The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

Information Series

ALEXANDER FRENKLEY

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Recruitment into Voice of America and Initial Training: 1946

Q: What were the circumstances of your joining the Voice of America?

FRENKLEY: In 1946, the Department of State decided to start planning for broadcasts to the Soviet Union, at first only in the Russian language. They started not only planning the broadcasts as such, the technical aspect of it, but the main point was to create a nucleus of competent personnel that they could rely on, to start preparing that personnel for actual broadcasting. At that time I was administrative secretary and executive officer of the French and Belgian University-in- Exile in New York, which existed since 1942 under the auspices of the New School for Social Research, whose director was Dr. Alvin Johnson. They invited me in fact to be chief of administration for that university-in-exile in January 1944. I stayed with them for three years.

Then in the middle of the summer in 1946, good friends told me that they had heard that the State Department was looking for American citizens with native knowledge of Russian, Russian-born. These friends knew that Russian was my mother tongue. And since the financial basis of the French university-in- exile was becoming a little shaky at that time, after the war, I decided to file my application. By the end of September or so I was invited for a translation test in the old Argonaut Building on 57th Street. The man who gave me the rest was named Michael Benisovich. What he was, who he was, I don't know, but he was an American citizen, a Russia intellectual of some sort, very nice gentleman who had been delegated to carry out these tests. Apparently I passed the new translation test on the spot. Two weeks later, I received a letter from Mucio Delgado, who was the official in charge of recruitment, with a Russian text and an English original, asking me to edit the translation that had been made by somebody else. I edited that text at home and sent it back. The next thing I heard was in early November, saying that I had been accepted. And so I informed my wife and the university-in-exile and the New School, and submitted my resignation. And then on December 30, on the basis of a letter from the State Department, I presented myself at the Fisk Building. The letter advised me that I was being hired as an editor, GS-12. When I came, and the young lady who was sitting at the desk saw the letter, she flushed and said, "Wait a minute, there's some misunderstanding," and went into another room, came back and said, "There is a mistake. You are being hired as a script writer, GS-11" - which was a thousand dollars a year less" quite a cut, because the whole thing was $5,900 for the editor and $4,900 for a writer. I had already resigned from my previous job, so I called my wife and said if it was all right with her I would still like to accept. So we did.

And then, the whole group that was assembled in these first few days - which included Victor Franzusoff, who started the same day I did - the whole group was extremely small, I don't remember the exact number but it must have been no more than a dozen people, perhaps even less, for full-time jobs. Several were working WAE or on purchase order, and most of them stayed on for a few years. Now, the group of executives, or supervisors, who were in charge of forming that group - transforming it, rather, from a motley crowd into a group of broadcasters - was headed by Charles W. Thayer of the State Department; Nicholas Nabokov, who had an indefinite status - I don't think he was full-time on the staff, I don't recall that, he was in charge of programming and working out assignments and so on; and then there was our good friend Eddie Raquello, to whom I think those who started working then and worked for years owe an absolute debt of gratitude. He may have been pedantic and extremely difficult to deal with but he gave us a technical basis, a notion of what broadcasting means, including such amusing points as when he was training his announcers, men and women, he said, "You always have to speak with a smile on your lips, because then the listener will feel that you are a friendly broadcaster. So whatever you have to say, say it with a smile." But on the other hand he was very strict and demanding, and he thought of things, some of which I still use in the preparation of my scripts today, as a free-lancer. We remained very good and close friends for the rest of his life.

We were given about seven weeks' time - the date of the first broadcast was determined and announced from the beginning: February 17, 1947 - in other words, all of January and two and a half weeks in February, to transform a group of the old Russian intelligentsia into modern broadcasters. None of them had ever broadcast; it was a superhuman task. Nevertheless, we achieved it. And here I want to mention that we entered the service, Victor and I, on December 30, 1946 and on January 2, 1947, I was given the task of preparing a schedule of programs in the field of science, technology and agriculture, as a project, and submit it to Nabokov and Thayer. And when I looked at this page a few days ago I was amazed. First of all because I am not a scientist, I am not a technician, I am not a farmer, and I had been in this country at that point for seven years; I had immigrated to the United States at the end of October 1939, after the start of World War Two. Apparently I had gleaned enough information or impressions of what America was all about that I was able to submit such a list.

Frenkley Background

Q: What was your background?

