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AMBASSADOR SOL POLANSKY

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[Note: This transcript was not edited by Ambassador Polansky.]

Q: I wonder if you could tell me a bit about when and where you were born and about your education and that sort of thing.

POLANSKY: I was born in Newark, New Jersey and my mother told me I was born on the 5th of November, so I used to celebrate my birthday on the 5th of November, until I had to go into the Navy at the start of World War II and I had to produce a birth certificate and, lo and behold, the birth certificate said I was born on the 7th of November, 1926. I don't know how the discrepancy occurred. After that, I put down the 7th of November. That seemed to have a certain amount of appeal when I came into the Foreign Service because my first assignment was Moscow and the Russians celebrate the October Revolution on November 7th. I could tell everybody that I was a child of the Revolution. Now with the end of the Soviet empire, it's lost its meaning. My parents moved from New Jersey when I was about five years old. We got on a bus and as I understand it, because I really don't remember it, rode out to southern California where we had relatives. We went to a town called El Monte, a bedroom community of Los Angeles.

Q: We joined the same exodus, because of the Depression. We left Chicago and went to South Pasadena. We took an old Rio I think.I was born in 1928 and we came out in 1931 or 1932.

POLANSKY: I went to grammar school and high school in El Monte. In 1944, I joined the Navy. I took the tests for radio technician school, which I passed; I went to boot camp and then went to radio technician school in Del Monte, California, and promptly flunked out.

Q: Showing your aptitude for the Foreign Service immediately there!! (lots of laughter)

POLANSKY: I then enlisted in weatherman's school which I did manage to complete successfully and then was assigned to various Naval Air bases within the United States. Then right, at the end of the war, they were going to put us on a sea plane that was going out to an atomic bomb tesout in the Pacific. For some reason they took all of the reserve enlisted meand officers off the ship. I wound up spending the last months in the Navy at Alameda Naval Air station in California. I was discharged and immediately applied to the University of California at Berkeley, to go to school. It was a good school. I picked it for no apparent reason, except my brother went there, so I went there. Watching kids today sweat through their applications to various schools is an entirely different experience. I really can't explain why, except perhaps because my parents were born in Russia, I then began to study Russian at Berkeley, with the idea of perhaps doing something in the government. I spent four, wonderful years at Berkeley and then at the end of those four years, decided to apply for graduate school at various places, including Columbia, which has a Russian Institute. I was accepted and got in a car with a friend and drove across the United States and wound up in New York City; looked for a place to stay and signed up for classes and spent two years at the Russian Institute.

Q: What was the view of the Soviet Union and Russia that you were getting? This was after thWar and moving into the Cold War. You did spend a lot of time in the Soviet Union. What were you getting? Were you talking to emigres who had axes to grind?

POLANSKY: No. When I think back on it, first of all academically, at Berkeley, the people who taught us Russian history and government, were all Americans. At Columbia, virtually all the faculty at that time, were Americans. There were no emigres that I had, except for language. John Hazard was a professor of law. Bill Mosely was my advisor and had done a lot of work in the Balkans and on Russia. He had been married to a Russian.

Q: You were getting a relatively objective view of the Soviet Union?

POLANSKY: That was certainly what we thought at the time and I think in trying to analyze it, that would still be the case. I don't think there was an obvious, strong, anti-communist bias as such. The Russians were on one side and we were on the other. There were issues of national interest and security where we collided rather than coincided.

Q: You could almost check the progression of the Cold War through out this time. By the time you got out of there in 1952, did you feel that you were learning about the enemy?

POLANSKY: Yes, I think we did feel academically that we were learning about the enemy, if you will. That was the way we looked at it. I had the opportunity to go to Moscow, for the State Department, as a translator. At that time, the Foreign Service did not have enough language trained Foreign Service officers and there was in Moscow, a translation bureau that was run by the Americans, British, Canadians, and Australians. It was a joint translation service and they needed somebody. They needed a bachelor. I was engaged at the time, but not married. I took the exam. Bob Tucker was the editor of the joint press reading service in Moscow. I passed the exam and was assigned to Moscow.

Q: This was not the Foreign Service exam, this was a translator's exam?

POLANSKY: Yes. I came in as a staff officer and then was "Wristonized".The first two years I was in Moscow at the embassy, working as a translator, the atmosphere was a very, very cold one. You had the "Doctor's plot" that was coming up. You felt very much that you were an outsider and you were the enemy. I didn't feel any sense of personal danger, but the political atmosphere was such that, the US was the enemy. There was virtually no contact at the social level. It wasn't a sense of isolation, but no real contact with ordinary Russians, except the few who were working in the translation office with us in a technical capacity. We never really talked about political subjects.

Q: This translation service was an extremely important part of our window into the Soviet Union. I can't think of anything more deadly than reading "Izvestia" and "Politika" day after day. How did you approach this? What were we looking for? What was our coverage?

POLANSKY: First of all, I came in as the new member of the staff and took what was handed to me. The way it worked, in the morning, Bob Tucker and his deputy assigned articles from "Pravda" and "Izvestia" that focused on foreign policy issues or editorials, with the idea of translating those as rapidly as we could into English. You were sitting there with what you were going to translate and a secretary/typist was sitting there with stencil paper in the typewriter and you translated and she typed the translation onto the paper. Then it went into Bob for editing. By the end of the morning, there would be a digest of the major news articles in the day's press and that was made into multiple copies and sent around to the various embassies that subscribed to the service. The afternoon was spent looking at longer articles, either in the newspapers about economic or social issues, or from magazines that would supposedly give a broader picture of what was going on economically or socially. That became a second part or edition of the translation service. All of those that were selected by Bob and his deputy for the political content or possible changes in domestic or foreign policy that might be reflected in those articles.

Q: Were you reaching down into the provincial papers to pick up developments there?

POLANSKY: It was limited to the central newspapers-"Pravda", "Izvestia"," Red Star", and "Trud". You have to realize that at the time, it wasn't always that easy to get subscriptions. The general feeling was that the entire media was so controlled by Moscow that if you were really looking for policy direction, or changes in policy, or hints about leadership changes, that all came out of the central press. The local press was really a reflection of national issues and the local issues were too irrelevant to require much attention.

Q: You were part of this machine that was beginning to feed this new science of Kremlinology. Were your antennae being sharpened or were you too involved in the daily work?

POLANSKY: I think I was so involved in having the right translation, really focusing more on the translations themselves-obviously interested in their content because of my interest in the Soviet Union, but it was up to Bob and his deputy to decide what was to be translated. I think we subconsciously felt that we had done our part and now it was up to the guys in the political and economic sections to do whatever analysis that they could derive from those articles for those who couldn't speak Russian.

Q: What was your feeling about the Embassy? You were there from 1952 until 1955. This was the death of Stalin; the Doctor's plot; the new Troika-it wasn't really a Troika-Malenkov and others. What was life like for you and your impression of the other people at the Embassy.

POLANSKY: Life for us, for me, when I arrived, there were five of us who lived in a house rented by the US government. It was not far from the Foreign Ministry or the Embassy. We had a Russian cook and Russian maids to clean the house. Three of the five were Foreign Service Officers and then there was another translator and myself. At the time we were all bachelors. We all got along well. I work responsibilities didn't keep us separated. We got together in the evening and talked about what was going on. We felt we were a junior part of the Embassy. The other translator and I weren't directly involved in the activities at the Embassy. We weren't excluded from it. After Stalin died, the Embassy itself was forced to move from its location almost on Red Square up to its current location on Tchaikovsky Street. That made it possible to bring together most of the families to one place in terms of apartments. In my case, they wento the Embassy Administrative Officer and DCM and asked if an apartment would be available so that I could get married and bring my wife back to live. They agreed and so I got married by proxy because it was difficult for my wife to get a visa without being married. There were all sorts of problems, but we got that all straightened out. She came and we moved into an apartment in the Embassy compound and we becampart of the younger set of the Embassy. Virtually all of the social life at that time focused on the American community, with some interaction with the Canadians, Australians, British, and Germans. There was very little contact with Russians. Not that we didn't look for it; it was a very uncertain period and there was virtually no contact. I spent three years in Moscow the first time. We had a number of chance conversations in Moscow with Russians but we spent our first three years without having actually known a Russian family or individual in any significant way.

Q: While you were there, George Kennan and Charles Bohlen were Ambassadors. I realize they were somewhat removed, but still it was a small Embassy, did you have much contact?

