

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

**PATRICK LACOMBE**

*Interviewed by: Don Kienzle  
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[Note: This interview was not edited by Mr. LaCombe.]

*Q: I am Don Kienzle. Today is Wednesday, June 21, 1995. I am interviewing Patrick LaCombe for the Labor Diplomacy Oral History Project. It's a great pleasure to have him here. We normally do not interview people until after they've retired, but in this case, since Patrick has recently served at the embassy in Poland as the labor attaché, we decided to make an exception. Thank you very much, Patrick.*

*Do you want to start by giving us some background on your family, your education, and early work experience?*

LACOMBE: I grew up in a small town in northern Michigan, in Michigan's upper peninsula, of about 300 people. The high school I graduated from was your typical small town environment. My graduating class was 13 and the high school was very small, one of the smallest in the state of Michigan. It has since closed its doors and consolidated with other schools in the area. But I mention that because I think it probably says something about my interest in Central Europe and the comfort level that I had in doing my work in Poland.

*Q: What was the name of the town?*

LACOMBE: It was Trenary, Michigan. It's sort of equidistant between the big lakes, between Lake Superior in the north and Lake Michigan in the south. No real industry there. It was just a small town which sent a lot of its workers in the town of Munising and, to a certain extent, in the iron ore mines in the Escvermaine-Figany-Marquette area, the so-called Negaunee Range.

*Q: Was it an ethnic town?*

LACOMBE: Yes, it was, although in different kinds of ways. Trenary is actually a Cornish name itself. The people who settled in the peninsula, among the first settlers there were Cornish miners who worked in the copper mines on the Keweenaw Peninsula. I don't know the exact story of Mr. Trenary, although my grandfather was one of his contemporaries. That is where he came from. Subsequent to that, it is my understanding

that there were Italians in the Negaunee-Munising area, but in Trenary, it was very much Finnish and, as my name might suggest, French or French-Canadian. Indeed, that is where I trace my roots back. But there was a heavy Finnish community. The more recent immigrants were from Finland. They worked in the woods, in the lumber industry.

*Q: Which was about timbered out by the turn of the century, wasn't it?*

LACOMBE: Yes, it was. The old saying goes that we built Chicago. The upper peninsula was clear cut to rebuild Chicago after the great fire.

*Q: What did you do after you graduated from high school?*

LACOMBE: I went to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, where I was in the Residential College, which is a small liberal arts concentration within the larger university, which kind of made the transition from small town a little easier, I think. I attribute my ability to stay, to put up with some of that transition, to the Residential College. I got a degree in humanities and also in Russian and East European studies. I got interested in the immigrant experience to the United States and began to get... Once you sort of walk yourself back... Why do people come? Why do they want to come? You start getting into issues of the politics and economic situations back in the old country. That sort of led me back to investigate those conditions. Politically, of course, labor movements, labor issues, factored prominently in those issues both in terms of the conditions that forced people to leave, the economic situation, but also the fact that the American labor movement got a decided boost from the intellectual impact from some of these immigrant communities, but also just manpower... This was, of course, part and parcel of the American experience at the end of the 19th and early 20th century. So, I got interested in basically Russian or Soviet history and politics.

Then when I was in graduate school that was subsequent to those first four years, I also majored in Russian/East European studies.

*Q: This was at the University of Michigan?*

LACOMBE: Yes. At that time, the Soviet Union was kind of suffering from rigor mortis, literally and figuratively.

*Q: This was in what year?*

LACOMBE: I graduated in 1981 and then immediately started the graduate program. So, around those years, 1980, 1981, the Soviet Union was a very stultified sort of place epitomized by Brezhnev, who they had to sort of prop up on the podium. Then subsequent to Brezhnev, there were successors who all shortly thereafter died. There really wasn't a lot going on. In some ways, there was under the surface, but for those of us trying to follow it from a distance, of course, it was kind of difficult. So, at that time, the real action and the real interest was in Poland and in Eastern Europe, in Hungary,

because of the so-called Solidarity Era in Poland. That drew a number of us in graduate school to focus more on Central Europe, which was always kind of off the beaten path. It didn't fit the kind of "know thy enemy" approach of a lot of graduate programs. The big enemy, of course, was the Soviet Union. So, even academics, who should otherwise know better, tended to view it as kind of an appendage of the Soviet Union, the Warsaw Pact, and what have you. So, I got interested in the issues of economic reform and political change in these countries. There wasn't much to speak of at that time, of course, but you were beginning to see the kind of movements... Certainly with Poland, the political change was very striking.