FRENKLEY: My background was very far from having anything to do with radio. I was born in the south of Russia, in Odessa, and moved with the family of my divorced mother to Bessarabia, to Kishinev, where her parents and she lived at that time. I was born in 1907 and we moved to Kishinev in 1911. My grandfather was an industrialist. My mother on the other hand wanted to become a lawyer, and she had been permitted by her parents to go to Paris - she was 18 - and she entered the law school of the University of Paris. My father was ten years older and was a writer and a musicologist and a violinist. Also a socialist, not very well regarded by the Imperial government, he was also studying in Paris. And they met and fell in love and decided to get married. They came back to Odessa, and were married. A year later I was born. Two or three years later they were divorced, because both were very strong personalities, each wanting his or her own way; there was no compatibility.

I went through high school, which was still Russian in the beginning, the first several years. In the winter of 1918, Romania took over Bessarabia, after which the gradual Romanization of the educational and administrative system of the whole province started and moved very fast. The result was that I started with the Imperial gymnasium and ended with a diploma of a Romanian lycee, which was the equivalent to the French lycee, which opened the doors to most Western European universities.

In the fall of 1925 I moved to Paris and entered law school, and in three years obtained my licentiate degree in law - in between the master's and the doctorate, in French terminology - and continued my study of English for several years. After that, being a graduate of the law school, I had the special possibility of doing in one year what normally takes more, at the Academy of Higher Commercial Studies in Paris. Then I came back and spent a reduced term in military service in Romania, as a university graduate. I obtained the equivalence of my French law diploma with a Romanian law diploma, which was very easy. The professors testing me had studied with the same professors I had studied with in Paris. The presiding professor said, "Who are we to question your qualifications if our professors have given you a diploma?" I returned home and submitted my papers and entered the Romanian bar. And for the next seven years I exercised my attorney's practice.

In 1937, in December, the King of Romania, Carol the Second, was finally compelled to form a semi-Fascist government. I expect that he feared assassination if he didn't, because the rulers of the country had become the Iron Guard, a highly organized, anti-Semitic, pro-Hitlerite group. And when in early January 1938 I opened one of the local papers and read that despite the fact that I was a Romanian citizen and a member of the bar and all the rest I would have to, as a Jew, obtain permission from the police each time I wanted to go to the movies with my friends - and my friends were Jews and Christians and believers and non-believers - I said to my family, my mother, "This is the end, I'm leaving the country forever." I had my passport always in my desk, and reluctantly they agreed, so I packed my suitcases and went back to Paris, hoping that I could earn a living there. No sooner had I arrived in Paris than the French government, in its wisdom, published a decree prohibiting non-resident foreigners from obtaining permanent jobs in France.

In the meantime I had met my wife-to-be, Natasha Tumarkin, the sister of a friend of mine who had got married and moved to the United States. Under his influence, and the influence of the circumstances, we decided to do the same. We got married at the end of December 1938, my mother in the meantime having died of a stroke. In January 1939 we applied for American immigration visas, and got our visas after the start of World War Two. Eventually we left France via Belgium and England and sailed on a British ship into New York harbor at the end of October 1939.

Organization and Early Programming of VOA Russian Service

Q: How was the VOA Russian Service organized?

FRENKLEY: The Service was small in the beginning. I was very soon charged not only with aspects of the programming but also mainly of editing, and writing certain scripts, mainly in the cultural field and the economic field. I wrote for five or six years the weekly Economic Roundup. Occasionally I would write news if need be. Victor Fransuzoff and a few others were assigned to writing news and nothing but.

The programming at that point was limited in nature, as I recall. We had the news, of course. So far as political material was concerned, if memory serves me well, the only political material at the beginning was a review of the American press, editorial opinion. So far as I remember, there was no commentary and no political analysis in the early period of the Russian broadcasts. It later took the form of a political commentary, if you want, called the Washington Observer, which, so far as I remember, came to us from Washington, through Charlie Thayer, with policy clearance. Of course, whatever we did was subject to policy clearance at the beginning. Every news item, every line, was checked by Nabokov as the expert in Russian and Charlie Thayer from the political point of view. We got the news from the newsroom, but they checked the transformation of the English original into Russian.