POLANSKY: I arrived in Moscow in time to attend my first diplomatic reception which was given by Mrs. Kennan because Ambassador Kennan was out in Berlin. They wouldn't let him back in. I was saying good-bye to Mrs. Kennan who I had not met before.

Q: He had made his famous statement on ...in Russia, when he got off the plane.

POLANSKY: He didn't come back, so I never really knew him. I met him a couple of times after that. Then Charles Bohlen came. He was a very well liked and respected person and I think he was open to everybody and I think everybody felt that he was very much a leader and we were part of a family in that sense. As a junior member of the Embassy staff by then, I was working in the Agricultural section because the Agricultural Attache knew agriculture but not Russian, and I knew Russian but not agriculture. So we teamed up. We took many trips and I learned a lot from him and saw the Ambassador in that context. When your a junior officer you hold a senior officer in a certain amount of awe, particularly with the kind of reputation he had. He was very well liked by all the women in the embassy. He was so damn handsome and dashing.

Q: What did the Agricultural Attache do in the Soviet Union at that time and how did you support him?

POLANSKY: Essentially what we were trying to do was to try and understand what the Soviet agricultural policy was; what the growing conditions were like; what the crops were likely to be, along with the economic and political connotations that that had for the Soviet Union. It amounted to several parts. One was to begin to try to read the pertinent Russian newspapers about agricultural developments. We tried to figure out what was true and what was not. There was also the time when they started their New Lands policy and what that meant for the development of Soviet agriculture, particularly the grain crops. We had that part which was reading the newspaper. The other part, to the extent that we could, was to take trips to the main agricultural regions of the country, either by plane, preferably by train, and sometimes by car. We tried to do that at appropriate times in the growing season, in the harvest season, to try and get first hand impressions as to what the growing season was like and what the crops were like. That wasn't always easy.We had to do all our travel arrangements through .....the Soviet agency that controlled foreigners. We would register a trip and tell them how and when we were going and in effect they would tell us whether we were going and in certain places they would block off part of the proposed schedule. Sometimes they would give us reasons, sometimes they wouldn't. We tried to look as carefully as we could at the crop situation. When we were in cities, we tried to go into as many stores and collective farm markets that we could, to try and get some sense of what the food situation was like; what the food prices were like-whether there were price increases or not. We tried to get some sense of how good the food supply was. This was before the age of satellites so we were, in effect, the eyes and the ears of the US government and of all the agencies that were interested in what was happening in the Soviet Union.

Q: What was the impression of the attache, whom you were supporting, of the efficiency, the developments in Soviet agriculture?

POLANSKY: In terms of the growing seasons, I think that his general impression was that they were not particularly effective or efficient in areas of land that were particularly well cultivated. There were a lot of weeds and that kind of problem. I think he came from an atmosphere and background that suggested the whole idea of collectivized agriculture was not an efficient way to do things. He tended to have those views reinforced by what he saw-the lack of equipment in the fields; the kind of equipment we saw that was not well tended. We didn't always see a lot of equipment in the field or people working hard. Whereas, if we were in a train or car driving through villages and saw the village private plots, that farmers had, they seemed to be much more densely cultivated. When we went to the market and saw what was available, we came away with the impression that no matter how collectivized they were, people tended to devote more attention, more care, and to the extent they could, to their private plots.

Q: Was there any feel for the New Lands Program? This sort of turned into an ecological disaster.

POLANSKY: I can tell you, we certainly didn't have the opportunity to talk to Russian farmers. We didn't have the opportunity, voluntarily, or otherwise to become part of that exercise. We flew over the New Lands on our way out to Kazakstan, in the fall of 1954, and it went on endlessly. From a plane, we saw mile after mile of newly plowed fields-vast areas. That was really quite impressive. We wondered where all the machinery was that had done it; we just didn't see it. Now I think it is a disaster, in large part.

Q: Of the young officers with whom you were associated with, did any stick out in your mind that you saw later on as the new breed of Soviet specialists?

POLANSKY: Oh yes. Bob Barry is one; Tom Niles is another. Those two certainly stood out. Mark Palmer was also there. In some ways, it is sometimes hard to pinpoint, but you knew that they were exceptional in a very capable group of people. They had entirely different personalities, but they stood out.

Q: This is a period from 1952 until 1955, during McCarthyism. Was this striking at all? Did you get any feel from McCarthyism and this almost anti-intellectual movement in the States?

POLANSKY: I think more in Washington than in the Embassy. I think people were obviously concerned by it, but I can't think of anyone in the Embassy who was affected by it.

Q: How about the security thing? Were the KGB playing games, particularly with you bachelor officers? Or were you pretty isolated from that?

POLANSKY: I think we were subjected to it in various ways. In Moscow, at that time, I don't think it was so obvious. I think we were aware of it and warned against it. I was in Warsaw later and the local security people had gotten to a member of the Embassy. I don't remember security in Moscow at that point, within the Embassy, particularly strong. I think it was there. We were warned about, but I don't think the Embassy security officer was a particularly heavy handed person at the time. It was not a major issue.

Q: How did your wife react to this?

POLANSKY: I think she, in a sense, like I was. Her academic background was not in things Russian. She was an occupational therapist. It sounds strange to people now, but there was really no question about her giving up her possible professional career. We got married and she became part of the Embassy staff. She worked as a typist in JPRand that added some money so that she could travel on some of the trips that I took. She likes children, so she got involved in teaching younger kids at the Anglo-American school. That was very much part of what she wanted to do and became an important part of making life in Moscow more interesting. She was certainly curious enough about life in the Soviet Union, learnesome Russian, interested in the cultural life, went to plays even though she couldn't understand Russian, did as much traveling with me as she could and then with some of the wives from the Embassy. You couldn't travel by yourself then. I think, for her, it was a marvelous experience. Neither she nor I had an idea of what life in an Embassy, in the Foreign Service, would be like, but it worked out very well. She was thoroughly pleased with the assignment and I think with each assignment that we have had, hated to leave, glad to be back to the United States; hated to leave the United States, but once she got where we were going, got very much wrapped up in it and again, would hate to leave when it was time to go. Although we didn't realize it at the time, the whole business of wives being rated, I think grated on her, and she appreciated the liberation in 1972. She thought it should have come earlier. I suspect this is true for most people, you really don't know what you are committing yourself to in the Foreign Service. I think she took the best possible things out of our career in the Foreign Service.

Q: Had you been integrated into the Foreign Service when you came back?

POLANSKY: Yes.

Q: You came back in 1955 and served in INR until 1958. What were you doing there?

POLANSKY: I was working on Soviet internal, domestic affairs and went through all the various leadership that had gone on in the Soviet Union. I did some basic research papers on Soviet political institutions as well as foreign policy developments and then had a chance to go to Serbo-Croatian language studies, and while I thought that was all right, I asked if I could have Polish instead and they agreed. I took Polish language training and went off to ....

Q: While you were in I NR, at the height of Kremlinology, because Stalin was gone and there was a regrouping while you were doing that from 1955 until 1958, who was leading the Kremlinologist? How did you fit into this?

POLANSKY: I think from my perspective, Boris Klaussen was the guy who interviewed me when I came into the Foreign Service, and my recollection is that, when I came back, he was still head of that part of INR that dealt with the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. He was the Division Chief. Ken Kirst was a civil-service person who had been in Moscow at the same time that we were there the first time. He was the Section Chief and I worked directly for him. Gordon Tiger came along. That was the nucleus of the Kremlinologists at the time.

Q: I've been interviewing Roger Davies who has been talking about his experience. He felt that there was a certain division between the Kennans and Bohlens, who used to really be able to talk to the leadership, really back from the pre-World War II days; they had all these connections, but how more and more you had to read the tea leaves. In other words, you had to look at the newspapers and see who was ranked and keep card files on people and how it was this younger generation that was coming up, of which he was a part of, because the situation had changed, of having to look through this glass in a different manner. Did you have this feeling that there was this change and that it was getting harder to figure out who was doing what to whom?