*Q: Did you complete your graduate degree there?*

LACOMBE: I did. I didn't get my master's degree actually. I was one of those "all but thesis" people. I went to Hungary first in the summer of 1982 and then the following summer studied in Poland and applied for an internship at the State Department.

Instead of going back to Ann Arbor and doing the thesis, I stayed in Washington and tried to hook on with the State Department. I did an internship in the Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. At that time, I was working kind of nationality issues working for Paul Coble. We were looking at Afghanistan from the Soviet perspective.

*Q: This would have been 1983?*

LACOMBE: 1983, yes. But my real interest was with Central Europe. When a job opened up there after the internship, it would have been 1985, there was about a year of waiting for my security clearances. Of course, the very things that made me an attractive candidate to do an analysis were the very things that made me somewhat suspect.

*Q: Your study in Poland, not your upper peninsula background.*

LACOMBE: Yes. It was really just the experience of having traveled and lived in Eastern Europe. That appropriately raised questions for security background reasons.

*Q: Did you choose a master's topic for your thesis?*

LACOMBE: Yes. I had written a good part of it. It was on the influence that economic reform in terms of policy would have in terms of opening up and leading to political change. They were submitted for review. As happens, I got overtaken by my work. I moved over to do, first of all, Romania and East Germany just to fill a gap in the office. Then in 1986, I took over full-time the Poland account just before things really started to move again in Poland and at a time when in the Department there was a debate going on about whether or not Solidarity was a growing concern or not. There was a real debate on that subject. The "if" question. If Solidarity was actually surviving or could survive as an organization. Then there was the question of how should we, the United States, respond. There was a certain argument being made that its day had passed.

*Q: That we should recognize reality.*

LACOMBE: We should recognize reality and get on with the business of dealing with the then current leadership, the Jaruzelski regime, not so much just to go about doing business as usual. I wouldn't go that far. I guess the view would be that working that relationship in order to not only peel maybe Poland away gradually from the Soviet Union, but to open up the political system in Poland as well. So, it wasn't completely cynical in the sense that we should just be doing business with the Jaruzelski regime, but seeing that as the best approach to doing it, to getting the job done in terms of political change. The other side of the coin was the view that Solidarity was not a [inaudible] and it remained a very potent grassroots organization. The fact that we couldn't see it was neither here nor there. As a clandestine organization, of course, at that time, or semi-clandestine underground organization, you wouldn't see signs, except in terms of publishing, occasional illegal broadcasts on Polish radio, an occasional demonstration, or doing the papal visits, when the margins were spread a bit where it was a noticeable political activity.

*Q: Which side of the debate were you on?*

LACOMBE: I was happy to say that I was on the side that said that Solidarity wasn't a [inaudible] force. Part of that was just a reflection of the fact that I had been there during martial law, supposedly the heyday of repression. It was pretty obvious that Solidarity was a living, breathing organization even under those sorts of strictures. Again, I was there in 1983 and martial law was lifted formally in the summer of 1983. Actually, it sort of went on under a different name afterwards. Certainly Solidarity was not a legal organization until 1989, but there were signs. It was quite obvious both in terms of open manifestations, seeing the Solidarity logo all over the place, but also in talking to people that there was still a popular confidence in the organization. Then everything I read, including the kinds of information that we would receive in the usual intelligence channels, indicated that, indeed, it was still a potent organization.