Now we had, all of us, to completely adapt, or readapt, our writing ability, to the needs of shortwave broadcasting - in short sentences, as much as possible in simple sentences to avoid complex syntax. The Russian language has very many long words. We had to try to make it as simple as possible. We had to make sure we didn't use too many sibilant sounds, which are also typical of some of the Russian words and sounds. These technical details - to master them in seven weeks is practically impossible. That's where Eddie Raquello came in. He trained us day and night. We worked like slaves.

I had to do a basic guide for feature script writers. Length in lines, reading time approximately so many minutes; we had an average established speed of 12 Russian lines per minute, so that we'd be clear. Start every feature script with a few lines of introduction to the specific subject, to be spoken by the announcer. Close every feature script with a standard paragraph provided for the particular feature group, also to be read by the announcer. For the present, treat the text as a one-voice or two-voice narration, or as a dialogue, interview, etc. Eventually dramatization - which came very soon. I wrote a dramatization of the Zenger trial - freedom of the press at the end of the 18th century. Style - how did I know! Well, of course, from Raquello. Use brief, clear sentences. Avoid subordinate and compound sentences. Avoid using too many technical terms. Avoid presenting too many figures in one script. Wherever possible, present round figures, easily pronounced and listened to, unless exact figures are essential. All numbers must be spelled out and not printed in numerals, because they take up lines of reading. Carefully check Soviet Russian terminology. Transfer all measurements into the metric system. And so on. We had no sooner started than, early in March, almost mid- March, President Truman made his now-famous speech proclaiming the Truman Doctrine of aid to countries wanting to resist Communism. The first two were Greece and Turkey. And that added to the unpleasantness between the two countries. After that speech, the atmosphere, the climate of relations between the Soviet Union and the United States became even worse. And we had to begun to change. That's probably when this Washington Observer and the permission to use more political material came about.

1947: Congress Threatens VOA Budget, but Relents

In the meantime. Congress in its wisdom, by around May 1947, started questioning the usefulness of the Voice of America, and of Russian broadcasts especially, and refused to approve the budget. By the end of May, all the members of the Russian Service received a formal notification from the Department of State that our jobs were not secure, the budget not having been approved as of that date, and that no one would object if any one of us would start looking for another job - without, of course, any kind of compensation for the time lost. I called the chief of the Russian translation services of the then fledgling United Nations, who was the father of our good friend Stan Barsky, Peter Grigorovich-Barsky, a very famous name in the history of Russian attorneys and law. So I came to see him at Lake Success. I passed the test with flying colors. He said he would call me back, and if other friends want to do the same here are some forms to give them. A couple of weeks passed, and there was still no budget for the Voice of America. We were working by inertia, waiting for an order to stop. I called Mr. Grigorovich-Barsky at the UN and he told me that although my test was excellent, and some of my friends', the Soviet delegation to the United Nations had vetoed the hiring of anyone connected with the Russian Service of the Voice of America. That was in early June 1947, less than half a year after we had been assembled and a few months after we had started - which shows to what extent the Soviet government already at that time was dead set against the Voice of America Russian broadcasts. I reported to Charlie Thayer, and perhaps it helped in a modest way, but in any case the House of Representatives reversed itself and approved a modest budget for the Voice. So we all kept our jobs.

By then the U.S. Government had decided to add the Ukrainian Service to the Voice of America and, if I recall, it was toward the end of 1947 or maybe early 1948. I think they celebrated their fortieth anniversary this year, 1987. By the end of 1947, I was promoted to editor-in-chief, which was a title, not that I was in charge of the whole operation. Charlie Thayer was still there, Nabokov was still there, but I had the title and the authority that goes with it.

1948: Early Security Problems: Nikki Nabokov,A Principal Founder of VOA Russian Service Ousted

In 1948, problems began to arise with some of our people, not many, including Nikki Nabokov, when Truman announced his program of loyalty and security checks. In connection with Nabokov I don't want to expostulate on the reasons for it but they were of a doubtful character. Maybe part of it was rumor, probably most of it was rumors, but he was forced out. And by the middle or end of 1948 for all practical purposes he stopped working. He had been an extremely valuable man. He was a kind of Renaissance man. He was a brilliant musician and composer, and he carried a weekly commentary on musical life in the United States, which he wrote and voiced himself and illustrated with music excerpts - it was brilliant. He also helped hire a number of his friends, of a very high intellectual level, including such well-known figures as Arthur Lurie, a composer of perhaps second rank but very distinguished, then Alexander Nazarov, who was a writer and commentator on literature. And even these people had to undergo the Raquello training.