POLANSKY: Yes, I think so. This business of the differencbetween the older generation, the Kennans and the Bohlens, and the younger generation, I don't think we somehow felt deprived that we didn't have the same kind of access to the Soviet leadership. We may have had, as part of their background and understanding of the Soviet Union, may have been there, but I don't think anybody felt that way. We just accepted the idea that that was not part of our experience. We had gone through the whole business about reading the press and reading Embassy cables about official meetings people in the Embassy might have had with people in the Foreign Ministry from stilted conversations and then the periodic trip reports that people would take whatever chance conversations they or if they went to a .....lecture on foreign policy issues to try and understand what was behind some of the questions that some of the Russian audience might have of the speaker. I think we just accepted it as that was the way it was and realized that the Soviet press was very heavily controlled, but that was the place we could see, if we could divine it, what the changes were in Soviet foreign or domestic policy, because in part, that was the way the Soviet leadership was going to get the line through to the broad masses of the people rather than to the party bureaucracy or the party elite. They were separate. We could see how people were ranked in the leadership. If somebody's name disappeared, we knew something was happening to that person. There was a lot of focus for awhile on the particular ranking of the names of the leadership.

Q: What was your relationship, as you worked in INR, with the desk?Sometimes there is a feeling that INR does its thing and the desk is so busy doing its thing, that although you are supposedly supporting the Soviet desk, there really isn't all that much time.

POLANSKY: I think there was that kind of division. I think there was also at that time there were more civil service than Foreign Service officers in INR. There were probably more Foreign Service Officers on the desk than there were civil service, so there was that rivalry or sense or sense of differentiation, even after Wristonization. We felt in INR that we were providing a service to the desk and other parts of the Department since we were the research side and they were the operational side. My recollection is that there was really little informal contact back and forth on a regular basis.

Q: You had the choice between Serbian-Croatian training and Polish training, which I had about two years later, and I opted for the Yugoslav. Why Polish?

POLANSKY: I don't think it was a profound analysis. I thought it was a more important country, more centrally located, larger. It was not based on any long term calculation about how it would potentially affect my career.

Q: Mine was based on the much more profound thing. I figured that Poland was flat and Yugoslavia was mountainous and had a nice seacoast.

POLANSKY: It may very well be that, even though the whole business of the relationship between Moscow and Tito had been going on, I suspect we were more influenced by the Poznan riots in 1956.

Q: During your Polish training, did the expatriate Poles training you, give you a strong antipathy for the situation in Poland at that time.

POLANSKY: Yes, that's true. One of the Polish linguists had a fairly prominent brother in Poland, so there was that kind of family division or rivalry. I think there was a certain amount of antipathy but there was also a certain amount of pride, in Poland, so there was that kind of contrast. We were still experimenting with different types of text books and syllabus. There wasn't an awful lot of bias on their part that would stick out.

Q: Your first assignment there was to Poznan; you served there from 1959 until 1962 as Deputy Principal Officer. What was the situation in Poznan during this period.

POLANSKY: The situation was that the consulate had been opened before and then closed, and we went to open it again.

Q: When had it been closed?

POLANSKY: Maybe 1955 or 1956. We went with the idea of finding an office building and accommodations and setting up a consulate. Before we arrived, the Embassy had already found a Polish contractor who was going to do repair work on the building. We met him in Warsaw and then drove down with him and his wife, in several cars, to Poznan. I had the only accident I've ever had in my life in a car then. I was driving, what was then, the consulate's jeep. My wife had gone ahead in our car. I took a curve too fast; it was the fall and there were beet leaves on the road, and it had rained, and I found myself flipped over on the side. I wasn't injured. I turned off the ignition and the Pole with me suggested that we get out and see what we could do. He flagged down a truck. The driver inquired if we were injured and then he said that we should try and get the jeep upright before any police come along and cause problems. We were able to get the jeep up on its four wheels and it started. He said we ought to try the 30 miles to Poznan and he would follow us. I appreciated that and everything worked out all right. It was a different attitude and I found that interesting. The local attitude in Poznan towards the American consulate was a very warm one. The official attitude-we had a terrible Party First Secretary by the name of Jan Schidlock-who was obviously out to make a career as a good strong Communist. He would have as little to do with us as possible. People in the academic and cultural world, within that atmosphere, still strong Communist control, were really quite warm and friendly and were delighted to see us. We were the first consulate there at that time. The Russians came later and then the British and French. We occupied a very favored position. We had a nice building; there was a fair amount of repair that had to be done on it. We lived in the basement of the building for awhile. We did our dishes in the bathtub in the bathroom. It was a nice atmosphere. We had a nice staff; everybody pulled together; it was one of our better experiences.

Q: What was the general impression of the Poles at that time as a Soviet military ally?

POLANSKY: I think we accepted that they were in the Soviet orbit. We had reestablished the consulate in 1959. After the Polish riots in 1956, the feeling was that the Russians were there, they had control, the Poles would do what they had to do. I never really got the feeling that they would do something in a whole hearted way if it came to that militarily. There were a lot of Soviet bases in western Poland that were off limits to us. I think there was a certain amount of necessary toleration on the part of the Poles with respect to the Soviet military.

Q: What about working there in terms of the security problems? There are the security police who were working hard to compromise you to do things. Did that work very well?

POLANSKY: We arrived in Poznan after some preliminary negotiations. The building had been given to us that would serve as the consulate as had the apartment for the Principal Officer, an apartment for the Secretary. Initially, we lived in the basement of the building. That worked out very well; it gave us a way to meet some Poles. We drove down from Warsaw, to Poznan, with the Polish contractor who had been given the job of renovating the building and we struck up a nice working relationship with him. He did his business and we moved into the consulate. We were aware of the likelihood that the Poles had the opportunity to do what they wanted with the building, whether the contractor was in cahoots with the secret police or not.

Q: We are talking about listening devices and the like?

POLANSKY: Yes. We must have had three or four visits by our own security people and they could not find anything. At one more visit, I think quite by chance, one of the SY people found a small hole behind a radiator in traditional fashion. They took the radiator out and began chipping away and lo and behold, there was a listening device. A hallowed out dowel went from the surface of the wall, back to this listening device. It was traced down through the basement, under the driveway, into the next yard, which was the school for Polish kids. All of this work was going on, tearing up the building, and none of the Polish employees asked a single question about what was going on. That was the only devicthat we found; there may have been others. We deactivated that and that obviously a clear warning that they had that capability and were using it. In that sense, we saw it, knew it was there. We tried to have a secure room where we could have our conversations and keep our classified materials. We assume, although we have no way of knowing, that that room was not penetrated. In terms of the apartments, we simply warned people that they had to be careful about what they say. In terms of physical security, I don't think we had any feeling that we were under any kind of physical threat.

Q: What about the use of provocateurs? There was the case of the General Service Officer who was caught in the classic "honey" trap. A Polish employee got him to divulge secrets.

POLANSKY: There was that possibility. While I was there, we had a single secretary and a single USIA officer. I think we were aware of it, but as far as we could tell, there was no systematic, concerted effort, to compromise anyone at the consulate. We knew about the case in Warsaw.

Q: What about your relations with our Embassy in Warsaw? How did they use Poznan, or did you do your own thing?

POLANSKY: I think we had a certain sense of being pioneers being out in the western part of Poland and spent a fair amount of time getting around our district to engage in whatever kind of political, economic, and sociological reporting that we could do, which went to the Embassy and the Embassy sent it on to Washington. We took part, sporadically, in Embassy staff meeting. There was no real effort to have a coherent, coordinated reporting plan and to feel part of the Embassy. We didn't feel that we weren't but we did feel a sense of being on our own.

Q: How about Jake Beam as Ambassador? What was your impression of him?

POLANSKY: It was a junior officer-Ambassador sort of relationship. You stand in awe. I think both with him and with Walt Stoessel, there was a good, cordial relationship, but it was one of physical remove, and then there was the difference of age and rank. I had good relations with both of them.

Q: How about on the consular side? Did you find your office was pretty heavily involved in immigration and social security?

POLANSKY: We were fortunate in that we did not issue visas. All the visa work was done in Warsaw and we simply referred people to Warsaw for immigrant or visitor visas. We did some American protection work, but not a lot. In effect we were there for political and in part for economic and commercial reasons. There was an annual Poznan trade fair at which the U.S. government had a rather sizeable building which we used. Although we didn't conduct an awful lot of commercial activity, that plus the political reporting and representation, were really our main functions. The consular functions at that point, in the first years that we were there, were really secondary.

Q: Were you there during the Berlin Wall crisis at the end of 1961?Did that have any impact?

POLANSKY: That's a good question. I don't recall it having any major impact either in terms of our reporting or our sense of physical security. I don't recall it closing down the situation or our ability to get around western Poland. I think that before we had arrived, the ability for diplomats to drive, unhindered, through East Germany, to Berlin, that was no longer the case. We didn't recognize East Germany, so we were told that we couldn't go through East Germany at that time. I really don't recall that the building of the Wall created an increased sense of foreboding or heightened tension.

