **[12:03]** I went up the gangplank for our port of embarkation at Camp Shanks in New York and I carried my rifle over one shoulder, my barracks bag over the other – and I had my fiddle case in one hand and I walked up the gangplank and...walking up the gangplank the...you know one after another the GIs, and I came to the top and my commanding officer said...looked at me, he said “What are you gonna do with THAT?” He pointed to violin. And I said to him “Well, you never know.” And that's what I truly meant. I had no idea of Potsdam or anything like that. So you never know. So I went across and that's why I happened to have the violin. I kept it with me all the time we were moving from...We landed in Le Havre in France and then we took...cattle cars moved us up to the...towards the eastern front. As the Allies were moving forward we were just replacement people for people who could no longer...who no longer lived, just riflemen basically is what they needed. But the war was coming to a pretty quick close. The GIs and the Allies were moving forward very quickly. **[13:12]** So I just had my violin and kept moving with it and kept it in my possession. I never had a chance really to play it while the war was going on and we were moving all the time, and we were going out on 25-mile hikes or marches with full field pack. So I just had it and I never...The last time actually I played it was on the troop ship coming to Le Havre. I used to practice in the hold. One of my colleagues, I met him many years later, he said he remembered me, he remembered the fiddle sound – and he came over on the same ship with me, he was in the same position. We talked about it. He said he used to hear me playing. So I wanted to keep alive my musical instincts and my technique alive, and that's why I had it.

Wickett: Was that the violin you wound up using for this concert?

Canin: [14:00] Oh yes, that was the violin. It was not worth maybe a couple of francs in those days, that was it. So that was the fiddle I played.

Wickett: What happened to that violin?

Canin: [14:10] God only knows. I probably left it someplace, or maybe I brought it home and then threw it away. I mean it was...it was very expendable.

Wickett: So Stuart, when you found out you were going to play for Truman, let alone saw these limousines drive up with Churchill and Stalin, how did you feel as a player? What kind of anxiety did that induce?

Canin: [14:31] Well it didn't hit me until they actually came out on the porch and sat down in the chair, these three world leaders, and I mean the *leaders* of the *world*, were sitting on that sofa – that's when I began to feel a little stomach churning and all that sort of thing. But I tell you something, you feel nervous until you get the violin in your hand, and when you get something that's familiar as the violin, and we had played these pieces many times, the nervousness disappeared. But I was terribly nervous when I went to get the violin out of the case and to play for these men, because there was the free world right in front of us.

Wickett: During the dinner, were you just out on the porch cooling your heels?

Canin: [15:13] Yeah we were just cooling our heels, we were just standing there waiting for somebody, something to happen, and pretty soon the doors opened and Truman came out, followed by the other aforementioned two, Churchill and Stalin, and they took their seats on the sofa that was arranged out there. The aides, there were a couple of aides that came out. Truman had a general, Brigadier General Harry Vaughn was behind him and Marshall Stalin had his aide, the one who had leaped to see what I was taking out of the fiddle case. I don't remember anybody being with Churchill because well, he was in the curious position of knowing from the polls that he was going to be ousted as prime minister, and maybe the country felt that he didn't deserve an aide. They didn't want to spend the money for an aide because he was going to be gone soon. But anyway that's just my own kidding around.

Wickett: But for you the reality only hit after the dinner, then.

Canin: [16:15] Oh, the reality, well the reality of who I played for...Actually when I came home and went to sleep that night and the next morning I wrote the letter. That's when I was just...I couldn't believe what had happened. I mean you sort of

run through the whole thing in your mind, and that was the letter I wrote: “You’ll never believe who I played for last night.” And of course how could they know?

Wickett: Tell me the journey that that music made.

Canin: [16:44] Well when I went overseas my barracks bag contained a lot of things and among the things that it contained were these pieces. Because they were short and they probably what...if I were ever to use the violin I would not be playing, as I say, big sonatas, I would be playing these little encore pieces. So I stuffed it into my barracks bag and the Wieniawski especially as you can see, it’s kind of war-weary as they say, it’s just...Look at that, it’s hardly...its almost disintegrated, it’s all taped and everything – and that’s the music I played, the Wieniawski Concerto. The others, well, only one of them is new but all the others were from my days in the Army, when I had that music to play for the troops.

Wickett: And you’ve used the same copies for your whole life?

Canin: [17:42] Well you use the same copies. You know them and it’s just one of those things. You like the old fingerings in there and you want to see how you’ve improved by changing the fingering. So yeah, that’s...that’s the way it was.

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