Some time toward the end of 1948, Charlie Thayer was appointed Director of the Voice of America. And then he appointed me as acting chief of the Russian Service, as he put it in his memorandum, "vice myself." In other words, I was acting in his stead. Shortly thereafter, the Ukrainian Service being in the process of organization, Alexander Barmine was hired as the future chief of the Russian and Ukrainian Branch, it being understood that I would work under his authority, taking care of the Russian Service, and he would supervise both me and the Ukrainian Service.

He had come to the United States in 1938 or 1939, and as soon as war was declared he joined the army. He had been a brigadier general in the Soviet army and Soviet military attachï¿½ in Athens. In 1937, the Stalin purges annihilated the Soviet high command, including Marshal Tukhachevsky, who was a good friend of Barmine from the time they had attended together the famous Soviet Frunze military academy. And when Barmine heard about Tukhachevsky's arrest and got an order to return to Moscow at the same time, he refused. He broke with the Soviet regime, stayed for a short while in Athens, and then moved to Paris, where he was taken under the wing of Isaac Don Levine. He started writing his book, the first among the books of "non-returners," as they were called then, and the most brilliant: "One Who Escaped." Isaac Don Levine translated it into English. And through Levine he became good friends with such former Trotzkyites as Max Eastman, Eugene Lyons and others who had become violent anti-Stalinists. They probably had a hand in recommending him, because the mood in the State Department I think also was changing, under the influence of all the events.

Soviet Government Attacks VOA; Begins Jamming Broadcasts;1949: VOA Enters Cold War Era Broadcastings

One event I must mention, as Ambassador Walter Bedell Smith mentions in his book. In April 1947, Ilya Ehrenburg, the well-known, repeatedly turncoat, Soviet writer and pamphleteer, back in the Soviet Union and in the good graces of the Stalin regime, came out with two consecutive rabidly violent anti-Voice of America articles in the Soviet newspaper "Culture and Life," which was a sign that something was going to be wrong. In 1948, the Soviet government started occasional jamming, sporadic. It was not properly reported. Then, a year later, I remember very well - it was Easter Sunday in April 1949 - we were advised - I was called at night, at my home - that systematic and complete jamming of the Russian broadcasts of the Voice of America had started. And within days and weeks, we got orders, participated in discussions and so on, to make features short, and all other technical changes that were necessitated. And that went on and on, and the ambassador (Smith) reflects on this fact. He says that he was surprised that they waited so long to start jamming.

So, from then on the Voice of America was in the midst of the Cold War, and it affected our programming, the tone of our broadcasts and everything else. We did not become vituperative. In May 1947 I wrote a script about the way the city of New York handled the problem of smallpox - non- political, as you can see. But then in November, November 7, 1947, the anniversary of the Soviet Revolution, I wrote a script in connection with the 30th anniversary of the Russian Revolution and went into the history of the American Revolution - American ideals and philosophy. And of course there were digs. I was permitted already at the end of 1947 to have a dig like this, for instance: "The American Government is based on the agreement of the majority. If such an agreement of the majority does not exist, if a minority dictates its will to the people and thereby becomes tyrannical, the people have the right to change that government. There is another political philosophical point of view, in which the minority assumes the right to overthrow the existing government, and by this coup to decide the fate of the majority." Et cetera. This was the first attempt.

In August 1949, I sent a copy of another script to Charlie Thayer and said, "Hope you'll like it," and he said, "Excellent!" The subject was People's Democracy. "The Voice of America will supplement the answer of Radio Moscow to the question of 'What is a country of People's Democracy?'" Then we go into the question of what a people's democracy is and what it isn't. And that was a very sharp article, which made it to the papers: "Moscow Radio Quiz Answered by U.S. Voice."

The Service grew in size, modestly, not so much in full-time staffing as by attracting outside contributors from among the Russian intelligentsia, which represented refugees either from immediately after the Revolution or those who had come to the United States in the twenties and thirties, or during and after the war.

Barmine's Influence on VOA

Q: Tell me about Barmine's influence and the changes under his leadership.