Q: You then moved back to Washington. You were with Soviet affairs for four years, from 1962 until 1966. How was Soviet affairs set up? Where did fit, in those days, in the Department's scheme of things?

POLANSKY: Yes, I was in the Office of Soviet Affairs. It was part of EUR and Eastern Europe was a separate office within the Office of Soviet Affairs. There were essentially two parts. There was a bilateral section. I think I had my choice of going into the bilateral or multi-lateral section and I decided I would go into the multi-lateral section. That essentially, not an extension of what I was doing in Moscow, but it was working with different geographic bureaus on Soviet foreign policy issues as they affected us. For a fair amount of the time, I had that part of the office that dealt with European affairs. The idea was to provide the Soviet element with whatever issue was coming up between us and a western or eastern European country. I had also the Far East ansoutheast Asia, less so Africa and Latin America, although they were there and important.

Q: Who was the head person as far as Soviet affairs were concerned?

POLANSKY: Bob Owen was Director of the Office of Soviet Affairs at first and Herb Okun was his deputy and for awhile Vlad Manoff was in charge of multi-lateral affairs and then Phil Valdez came in after Vlad. I'm sorry, Mac .... was in charge of the Office and Bob was in charge of bilateral affairs.

Q: Were you there in time for the Missile Crisis?

POLANSKY: Yes. It was handled above us however. It was not an issue with which we became fully involved at our level.

Q: What were your main concerns during this period from 1962 until 1966?

POLANSKY: There was concern about Germany and about Soviet/German relations and how that had an impact on us.

Q: Did we feel that West Germany was solidly in the western camp or did we feel that if the Soviets made the right moves they could nudge them towards a neutral position?

POLANSKY: There was some concern about that, but it was not overwhelming. The Russians couldn't offer Germany anything at that point that could induce it towards any kind of neutrality.

Q: Did we feel that there was much for the Soviets, either through their surrogate Communist parties in Western Europe or as a military force to mess around in Western Europe?

POLANSKY: Nothing really pops out.

Q: Khrushchev left the scene in about 1966.

POLANSKY: Yes, but I remember more about when Malenkov anKosygin left the scene. I remember more about the business of Khrushchev secret speech about Stalin, which we didn't know about until later. It was the 20th Congress speech.

Q: How about the speech that the CIA eventually published all over the world. I remember, I was in Saudi Arabia, and I was happily spreading copies around to very disinterested Saudis. It was the first time that Stalin and his regime were attacked in this so-called secret speech. Do you remember hothat played when it first came out.

POLANSKY: There was some skepticism about whether it was for real or not and how it was smuggled. It became clear, fairly soon, it seemed to hang together and made a lot of sense and tended to confirm what people in Western Europe and the United States had known about the early parts of the Stalinist regime. I think after the initial skepticism, there wasn't much doubt about the authenticity of the speech.

Q:Was there any difference between how your office, the State Department was looking at the Soviet Union?

POLANSKY: I don't think there was much of a feeling that somehow they had a better insight into the Russians and what they were up to than we did. I don't think the analyses of what the Soviets were doing in different parts of the world were terribly different. In some ways, they had individual sources that were helpful, but I think they were more inclined to generalize about a particuladevelopment from an individual source, than we would have been. I don't recall any major disagreement about analyses.

Q: Were you getting any feel about the China-Soviet relationship?Were we still talking about China and the Soviet Union being together?

POLANSKY: Yes. I don't think when I was there that there was much of a feeling that there was much of a wedge that you could drive between the two of them.

Q: You moved from Soviet affairs in 1966 and went to West Berlin where you served from 1966-1968. What were you doing there?

POLANSKY: I was in the section that nominally dealt with what was going on in East Germany and I acted as the liaison officer with the Soviet Embassy in East Berlin on political matters relating to the four power occupation of Berlin and if there were problems related to the US Military Mission in East Berlin. We would talk with the East Germans and Soviets about it and that was one of my responsibilities. It was basically two things. One was looking at the East Berlin/East German media to try and get some idea of political, economic, and foreign policy developments of the East German regime and then dealing with the Soviet Embassy on a variety of bilateral issues.

Q: How did you find dealing with the Soviets on these bilateral issues. They were mostly military problems right?

POLANSKY: Some were military problems not all. There was also the question of unimpeded US civilian access to East Berlin. We went through a process of trying to work out a pass system that civilian members of the US Mission in West Berlin could use to enter without being checked by East Germans. They were, but we worked out with the Russians a system of a flag card, which had identification on it, which the East Germans were not permitted touch, but was held up as one went through the checkpoint. That was a form of identification, but we maintained the fiction that the East Germans were not controlling us. With a certain amount of cooperation from the Russians, that kind of system went into effect, presumably making it easier for Americans to enter East Berlin without being checked by the East German guards.

Q: Did you have problems with American military units getting into trouble?

POLANSKY: Yes, periodically, but they never evolved into major problems. There was a standard protest from the Russians on behalf of the East Germans and vice versa. It never became a major sticking point in the relationship.

Q: Someone was interviewing Pete Day, who said he discovered, through bitter experience that usually the Soviets, when they complained, had a reason for complaining. He couldn't really trust the American military with giving him the straight story because usually some guys in a jeep were screwing up somewhere and they were trying to cover up.

POLANSKY: I think there may have been some of that and certainly with the Military Liaison Mission field trips. They were out looking for whatever they could find in terms of Soviet and East German forces and equipment. There were certainly cases in which they strayed over the line. My own recollection was that was more the case with the Military Liaison Mission people, who were better trained, and were competent in Russian or German, than it was the case of stray US Military units in East Berlin itself, either as a result of being on tours or patrol in East Berlin. There were regular patrols in East Berlin, but there aren't too many cases where they were at fault.

Q:Did you have any contact with East Germans at all?

POLANSKY: We tried to and did have some contact with a very select number of people. It didn't amount to an awful lot.

Q: Did you have much work with the East German authorities?

POLANSKY: No. We had, at least speaking about myself, we had contact with the media world in West Berlin. Brandon Grove and others had the responsibility of liaison with the West Berlin government in terms of the US Military Mission. I had no official responsibilities with the West German or West Berlin governments. The relations we had with West Berliners were really social.

Q: Were there any major problems in this two year period?

POLANSKY: No. The main issue was getting the flag system for access to East Berlin down pat. There were not any major issues. We left West Berlin for our next assignment in Moscow right on the eve of the invasion of Czechoslovakia. In fact, we were in East Berlin having dinner with the Finnish commercial representative in East Berlin when it happened. Had we stuck to our original travel plans, we would have been traveling through Czechoslovakia to Moscow by car, but for our own personal reasons, we revised the plans to go up to northern Germany and take a ferry to Helsinki and then down to Moscow. You couldn't tell the night we were in East Berlin. It was quiet and then we came back and heard about it.

Q: Did that have any effect on what we did there?

POLANSKY: We left literally about that time. We were listening to West German newspaper correspondents who were broadcasting from Prague about what was happening and then subsequently met one of them on vacation in Greece. We left right after that happened and got to Moscow under the atmosphere of the invasion of Czechoslovakia.Q: You served in the Soviet Union again from 1968 until 1971. What were you doing there?

POLANSKY: Then I was in charge of the foreign policy or external relations branch of the Political Section.

Q: You must have walked in when all hell was breaking loose with this Czech thing; every country had something to say about it. How was this playing back in the Soviet Union?

POLANSKY: It was a tense and cold period in terms of our relations with the Soviet Union. There was a certain amount of official contact in terms of making representations. There was not any great sense of personal concern. There was concern for what the invasion meant for the lack of development of relations. I don't think anybody was concerned for one's physical being or somehow this meant a heightened possibility of a Soviet move west.

Q: As the officer in charge of Soviet external relations-observing them-what did you do? What were you interests and how did you go about getting information?

POLANSKY: It was essentially the same process of trying to use the Soviet media and press to get some idea of how they were looking at issues plus a lot more contact with Western European embassies, particularly the German, British, and French embassies to try and share ideas and experiences and exchange information. It wasn't until a year after that, that we developed some contact among Soviets themselves that added an additional element to reading the media and listening to the radio and watching television. It was not quite the same thing as an INR analysis of the Soviet media, but there was a lot of that still.

Q: What was the evaluation of Brezhnev at that time?

POLANSKY: We thought he was very much in control and a tough character.

Q: I was wondering if there was the feeling that while Brezhnev was a "tough cookie", Khrushchev was a "loose cannon" and maybe we are better off with a little stability.