*Q: Let's backtrack a little bit. Do you want to describe the formation of Solidarity? It was pretty much a spontaneous...*

LACOMBE: Yes. As usual, there are competing views on that. In fact, I'll jump ahead even further by saying that during my tenure, it was an ongoing project of mine on the side of my responsibilities to pursue some of these historical topics. Exactly the question: was this a spontaneous workers movement or did it have some elements of a leadership or planned activity? The answer, as usual, was kind of a mixed picture. To the extent that it was a mass social movement, indeed, it has all the earmarks of a spontaneous movement. There was a high degree of popular dissatisfaction that was tied inexorably or interwoven with the Polish sense of nationhood and sovereignty. I don't think the two things are indistinguishable. That was certainly sort of a fundamental aspect of it. So, there was a kind of socio-economic driven dissatisfaction on the one hand, but also some lingering

sense of illegitimacy on the part of those who would rule the name of the working class.

*Q: You're talking in terms of time -- late 1970s?*

LACOMBE: We're talking even as early as the early 1970s in places like the shipyards in particular where the real antecedent conditions were being created. So, even in the early 1970s... I should even back up and say there were some people I spoke to in Poznan who traced it back to 1956 and a kind of mason worker movement then. I think that is probably stretching it a bit. The longer you go back, the more tenuous those relationships are. But certainly, it's much easier to tie it to the 1970s. But it was in that sense kind of spontaneous. The shine was beginning to come off the Gierek debt-fed prosperity of the 1970s. In order to keep the economic house in order, the regime imposed a certain kind of austerity and that austerity hit workers hardest. That was certainly driving it. But again, there was a decided political agenda at work there as well already by the early 1970s. Now, in addition to that, you had real leaders emerging, not only among workers themselves, but among the intelligencia class. There was an organization called KOR (Komitet Obrony Robotnikow, The Committee in Defense of Workers), which organized in the mid to late 1970s. It was really sort of an intellectual outreach to the workers. In fact, that is probably what ultimately made Solidarity so potent as a social movement. It was not just a workers' movement or not just an intellectual movement, but it was sort of the joining of forces between these two really different classes in the Central European context, the sort of intelligencia on the one hand and the workers on the other.

*Q: Through the Committee?*

LACOMBE: Yes. There were a couple of different locations. By and large, they were the Warsaw-based intelligencia, which had to sort of sit back and think about individuals on a case by case basis, but I think a lot of it were people who came out of the communist workers movement and were actually revisionist at the very least, or outright had declared and operated as oppositionists, became disaffected with not the labor system, but probably disaffected with the ideological backdrop to it as well, Marxism and Leninism.

*Q: These were not national communists?*

LACOMBE: No, these were people who, I think, even today, some of these people are active politically and think of themselves these days and portray themselves as kind of right of center, but when you really peel below a certain surface, a lot of the issues, particularly in the economic side, part of the ideas are probably what we in the West would refer to as kind of left of center ideas. I suspect that has to do with the fact that their intellectual development was kind of socialist.

*Q: Democratic socialist.*

LACOMBE: Exactly, European social democracies.

*Q: What was the first structural manifestation of Solidarity and when did it take place?*

LACOMBE: That's tough. With the Committee in Defense of Workers, to the extent that they began, they sort of cut the path towards making a broader movement, you could say it began there. I'm a little suspect of that. That is the kind of legend that has built up around it. I think it's no accident that the people who propound that particular legend are intellectuals themselves and would tend to exaggerate the role that the intellectuals made. I'm kind of sympathetic to that. I think Solidarity, when you say, "When did it really become an organization," it didn't really become an organization until it became a full-fledged workers' movement. That was in 1980 in Gdansk. But certainly the backdrop, the sort of antecedent conditions, were there and the intelligencia played a real role in that. Some observers gave it the kind of inoculation role. The intellectuals sort of getting out there and meeting and talking to workers kind of confirmed and legitimized grievances by giving it a kind of intellectual framework to think about it. I am a little suspect of that because I'm convinced that workers didn't need to have those grievances legitimated. They knew and had a sense of what they were dealing with both in terms of the regime itself, that the actual working conditions in the factories were wrong and they had a right to challenge that. You could say that that was partly the result, ironically, of the regime's propaganda coming back to haunt them. This was a regime that ruled in the name of the working class and yet working conditions, wages, living conditions, the standard of living, all tended to belie that claim. Also because there was an elite group of people who were living not extremely well by Western standards, but were living certainly several cuts above the average person. This was very obvious and, I think, also troubled people.