FRENKLEY: Under Barmine's influence there was some sharpening of the output. He arrived in October or November 1948. I soon became his right-hand man, in addition to my duties of supervising the Russian Service. Not that I shared many of his views, but I shared some of them, and of course his entirely Soviet background was anything but my background. I was a bourgeois capitalist by formation; he was not. But he was, in my opinion, and in the opinion of many others, a politically extremely astute mind, a very intelligent man, perhaps not so much by education as in a natural sort of way, innate intelligence. Of course, he was entirely anti-Soviet. But he did not let this influence his editorial or executive ability, except in matters of discussing policy, trying to influence policy. If policy was determined, and we were given some central material to carry, he would be the first to make sure that we did, if he approved of it. If he did not, he would go back to the authorities and fight it out.

Q: I've heard he used to appear to ignore the discussion during the morning policy meetings, but then would say something like "Nonsense!" when someone at the table said something with which he disagreed.

FRENKLEY: I do remember he would sit with his New York Times open in policy meetings, but I do not remember his ever shouting "Nonsense" as some of our colleagues have recalled. But it could have been, because these morning meetings were very different from what I understand they have become today. They were really substantive policy discussions.

Volodya Mansvetov joined the Service a short time after Victor Franzusoff and I did, first on purchase order, then on WAE, finally as a writer and eventually editor. In my opinion, to this day no one ever wrote as well for the Russian broadcasts as Vladimir Mansvetov. His style, his ability to give the gist in short and beautiful Russian, was amazing. As an editor, he never tried to substitute his text for the text of the writer. He corrected the writer but he respected his individuality. And he gradually grew in that job, but by so doing he sacrificed his first love, which was Russian literature and poetry. He gradually ceased writing either poetry or prose in Russian. He knew Russian literature very well, of course, he was a specialist in it. But he knew amazingly well also American literature, and wrote about it brilliantly. He was on the literary and feature side, but when needed he became an editor or even a writer of political commentary. And when it was needed he did a brilliant job, but he didn't like it.

There were quite a number of contributors in the first couple of years, who came and went because some of them proved to be anything but useful, but they represented a brilliant stratum of Russian society which has disappeared from the face of the earth. Or is gradually disappearing. Not so much the Russian aristocracy, but the Russian intelligentsia of the old roots, with that immense breadth of knowledge and education.

In the beginning, there was no effort to preserve the traditional Russian culture among the listening audience. For quite some time, the task of the Voice of America was to reflect America and present America and nothing but. The Russian element was occasional, as a comparison, but there was no effort to preserve "Russian culture" in the first couple of years. This began to change when the displaced persons camps, the DP camps, in West Germany and elsewhere began to be emptied under the special immigration laws the U.S. Government had passed, and these people began arriving in large numbers in the United States. With the help of Barmine mainly, who also went to Munich to recruit people, several of these people joined the ranks of the Russian Service, and by then the Ukrainian Service. And although their intellectual background was far weaker than the one of the old Russian intelligentsia, those he selected were very gifted people. An example: Peter Veres, as he was officially known, Peter Uranov as he signed his scripts, became our best writer on agricultural matters. He had been a Cossack, a poor Cossack of the Kuban area. He had lived in total misery. But his family and his friends were all farmers, peasants, and he knew something of the experience of farming in Russia. But he was also a natural intellect, and while he had difficulty with the English language he absorbed America very quickly, and he became a brilliant contributor. A very miserable man, because he was never able to feel adapted to the new country. He knew the country, but never felt at home. And he married an American girl and had five children.

And there were others, like Irgizov, who was a former inmate of a Soviet concentration camp. He became a brilliant political writer. Of course, that was already at the time not only when Barmine was increasing political material in the programming but when the critical, anti-Soviet element in the programming was becoming very important. So this influx of DPs had an impact.

1952: Frenkley Sent to Munich to Set Up DirectRussian Broadcasts From Munich to USSR

In 1952, when Foy Kohler was director of the Voice, he asked me to go to Munich and help set up direct Russian broadcasts from the Munich Radio Center, addressed not only to the Soviet Union proper, but through medium wave to the Soviet army of occupation in East Germany and Eastern Europe. So I went in April and spent three months in Munich. When I arrived at the Frankfurt airport I was met by Perry Harten representing VOA in general, not Munich at that point, and on the way by car from Frankfurt to Munich I asked him whether he had anyone cleared for employment. He said yes, there was one young girl of about 18 or 19. "I gave her texts to translate," he said, "and apparently she did a brilliant job because I showed it to some people who know Russian and she had done a beautiful job in news and press reviews." I asked whether she was available and he said she was. I asked what her name was, and he said Natalie von Meyer. And today, 35 years later, she is the head of the Russian Service. And that gives me satisfaction, because when I saw her and checked her translations myself I came to that conclusion.