POLANSKY: I don't think that was quite the case. We were under the very strong impact of the invasion and what it meant. We didn't think it wagoing to result in any offensive against Western Europe, but we didn't look on Brezhnev as a stable person in the sense of being able to know that things were under control and that was better than under the Kruschev era.

Q: This is a little before we opened up to China. How was this observed from your point of view?

POLANSKY: I arrived in Moscow right after the invasion of Czechoslovakia and left the day that Nixon was going to China and must admit, had essentially, no idea that that was going to happen. I did recall at the time, and do recall now, really heard first from a source in the Romanian Embassy that there was a certain amount of travel going on by Kissinger in that part of the world. People at my level queried the Department on it and basically got nothing back.

Q: What were the differences between living in the Moscow in the Fifties and then again in the late Sixties?

POLANSKY: It was different in the sense that we had somewhat better accommodations that we were able to get, not easily, from the Russians. It was all in diplomatic compounds. For us the improvement toward the middle and end of our stay was the opportunity to meet some Russians in what were obviously very controlled, approved situations. It was better than when I was there from 1952 until 1955. That part was an improvement. In terms of traveling, the situation was a little bit better, but again, it was always hard to get away from the office, but there was a fairly travel active program to get and visit different parts of the Soviet Union. The food supply was a little bit better. There were more things to do culturally. It was probably more enjoyable and varied than the first time.

Q: Did you feel the heavy hand of the KGB as far as provocations?

POLANSKY: I don't think so. Again, having had gone through one tour, it was maybe easier to go through it the second time. I really didn't feel it was worse or more intrusive in any sense?

Q: Jake Beam was your Ambassador. You were closer to him. How did he operate?

POLANSKY: He operated pretty much through his DCM, who was Boris Klaussen. I went with Ambassador Beam frequently to the Foreign Ministry when he had protests or other representations to make to the Foreign Ministry and Gromyko. There wasn't an awful lot of preparation between the two of us as to what he was going to do. I went along as note-taker and helped with the translations. He did what he wanted to do. He was a shy, retiring type. It was uncomfortable for him to be on an informal basis with other people. That burden was taken on by Boris Klaussen, who was the main point of contact. He was a different kind of personality. He was easy to work with. Everyone respected Beam, liked his wife very much. She was a very outgoing, no nonsense kind of person.

Q: What was the feeling about Kissinger, the National Security Council, and the Soviets? Did you have a feel that they were playing a different game than what you were?

POLANSKY: I don't think a different game. I mentioned the business about the Romanian contact and Kissinger's travels to China. I don't recall that there was any great feeling that somehow things were being done in the NSC that were a level apart from or in conflict with what we were doing.

Q: You left in 1971 and you went to the Cultural Exchange program for a year.

POLANSKY: Yes.

Q: What were you concerned with there?

POLANSKY: The Office of Cultural Presentations, as it was called then, was essentially a world wide program without an awful lot that related to the Soviet Union. My interest at that point was to see if we could increase the amount of cultural presentations in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. I looked on it as an interesting challenge, at the same time, didn't particularly care for the assignment; I thought it was out of the mainstream. I took on the business of trying to increase the amount of money that could be used for things that related to the Soviet Union. I had to work with ....I also worked with a couple of theater companies out in San Francisco about programs in Moscow. I had the chance to go out the War College.

Q: Which War College did you go to?

POLANSKY: The International War College?

Q: Did you find yourself, as "Mr. Expert", telling everybody about the Soviet Union? Were you a source?

POLANSKY: I was a source for first hand experience and observations. People did tend to think that I knew more about the Soviet Union than they did. As we moved around from group to group, covering different subjects and geographical areas, it melded into what was going on. I was looked at best as a source, and one of the students.

Q: Then you got back into Soviet Affairs from 1973 until 1976.

POLANSKY: It wasn't necessarily what I wanted to do. At that point I didn't' really want to go back into the Exchanges program, which is what actually did happen. It was the first time I really tried to get out of thing out of things in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, without success. I thought it would be worthwhile to have an assignment in Latin America, but never having an assignment there, and not having Spanish, there was no place for me. By default, the only thing that was open was on the Exchanges staff, and that is where I was assigned.

Q: Was this under Soviet Affairs?

POLANSKY: It was a separate office and covered both Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. As a result of one the reorganizations in the Department-trying to cut out positions-the office itself was divided up, with part of it going to SOV as a separate unit, and part of it going to EUR as a separate unit. I wound up being in charge of that part of SOV that dealt with exchanges with the Soviet Union and worked with people on IREX issues. That part of the office worked on a whole range of bilateral exchange agreements that various agencies had with the Soviet Union. I had to work with agencies in terms of implementation.

Q: One has the impression that we were really trying to get a reasonable exchange of people; the idea that the more we could reach into influential in another society, the more they will be favorably inclined towards us. At the same time, one gets the impression that the Soviets looked upon this as a way of getting agents into the United States....

POLANSKY: ....or gain technical information. There is a constant battle between us and the Soviets in terms of how the overall exchange agreement was written; we tried to insist on reciprocity. There was also a battle within the U.S. government and within the academic community-how this is carried out. Many of the agencies, from our perspective, perfectly willing to agree to things with the Russians that didn't provide for reciprocity or didn't give us the opportunity to try to get access to certain institutions in the Soviet Union and to bring over Russians without a comparable number of Americans going in the other direction. In a sense our allies turned out to be the FBI and the CIA against other parts of the Executive Branch and also with respect to the academic programs that were going on. It was not an either or situation, but a fluid one.

Q: What was your impression of the value of this exchange program at the time?

POLANSKY: I thought by and large if we could get a fair degree of reciprocity, it was worthwhile engaging in. I still think that was the case. I always had the feeling that when the Russians came over this way, they were better prepared for what they wanted to find or learn than we were in going to the Soviet Union. I think in a lot of cases, the people who were involved on our side simply were much more opened with what they wanted to do and less concerned about the reciprocity angle. From my perspective, that was always a problem.

Q: You ended up as being the heavy bureaucrat.

POLANSKY: I'm sure that was the case, not only within the Executive Branch, but also with respect to different parts of the academic community.

Q: The feeling was I assume, that if you hadn't, it would have ended up being completely a one-sided thing.

POLANSKY: Yes, that was our feeling. Maybe that's true. But when you see what's happened to the Soviet Union, you sort of wonder, would it have made any difference if we hadn't insisted on reciprocity. It's hard to know.

Q: You were there until 1976. You seem like you were repeating yourself-right back to East Berlin from 1976 until 1979.

POLANSKY: At that time I was really interested in going back to see what was happening in that part of Germany. I think we were the last to recognize the East Germans. I really wanted to go back and see what was happening. I thought Germany was important and the East German relationship was important and so went back willingly.

Q: What was the situation there then?

POLANSKY: I think from the East German government standpoint, they were delighted to see us there as a symbol of their stability and permanence and international recognition. Before we arrived, Brandon Grove and Ambassador Cooper had worked out an arrangemenfor a rather impressive Chancery Building. The repair and renovation had been completed by the time I arrived. Brandon stayed about eighteen months and then I came. We had the business of finishing up the renovation and getting the Chancery building open. The East Germans were cooperative to a certain extent in making sure the building functioned. At the same time, they made sure that not too many East Germans came in easily without being identified. They were fairly cooperative in providing us with a limited number of local staff. The relationships with the Foreign Ministry were professional. The East German who was in charge of East German/US relations, Hans Martin Geyer, was an old time, long time, Communist who took a certain amount of glee in the fact that the Americans were there. It was an interesting time.

Q: What was your position there?

POLANSKY: I was DCM.

Q: Who was the Ambassador?

POLANSKY: The Ambassador first was John Sherman Cooper, the former Senator from Kentucky. He was a wonderful person. He was succeeded by David Bolen, a career Foreign Service Officer. He had one tour in West Germany, in Bonn, as an economic/commercial officer. He had some German experience, but no Eastern European or Soviet experience. We set about establishing a reporting, work, and consular schedule, and had a USIA operation that we thought was very important. The East Germans gave us a lot of trouble over access to the library. That was a continuing problem the whole time we were there.

Q: Was the country open to you?

POLANSKY: Yes, we could travel just about anywhere we wanted to and we tried to. There were no real travel restrictions that we observed and the country was small enough that you could really get around.Q: What was in it for the United States? We finally recognized it after many years of subscribing to the Holstein Document.