My first stop was in Frankfurt, for consultation with the NTS, the "National Labor Union," which was an anti-Soviet emigre organization, which exists to this day. They were putting out a newspaper, financed by the Americans, and a monthly magazine. I had a meeting with the directors and asked whom they could recommend from among their contributors, and they gave me one name, that of Alexander Kazantseff. They were reluctant to part with him, but since they had an American master behind their back they couldn't say no. He proved to be a brilliant political writer, although his knowledge of English was extremely limited. Nelson Chipchin was sent as a future deputy to the future chief, who was Charlie Malamuth. They both arrived toward the end of May after I had set up the whole service, practically speaking, in the building of the American Consulate General, the Consul General being - Charlie Thayer. Which helped, of course. Whenever we needed anything, I just went to Charlie at the other end of the hall and he gave whatever was necessary. But by then of course it was Cold War outright, and that lasted for a long time.

Return to Discussion of Barmine Influence on Voice

There was one incident between Barmine and me very early in our cooperation, when he raised his voice and said something to me that I didn't like. And I said to him, "Alexander Grigorievich, I will not permit even you to talk to me in that tone of voice and to give me that kind of orders. I am delighted to cooperate with you, and so far I think I have done it well, but if you want further cooperation, treat me as your equal." And from then on, for the next 15 1/2 years, there was never a bad word spoken between us. We understood each other very well.

We were the last editors of anything that went on the air. For years and years, Mansvetov or Franzusoff or whoever else edited this or that, the requirement was that while the rehearsal by the producer and the announcers of a given show was taking place, both Barmine and I got copies of the newscast and each went through it with a blue pencil. If we found anything that in our opinion was wrong, we went to the rehearsal people and asked them to change this or that. Most often Barmine's corrections and mine coincided. Very often we consulted each other before sending it to the rehearsal. If it was a feature script we had to see every one before it went into the recording session. And that worked. I don't recall mistakes - there were, undoubtedly, but I don't recall the quantity of mistakes that later developed. We had five programs a day. And this is where my disagreement with Terry Catherman began, when he became the chief of the Russian branch. But of course it was not his decision alone. To this day I consider that it was a mistake to create that constant flow of programming in one language that today extends to seven hours, not including night programs and repeats. Not only did it strain the manpower to an enormous extent, but it weakened the editorial control. It spread it among too many people. It was impossible to keep track of changing news and corrections. One crowded upon the other, constantly. And there is no respite, such as we had when we had several programs separated by periods of preparing, working, editing and doing a good job. And at the BBC, which was our mentor and example, they still have separate programs. So many decades later, they still don't have this constant flow. I think this is a strain from which the Service has not recovered.

Q: What were the circumstances of Barmine's departure and Catherman's assignment to VOA?

FRENKLEY: I don't know who decided on Barmine's transfer, but I assume it was in conjunction with the State Department, the leadership of USIA, to a great extent under the influence of our Embassy in Moscow. Barmine left in February of 1964, appointed to the headquarters of USIA as a special consultant, assistant, whatever, to the head of the area office. He was given a special assignment, to go on a recruiting trip, mainly in this country, because we were faced with this six-hour block of programming so of course we needed more people. He found some very talented people, some of whom are very useful to this day. He sent all the materials to me. While he was on this trip, and before Catherman's arrival, I was appointed acting chief of the branch. Then Clem Scerback came in to help, and in May of 1964 Terry Catherman arrived. It was at the time, if you remember - and the start of this trend had been during the Khruschchev thaw. Khruschchev himself didn't last long, but the couple of years preceding his fall had already started influencing our Embassy thinking and our superiors' thinking, perhaps we should soften our output, that we should have more American voices rather than pure Russian voices. And that's when Terry Catherman undertook this recruiting of talented American young people from universities and colleges. Of course I was one of the official examiners, appointed by the Civil Service, and we went through many, many applications, and some of them were very good, such as Mary Patzer. But they didn't last, because after a few years they found they could live better in the USIA in general or they became frustrated because the promotion policies of the Voice were - and still are, in my opinion - very poor.