POLANSKY: What was in it for us was essentially, that since just about everybody else recognized it, there was no point in not recognizing it. We maintained a fiction that East Berlin was not the capital of the GDR but was still part of occupied Berlin, so we wanted to maintain that fiction. We wanted to make sure that we understood what was going on in East Germany.

Q: What about relations with the East German government? Were you calling on people in the government and how did you find them?

POLANSKY: In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture, they were proper and correct. They didn't go out of their way to look on us as an opportunity for great increase in contacts. They wanted it, but they realized it was not going to be an easy relationship. The people on the economic side were looking for ways to increase contact with western firms for commerce. We always had an exhibit at the Leipzig Fair which they wanted us to increase. It was important from there standpoint for us to be there, but they didn't give us any incentives for trying to have a favored position.

Q: What was your impression of the political and economic strengths and weaknesses of East Germany in this period from 1976 until 1979.

POLANSKY: At the time we felt that while there was some outward presentation of stability and confidence that they had somehow created a new East German citizenship, in the sense of separateness, that was really on the surface. Apart from people in the Ministries, we really didn't get a sense that there was a separate East German citizenship or East German nation that went very deep in peoples' thinking. Economically, it certainly looked stronger than any of the other East European economies. We subscribed to the idea that as Germans, they were more efficient and productive than their East European neighbors. There was a sense that they looked down on the Russians and some of their East European allies. The stores, particularly towards the end of our stay there, were better supplied, in terms of foodstuffs and consumer goods, than elsewhere in Eastern Europe, certainly better than the Soviet Union. While there was not this great deep seeded sense of East German "nationhood", it did look more stable at that time than perhaps it was.

Q: Hindsight is always "20 20", but in 1989, with the collapse of East Germany, West Germany found itself with what is often termed "an economic basket case". The highly flaunted industry was outmoded. The workers weren't very good. Yet you have Czechoslovakia and even Poland with what appears to be more vitality. Were we missing something?

POLANSKY: First of all, I'm not sure that the Polish and Czech economies at the present time really are more efficient than what is left of the East German economy. We had the feeling at the time that the East German economy was more productive and effective and West Germans certainly were prepared to put a lot of money into East Germany, in various ways, as part of an effort to maintain the relationships so that the two societies and countries didn't drift apart. That certainly helped the East German economy. Obviously I think we and the West Europeans missed and were taken in by what was really going economically in East Germany. It may very well have declined in the middle and late 1980's. My recollection that in those cases where Western businessmen and American Embassy people were able to visit factories and talk with people, they came away with a fairly favorable impression of what was developing economically.

Q: Was there the feeling that the Carter administration was taking a new approach towards countries like East Germany?

POLANSKY: No, I don't think so substantively in terms of reaching out to East Germany. I think it was very subjective and more of our own personal assessment. David Bohlen was a black officer, one of the few blacks to achieve the rank of Ambassador at that time. He was sent to East Berlin as our Ambassador. On our part we thought that this was one way the Carter Administration was trying to demonstrate an attitude towards civil and human rights by making a deliberative effort to send a black Ambassador to East Berlin. There was the feeling, particularly after someone like Ambassador Cooper, what kind of message were the Americans trying to send us by sending a black Ambassador to us? The substance of our relationship had a Four Power aspect to it in terms of what we were doing in East Berlin and what we were doing in terms of East Germany. I don't recall that there was a conscious effort somehow to put our relations with East Germany on a par with our relations with West Germany or on a par with our relations with the other countries in Eastern Europe. There was a feeling that if the East Germans want to have a better relationship with us, that they had damn well prove that thewant it, we were not going to give anything away for nothing.

Q: You left there in 1979 and served for four years in Vienna?

POLANSKY: I was in Vienna from 1979 until 1983. I was DCM and then when Phil Kaiser I became Charge for sixteen or eighteen months until Helen van Damm came. In effect I was running the Embassy for that time.

Q: What were American interest in this period?

POLANSKY: They were to make sure Austria knew our interest in keeping Austria neutral as they had proclaimed themselves and at the same time, make sure it was really pro-Western in its attitudes and policies.One of the first thing I remember was the Iran hostage situation and the impact it had on us personally in trying to get the Austrians to understand what the situation was. We were also concerned about whether the Austrians would buy Russian, Eastern European, or Western European fighter planes. We spent a certain amount trying to convince the Austrians to buy US fighter planes. It was not clear by the time I left what they were going to buy. There was also a time when martial law was declared in Poland and there was some concern as to what kind of refugee flow that would create in Austria, what they would do with the Polish refugees that were there, and the efforts of some of them to come to the United States and under what circumstances. In general it was trying to make certain that Austria was a neutral state and pro-Western in its foreign policy and open to American investment in a way that we could do business.

Q: Looking at it as an American diplomat, how did you view Austria? Where did they stand? What were their interests?

POLANSKY: A lot of the first part of it really relates to Bruno Kreisky as Chancellor and that the role that he played and the role that he saw himself playing, particularly in the Middle East and certainly there was no desire on the part of the Administration to cede him a role as arbitrator or guide for what our policy should be in the Middle East.

Q: You are talking about the American administration.What was Kreisky's interest and what was he trying to do?

POLANSKY: He was trying to play the hand of Arafat and the PLO and trying to get us to accept his perception of the role of the PLO as force in the Middle East; as an organization that we ought to deal with in trying to solve the Middle Eastern crisis. I think he felt that he understood the Middle East and that we did not. He had delegated to himself the role of spokesman and thought that we should essentially understand his perspective on the Middle East as a way of bringing peace to the area.

Q: Here you have the Prime Minister of a neutral state, Austria, who is advocating recognizing the Palestine Liberation Organization, which is not only an anathema to powers that be in Israel but also to the Jewish community and its lobby in the United States. You are the American representative having to deal with this. You must have been under an awful lot of pressure to tell him to "knock it off."

POLANSKY: I didn't feel any great pressure. I didn't have any sympathy for his point of view. I think it became fairly clear to Kreisky that the United States was not going to accept his viewpoint. It was done in a candid but polite way. He was realistic enough to know that whatever my personal views were, I was carrying out orders that didn't affect our relationship, which was a good and open one. He was a hard headed politician from his perspective. He didn't particularly like it, but he understood when he was being told no. It didn't have any great impact on his feeling toward me.

Q: Did you have any assurances that Austria really was neutral, or was it a paper neutrality and Austria was leaning East or West?

POLANSKY: The concern was, at least with respect to Kreisky, was even though he proclaimed neutrality and he was clear in what he said about the Middle East, he was, in someway, more inclined to be sympathetic to and responsive to Soviet positions more than he was with respect to American and NATO positions. He realized that whether we liked it or not, we were prepared to take fairly strong stands on issues with respect to Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. He could say what he wanted to, but it really wouldn't have an impact on what we did.

Q: Was he coming from the Socialist side of the political spectrum?

POLANSKY: Absolutely. He was head of the Socialist Party and he was President, Vice-President, or Chairman of the Socialist International in his international role. There was no question of his political orientation.

Q: How did the impact of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan hit him? That was in December of 1979.

POLANSKY: He was opposed to it and said so. I think he was forceful in his condemnation of the Soviets at that time. He was not an apologist.

Q: Did you find the change over to the Reagan Administration causing a certain amount of anxiety? Here was Reagan, an arch-conservative and here you have a left-wing Socialist government. Was that a problem?

POLANSKY: It was a problem in the sense that Kreisky and others were condescending toward Reagan. How could a movie star become President. An attitude that was limited not only to Kreisky and the Austrians. At the same time, it was quite clear, because of what Kreisky wanted to do in terms of his foreign policy interests, that he wanted to meet with Reagan. It didn't come off until 1983 when he came to Washington on an unofficial visit and was received by Reagan at the White House. It was a short meeting; really just a courtesy, but it took him that long to get into the White House. One of the things that Reagan told him at that time was that Helene van Damm, who had been his personal secretary and then Head of Personnel at the White House, was going to become the new Ambassador to Austria. Whatever Kreisky thought personally, he welcomed since she came out of Reagan's inner circle.

Q: You left Vienna in 1983 and went to START?

Q: Did you know at the time that we were going to put these short or medium ranged missiles in Germany?

POLANSKY: There is no question about that. There was some hope that the Russians would still have an interest in talking about strategic issues rather than walking out. That turned out not to be the case. We spent the next couple of years doing various studies about different issues; visiting submarine sights in the United States and visiting nuclear missile sights in the United States as part of the effort to keep on top of issues.