I can't complain. I got my first promotion within a year after I entered the service, my second promotion one year later, and then I waited for ten years. From 1949 to 1959 I was a GS-13, as deputy to Barmine, who was a 14. And then something happened that to this day is amazing to me, knowing our bureaucracy. Henry Loomis was director at that time. One day his secretary called Barmine's office and asked him to assemble all the most important people in the service in his office. He came to the office, with a paper in his hand, and addressed me. He said, "Alex, on the recommendation of Alex Barmine, I have the papers here appointing you officially deputy branch chief, at the same grade as your boss, GS-14." Which was unheard of for the bureaucracy at that time - a deputy having the same grade as the chief. But here was Loomis doing it on the recommendation of Barmine, which was very touching to me.

In those early (post-Barmine) days, Mike Hanu helped with the new format with a number of scripts. He is a very talented script writer. He worked with me, and he worked with Clem Scerback, and for some time with Terry Catherman, but Catherman didn't like other people to tell him what to do.

Q: Tell me about the various groups making up the Russian Service, with their different backgrounds.

FRENKLEY: From the beginning, staffers had to be American citizens with a native knowledge of Russian. There was no exception to that rule. Supposedly, as American citizens, they knew something about the United States and the American way of life. The second group were selected people from the ranks of Displaced Persons who had been admitted to this country. They had influence of various kinds. All of them were rabidly anti-Stalinist and anti-Soviet. But their influence was felt when they were asked, sometimes behind our backs, by higher authorities, to monitor our output, our scripts. When I heard anything about the criticisms, that was through Al Puhan, who was program manager. Some of these criticisms came from Munich, from released DPs who were still in Munich. Some of them were here already. Under the circumstances, in the political climate of that day, some of the remarks and criticisms were well taken, and were taken into consideration. Some of them were of a self-serving nature. They thought, as many do, that if they criticized what is going on they will be hired to improve it, to change it, to throw out those they don't like, et cetera. You know very well how it works.

Then there was the Catherman era of Young Americans, who spoke Russian, sometimes excellently, like Bill McGuire or Mary Patzer, and some others - Jill Dougherty, a lovely girl from Chicago. But some spoke with a heavy American accent, which was supposed to charm a Soviet listener but in fact impeded his listening properly to the content.

And then there is this recent crowd of arrivals. Soviet emigres; but here I would say I should refrain from characterizing them because all this happened after I had retired, and I only know - either from hearsay or when I wrote my scripts and some of them started editing - that they knew best, they always know best. But that is a matter of authority, to edit or not to edit, that is something else. But they brought with them - not in general, but some of them - those elements of Soviet life which had become ingrained in their nature, because that's where they grew up, in those circumstances.

An Example of Barmine's Defence of Russian in McCarthy Era

This had never happened before. In all the long years of Barmine's stewardship, and my being his deputy, we did not have this kind of climate. He was the most passionate defender of the Russian Service and of all who worked there. During the McCarthy years, I remember one occasion, it was a Sunday and I was on duty, in the Fisk Building. My door, as always, throughout my career, was open. There was never a case, except for a confidential conversation, that it would be closed. Suddenly I see Roy Cohn appearing on my doorstep - on Sunday, at the Voice of America Russian Service. "Is General Barmine here?" I said, "No, but may I help you?" He said, "No, I have to see General Barmine on a confidential matter." I said, "You'll have to come tomorrow, or call him up." So he left. I immediately called Barmine and told him about it. He said, "Don't worry." McCarthy at that time had a headquarters in New York located in the Waldorf Astoria towers. Barmine called up and asked for an appointment for Monday morning. He went there, and he spoke to McCarthy, and he said, "If any of your assistants ever dares to come to the Russian Service you will hear from me, and others will hear from me. I categorically prohibit your representatives from coming to the Russian Service and demoralizing it." And he defended us from any kind of criticism or attack on the part of McCarthy. He never dared say a word about the Russian Service. Barmine of course was beyond suspicion, from the point of view of the anti-Communist crusaders.

Q: There have been differing views of the proper content of VOA Russian output among different groups, both American and Russian, haven't there?

FRENKLEY: There was very little difference in views during those Barmine years, perhaps because the Cold War, which lasted so long, had created a certain permanent climate. We never vituperated, we never exaggerated, but we never refrained during all those years from criticizing the Stalin regime and the Soviet and Communist ideology as such.

However, in recent years, if I understand correctly, the tendency, especially under the influence of incoming emigres - under the influence of Solzhenitsyn and others who have become very active in the emigre area - writers, artists, etc. - they want ever more Soviet materials, or Russian material, in the output of the Russian Service, to such an extent that some of the remaining old-timers say, this is not the Voice of America any more. After all, this is supposed to be the Voice of AMERICA. If America has something to say about Doctor Zhivago, the great novel of Boris Pasternak, fine. But we have been giving extensive broadcast readings of novels that have not appeared in the Soviet Union.

Here is what I consider a great and fundamental mistake: the merging of tasks of Radio Liberty and the Voice of America. It started by giving lengthy readings of Solzhenitsyn's "Gulag" and others of his works. Then they went over to readings of some other Soviet writers. Sometimes it was in the form of interviews, in which the author read in his own voice, which may have been very effective, for all I know. When the autobiography by Rostropovich's wife, Galina Vishnevskaya, appeared, titled "Galina," they got in touch with her, she has the Russian manuscript of the book - which is very well written, I must say, very sharp, very anti-Communist, and she agreed to read excerpts from that book in her own voice. The tapes were sent from Paris, where she lives, to Washington, and used as a series. Then there were readings from Aksyonov, who lives in Washington now; he was a fellow of the Kennan Institute for a while. Today I saw a script of a reading from Doctor Zhivago. It is now going to be published in the Soviet Union, and Radio Liberty already read it. Also, there is an insistence on including as much material as possible on Soviet life. Soviet events, what is going on there. We may lose track of what the Voice of America is all about. And I think this is a mistake.

I don't say that what we have to do is to return to what I was initially asked to do. Here is a form I worked out for planning the programs, with two features scheduled each day on the same one-hour show. There was a newscast at the beginning, there was a news summary in the middle and another at the conclusion, but the main substance of each show was Americana in two kinds of features, and I had the task of establishing a program for every week. The New York Times translated our first program into English and published it, and commented on it. Here is Feature A, February 17, 1947, the first program. The first feature was on states' rights, under the section Law and the Constitution. Feature B: Science - Pyribenzamine, which was a recent discovery. Agriculture - fertilizers. Sociology - Veterans in College...the GI Bill of Rights. Literature - Chekhov... not Chekhov in Russia, but Chekhov on the American stage, and his general popularity in America. Americana - foreign correspondents, what they do and how they go about it. Medicine - Streptomycin. Music Review - American composers; this was Nabokov. You see the lengths: 15 minutes, 8 minutes, 9, 9:40, 14:20. Friday: Industry and Technology - Telephones in New York City. Clarence Day. Special feature for George Washington's Birthday. Labor and Management - American Federation of Labor. On Sunday we had Art and History - Museum of Modern Art, and the first U.S. Minister to Russia.

That pattern went through many weeks and months. And then I changed the format to include a Reporter's Notebook, a weekly featurette describing advances in material and cultural standards of living of the American people. More feature items: Interview with Paul Hoffman of the ECA. Description of states. Eisenhower as President of Columbia University. First Russian-American trade agreement. As so on and so on. Here was one of the exceptions to the rule of concentrating on American culture: a feature dedicated to the golden jubilee of the Moscow Art Theater. Not only was it the golden jubilee, but the American theater was very instrumental in using and spreading the Stanislavsky method.

Q: In light of recent developments in the Soviet Union - glasnost, perestroika - do you see a continuing need for VOA Russian broadcasts to the USSR?

FRENKLEY: My definite opinion is that it has increased and not been reduced. We have to take all the advantage possible after this opening up of airwaves penetration into the Soviet Union. We have listeners. In the beginning, the impression was that only the city dwellers and intellectuals were listening to us. But as the Embassy began to collect impressions, it became clear that the provincial towns, where the reception was better, were interested, and eventually farmers and peasants, kolkhozniks. There was no doubt at any time that the Red Army personnel - I'm not speaking of the generals - especially in the occupation areas, they all had radio receivers, and they were very much interested. So eventually, our audience in our evaluation became the widest possible audience. Then we discovered, especially with the introduction of music, American music, in 1963, that we had conquered the Soviet youth. This was a sort of come-on, but it became an extremely important element of the attachment to VOA and eventually to Western broadcasts altogether. But VOA was always the source of American music, jazz and rock, and nowadays even country music. And they all love it, as we can see from the papers. They are listening to music, or to a description of American fashions, or to trends among American young people - it all influenced them enormously, and it should continue to do so.

Q: Thank you very much, Alex.

End of interview