Q: How did you view the various sides on the American team?

POLANSKY: There was a lot of feeling that you couldn't trust the Russians. You really had to turn over every stone each time they suggested there was some movement on their position. Virtually all of the different agencies that were represented on the team, were all extremely careful and conservative in their view. The way to negotiate with the Russians was not to give them any benefit of doubt at all and to take the most extreme positions on the capabilities of the various Soviet nuclear weapons systems, whether they were airplanes or missiles. For all practical purposes, it turned out to be the right thing to do. It was clear that the Russians were not going to engage in any significant compromise in their position. It became a holding operation. No one really trusted the Russians.

Q: You must have come up against our strategic planners in the nuclear field. What was your impression from dealing with these people?

POLANSKY: I thought they were sincere. I thought they exaggerated the capabilities of the Soviets. Not that the Soviets didn't have very formidable weapons and were trying to conceal the development of new weapons. I don't think there is any question about that at all. It seems that both sides had more than enough weapons to do everything possible in the way of destruction. To add more new weapons, for what might become marginal targets, or to have so many weapons that everything could be blown up, was a nightmare, but it was very much the attitude. I don't think there was any possibility of changing it at the time.

Q: Did you have the feeling that you were in a foreign culture when you got into this, having come from the world of diplomacy?

POLANSKY: Not totally foreign. Certainly the details and the technicalities were an entirely different culture, but the political culture was not entirely different. The military and some of the intelligence people represented an honest, but conservative aspect of what was our overall foreign policy. I saw it in various ways at embassies in Eastern Europe, so it was not totally alien. They just perceived the threat in a different way. I dealt with until 1985 when there were signs that the Russians were prepared to resume negotiations. There was a change in the leadership of the START delegation when Rowney moved over and John Tower took over and he wanted to have his own deputy, and that turned out to be Ron Lehman. I was without a job and did a couple of short term assignments for Ron Spiers. One of things I did was to head up a team of retired FSO's who looked at the potential damage to all of our cables from the compromise of typewriters at the Embassy in Moscow. It was the Soviet ability to take Embassy typewriters that were in unsecured, unclassified areas and modified them through a retooling of standard typewriters. They would put electronic transmission devices in the typewriter that enabled them to pick up the transmission from the typewriters down through the power lines and the question were, how long had that been going on, how many typewriters were involved, what parts of the embassy were they in, at what period of time, what kind of messages were typed on them. It became a jigsaw puzzle. We spent a number of months working on it. There were several generations of typewriters involved. One of the conclusions we came to, was that the batteries that were installed in the typewriters to permit the transmission of the information, had, in most cases, died during the time. We tried to figure out the shelf life of those batteries. We tried to go through all the out going cables which the Embassy had sent; we divided them up into arms control and political and economic reporting, and consular reporting and eliminate those that didn't have much relevance, and then went through the rest and tried to make some assessment of the degree of damage. Whether it was right or wrong, the assessment that we came to was that, to the extent we could tell that typewriters had been in different parts of the Embassy, that the damage probably wasn't too great because the batteries had expired. Whether that really is the case, I don't know.

Q: How did the call to Bulgaria come about?

POLANSKY: It came about after a couple of short term assignments with CSCE conferences, one in Bern and one in Budapest. This is the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Those were interesting in terms of talking about human rights and related issues. When those were over, I was asked if I wanted to be considered for the post in Sofia and I agreed.

Q: There wasn't a competition from the political side?

POLANSKY: If there was, it certainly wasn't noticeable! Prague went to Jay Niermczyk, who had been a political appointee, but has been a former Air Attache in Prague.

Q: You went to Bulgaria in 1987. As you went, what were American interests and what were you going to try to do in Bulgaria?

POLANSKY: What was quite clear, was that we had very little in the way of significant interest in Bulgaria. Our interests were more in Turkey and the southern flank of NATO and guarding that. We were not expecting much from Bulgaria in terms of US national security interests or US economic or political interests. We certainly didn't expect the Bulgarians to side with us on any issues in the UN. It was a very solid ally of Moscow. It was looked on as a holding operation and we tried at least to increase the exchange programs and open up the possibilities for young Bulgarians to learn about the United States.

Q: How about drug interdiction?

POLANSKY: That was certainly an interest; that an arms sales. We spent a lot of time talking to the Bulgarians about drug shipments through Bulgaria from Turkey to Central Europe. It was mainly truck traffic. They flatly denied it and said that they had adequate means to inspect. After awhile we did work out some arrangements for some customs visits from the US, but they were non-productive. The Bulgarians didn't cooperate very much. That became a source of irritation in our relationship. The Bulgarians did not seem to be playing fair.

Q: Was it just nationalism and they didn't want anyone to interfere or did you feel they had a hand in getting payments?

POLANSKY: There was the feeling that some people were getting paid off. While the Bulgarians put on a face of wanting to be cooperative and understanding, there was nothing in practice that let us believe that they were really trying to stop the traffic.

Q: I get the feeling that not an awful lot of attention was being paid to Bulgaria back in Washington.

POLANSKY: I think it was negative attention. It was on things like arms and drug sales. A lot of attention, in a relative sense, was paid when Bulgaria started to harass Turks and send them back to Turkey.

Q: What about arms sales? Who were they selling to?

POLANSKY: It was never really clear, except to Third World countries. I think it was the drug trafficking more than the arms sales, that caused problems.

Q: How did you read the fact that the Bulgarians were all of a sudden forcing the Turks to leave their territory?

POLANSKY: I think it developed in a way they really didn't anticipate. It all came out of the CSCE process and that process led to a series of agreements and understandings that all of the countries signed up to, but in fact, provided for more travel and easier access to exit visas and passports. In effect, the Bulgarians were challenged on it by the Turks and any Bulgarian of Turkish descent, who wanted to leave, could get a passport immediately and go. Some Bulgarian Turks thought this might not last long and grabbed on to it. Some did and there were some assertions that the Turks were provoking the whole thing and there was an action\reaction, with the Turks challenging the Bulgarian authorities to let the Turks go and the Bulgarians were saying that they were letting anyone who wanted to, go. Then the Bulgarian Turks went to try and get passports and visas, sold all the houses and their possessions and took off as quickly as they could. From the US government perspective it was a case of the Bulgarians not permitting the Turks to leave in a decent way, they were being harassed and having to sell their property at low cost. The thing just escalated. Over three hundred thousand Bulgarian Turks left in a period of several weeks.

Q: What were you doing as the US Ambassador?

POLANSKY: First of all we were sending Embassy officers around the country to see how Bulgarian Turks were being treated, whether they felt they really could go and if so, under what circumstances. How difficult it was to get a passport and then try and convince the Bulgarian authorities that if they were going to let people go, they do it in a way that was decent and humane. We went down to the border any number of times to see how people were being treated and it was really rather, not brutal, but not conducive to human behavior. They were sitting out in trucks without any means of water or sanitation; they were held for hours at a time and then forced to unpack all of their possessions very carefully in front of Bulgarian customs officials and then forced to put it all together and then creep through the no man's land between Bulgarian and Turkish customs officials. Then on the Turkish side they had to do the same thing over again. It was a very unpleasant set of circumstances in the middle of summer.

Q: We just didn't have any particular clout there?

POLANSKY: We had a little bit of clout in the sense that the Bulgarians had agreed to CSCE conditions and terms. We certainly had no clout in trying to make it a more reasonable exit for the Bulgarian Turks who wanted to go.

Q: You were at a momentous time when things in Eastern Europe fell apart.

POLANSKY: We saw what was happening in Czechoslovakia and East Berlion CNN and then saw the Bulgarians themselves take part in the whole process. That became the most rewarding part of the assignment. The most rewarding assignment in the Foreign Service. Not only to watch, but to use whatever appropriate means we had, to bring about change.

Q: We are talking about the events of 1989. How were the Bulgarians getting their information? How were they reacting initially?

POLANSKY: Some of them were getting their information from Western news sources, where there was RFE or CNN in a smaller way. A fair amount of Western news information was getting through. For the Bulgarians, they saw the Berlin Wall being pierced, they saw it on their own television, so they knew what was happening there. In fact, the piercing of the Wall and the ouster of Honeker happened almost at the same time. Todor Zhirkov was the Bulgarian dictator or Communist Party leader. For the Bulgarians, who saw what was happening elsewhere in Eastern Europe, they used an environmental movement in effect to become the political opposition. They used again a CSCE conference on environmental issues that was taking place in Sofia as a way of getting their message out to the West and drawing some support and inspiration from it. What happened in October was, when the CSCE conference was taking place, some environmentalists wanted to use the occasion to make their protest known to this international conference. The Bulgarian police were not about to let it happen. There was a confrontation and some of the environmentalists were roughed up. The caused some of the Western governments to let the Bulgarians know that they were not going to tolerate this kind of behavior in the conference. It caused a certain amount of turmoil within the Bulgarian Communist Party and that really became a pretext for the more moderate wing of the Bulgarian Communist Party to overthrow Zhirkov as simply being to rigid. They knew from what was happening elsewhere iEastern Europe that Zhirkowas not going to get any support from Gorbachev. In fact, Gorbachev, made it plain that he wouldn't. Consequently, we had been suggesting to the Department, it might be appropriate for Secretary Baker to come to Bulgaria at some point, if he was traveling elsewhere in Eastern Europe, because it did seem that at least there was some movement in the Bulgarian Communist Party toward a more moderate view and it was something we ought to encourage and try and take advantage of. In February of 1990, he did come to Sofia from Moscow, for a very quick trip.He basically told the new Bulgarian Communist leaders, who were really the group around Zhirkov, now without Zhirkov, that if they wanted a better relationship with the US, and they had talked about free and fair elections, that would be the measure of what we would judge Bulgaria by. If they really had free and fair elections, we would respect the outcome and see where we could try and improve and expand the relationship. That became the framework within which we operated for the next four or five months until the Bulgarians really did have elections.We wanted to make sure that the opposition really did have a chance to express its views, had access to the media. I had many discussions with the Bulgarian Prime Minister and others about the availability, for the opposition of newsprint. I got all kinds of excuses from them why newsprint couldn't be available in the quantities the opposition wanted. We traveled all over the country talking about the importance of free elections. The USIA and other organizations helped support the development of a public Bulgarian organization to observe the elections and make sure the elections were being held in a free and fair manner. The National Democratic Institute and the National Republican Institute came in with equipment and gave training on how opposition parties could organize themselves and conduct campaigns. All of this was going on with the Communist Party tolerating it?

Q: Had they just lost heart?

POLANSKY: They saw what was happening elsewhere. The Bulgarian Communist Party had been around for a long, long time. I think they felt they might stand a chance to come out better than some of the communist parties did elsewhere in Eastern Europe. They were really the only organized political force in the country with any experience. They ran, in many ways, a more coherent campaign, than the opposition did. The elections were held, there may have been some slight manipulation. We did have, in addition to the unofficial Bulgarian organization that was observing the election, international teams that came to observe the elections, including one from the United States. By and large the feeling was, the elections were free and open.

Q: How did it come out?

POLANSKY: The results were that the opposition had something like forty three percent and the Communists had something like thirty seven percent. You had a new Parliament that had opposition as well as Communists in it. The opposition was able to name a non-Communist person to be President. The Socialists went along with it. You wound up with the first non Communist government in Bulgaria in over forty-five years in August of 1990, with a non Communist President. It was a very gratifying four or five months when we were able to conduct that kind of activity.

Q: What about police control? Were you able to see opposition leaders as this went on?

POLANSKY: At the beginning, in November of 1989, there was one small opposition group, it stood for Glasnost and Perestroika, we had virtually no contact with them. We gave all sorts of signals that we would like to have contact with them, but for their own reasons, they simply felt it wasn't appropriate. It wasn't until about December of 1989 that we were able to work out a very informal, but useful meeting with Zhelev, who was the leader of this club, who subsequently became the leader of this opposition and later the President. That part of it was a hard go. They simply weren't ready at the time. After Secretary Baker came in February of 1990, then it became easier and then you could see people and have access to all sorts of people; they made themselves available. We went all over the country talking to members of the opposition; talking to members of the Socialist party, members of the Agrarian Party, basically just taking the message we had about free and fair elections if they wanted a better relations with the United States. I think we were unique in that, I don't think any other Western Embassy went through that process the way we did. It's not sort of the thing we were trained to do, it developed out of the circumstances.

Q: You left when and by that time had they created a new government?

POLANSKY: I left in August of 1990. They had created a new government. Zhelev was sworn in as President on August 1st. I saw him on the fifteenth, just before I left.

Q: It is now 1993 and Yugoslavia is in a terrible mess. Did Bulgaria have aspirations toward Macedonia, or any parts of Greece or Turkey?

POLANSKY: The answer is no. The democratic opposition that came in really had no territorial ambitions. They wanted to improve their relations with Turkey to the extent that they could.They did virtually everything that the United States asked Bulgaria to do in connection with the Gulf War. ThBulgarians lost oil resources as a result of that. Iraq was one of their main suppliers. They lost a tremendous amount of money, but they went along with the embargo without delay. They let us know that they were going to take a terrible economic beating, but they understood the importance of it and in the first year after the new government came in, what they were trying to do was to demonstrate their readiness in being forthcoming in their support of Western foreign policy on a whole range of things.

Q: Did the concept of "Macegre" or Macedonia show its head at all?

POLANSKY: It has its roots back to the 1930s and even earlier. I don't think, except maybe for a few small minority parties during the election period, the idea of a greater Bulgaria, incorporating parts of Macedonia, ever entered into it. There was a Royalist party, there still is, in terms of return to the King. I think the whole question of Macedonia has obviously become more sensitive and significant in connection with what's happening in Yugoslavia. I think a sense of "Macedonianess" is being created in that part of Bulgaria, that is part of Macedonia. My own feeling is that it is artificial on the Bulgarian side. It can be stimulated but it is not being stimulated from the inside, it is being stimulated from the outside. But it exists and it is becoming something that is a little more worrisome to the Bulgarians. I think that is one of the reasons the Bulgarians were very quick to recognize Macedonia as a separate, independent state. I think they hoped that that would calm things down. I think Zhelev has stroked the other party a number of times in order to maintain a relationship wit them. I think there is some concern. If it keeps up in Yugoslavia, I think the concern will increase and so will the sense of Macedonian nationalism.

Q: You left Bulgaria in August 1990.

POLANSKY: Yes, I was assigned to ICAP as International Affairs Advisor. That was quite a change. I didn't care for the quiet aspect of it. The opportunity came along to be assigned to the Citizen's Democracy Corp, which sounded more interesting, since it was an effort to contribute to the change that was taking place in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. I was on loan for a year helping to develop the organization and programs. Then when I reached sixty-five, I decided to retire. I could have stayed on and gotten an exception from the State Department. I decided to retire and stay on with the Citizen's Democracy Corps in a paid position.

Q: Could you explain what the Citizens' Democracy Corps is?

POLANSKY: It grew out of a speech that President Bush gave in May, 1990. It was an effort to enlist the enthusiasm of the American public as they saw what was happening in Eastern Europe, in terms of the change, and try to develop a non-profit, independent, bipartisan organization that would seek to provide technical assistance to the democratic change and the effort to transform those economies into market economies through providing managerial skills-not money; not joint ventures, not loans. Instead, using the skills of American volunteers and American corporations to work on issues of economic reform on a very practical, micro way. Having people work in companies and organizations in order to suggest how change can take place. The best example was to get people from Union Pacific Railroad, who had absolutely no desire to buy the Polish railroad system or to contribute to it in any way or to sell it things, but to send people over to suggest ways in how the railroad system, which had hotels, farms, and every other kind auxiliary enterprise attached to it, in addition to railroads, could modernize and stream line itself. How it should go about applying for loans from the World Bank in terms of modernizing itself. Supplying that kind of technical assistance was one part of the program. Another part was a clearing house which essentially put together all of the non-profit organizations and all the individuals who expressed interest in helping, into a data bank, and we developed a series of compendiums that listed all the non-profit organizations and made those available to countries in Eastern Europe. Then, in terms of the volunteers, at that time we didn't have our own programs, what we said to organizations that called us for volunteers, was that these people have expressed interest in working in Eastern Europe and they have experience, some of them have language skills. We did not have any way of knowing whether they really had the skills they claimed they did, but if the organizations wanted to talk to them and recruit them, then it was fine. We did that for awhile and after that we decided that there were volunteer programs that we could develop in Eastern Europe and that's what we did. We wound up with a program involving American corporations funding executives. We did a business entrepreneurial program with volunteer American entrepreneurs working with small and medium sized firms in Eastern Europe to try and supply managerial assistance, not money. We put together programs of teams of American volunteers. One example was of people who went to Bulgaria to help the Bulgarians begin the process of starting of an extension service.

End of interview