*Q: The regime then, in effect, tolerated Solidarity from 1980 to roughly 1983? How would you describe it?*

LACOMBE: I wouldn't say "tolerated." I think they were forced to deal with it. They were faced with not just the strikes in the shipyards in Gdansk, but a national sort of movement. To this extent, Solidarity... What happened in Gdansk at the shipyards and the Szczecin shipyards at the north coast near Germany had a kind of spark effect in terms of... Sparked a more general social movement. To that extent, it was not just containing the labor unrest by that time. Once the strike had taken place, once the workers had occupied the shipyard, it became quite obvious that this spread like wildfire. It became obvious to the authorities that just putting a stop to this one particular outbreak of occupation strike was not going to deal with the problem they had on their hands, which was a much more fundamental rebellion against the system. I think partly the intellectual worker connection bothered them as well, the fact that it wasn't just an isolated group of workers, but the thing spread pretty much throughout the country.

There is something else I haven't mentioned there. That is the role of the Church in all this. The Church really itself had kind of pressed the envelope a little bit in terms of keeping the regime's totalitarian aspirations or ambitions at bay. By the 1970s, the regime may have infiltrated the Church to a certain degree, but the Church was, in a sense, off-limits. This created a kind of oasis or refuge for those people who were the inking

independently and quasi-politically. There was no discussion about changing the system per se, but just sort of pressing the envelope and pressing for greater freedoms and rights, among those workers rights being principal among them. So, the fact that there existed this kind of neutral terrain that was protected and kept the state at a distance meant that there was a place where people could gather to talk without fear, without concern. That played a big role as well. I think it's a point in hindsight that some observers of Poland miss a little bit. When they think about the Polish Church, which has in some ways a deserved reputation for more authoritarianism, from the beginning, there has also been a very potent social message at work in Poland as well, that the Church encouraged, that it was legitimate for workers to press for their rights and for a decent standard of living and so on. So, again, while we tend to think of the Church as kind of retrograde on the sort of social agenda scale, some of us, I think that here is a perfect case where it played the exact opposite role.

*Q: Could you put a date on the Solidarity?*

LACOMBE: In August 1980. There are other factors. I'm skimming over all kinds of other things, including the role that personality plays and certainly the role that Lech Walesa personally played. His detractors today sort of point out that some of his deeds were not the historic kinds of deeds that somehow people in the West have come to believe. On the other hand, it's pretty clear that at key moments, Walesa made the right decisions. Just in terms of the strike itself in Gdansk, the intellectuals when they first gathered or in some cases took the train up to take part to find out what was going on, word had spread that this was getting going and there were demands put forth. They were encouraging Walesa to back off the one principal demand, which was recognition of Solidarity as an independent trade union, that such a step would incur the wrath of the regime and result in bloodshed and that was this was too much. Not for the last time, this was a case where Walesa's real leadership shined through and he stuck to his guns and said, "We are going to make this the principal demand." In hindsight, the regime probably wishes it hadn't because those so-called Gdansk Accords that we're talking about that date back to August 1980 was the kind of official or implicit recognition on the regime's part of the rights of an independent organization outside the role of the state. When they signed those accords, there was no turning back at that point.

*Q: So, prior to the Accords, in effect, the movement was within the mainstream government-controlled labor movement?*

LACOMBE: Yes, technically you could say that. The official unions were CRZC, it's leadership was hardly the people to make revolution. They were, in effect, the sort of nomenklatura types. These were people in the party who approached [inaudible] with a kind of transmission belt attitude, that we were here to convey the regime's wishes from the top down. So, while it's true that a lot of the people who actually ended up joining Solidarity (I'm talking about workers.) came out of the CRCZ, the official trade union, there was really no connection. In fact, what was so groundbreaking about this was the fact that it was completely independent. By the time that it occupied the shipyard, it took

on the name Solidarity, but most importantly, when the regime signed those accords in August 1980, we can look back and say that was really the beginning of the end when the regime recognized officially... Subsequent efforts to put the genie back in the bottle didn't quite work and that is why you had martial law. Once people got a taste of this kind of independent activity, they started to spread the envelope a little bit, push the envelope out.

*Q: The regime didn't consider just rounding up the leaders and putting them in jail?*

LACOMBE: No, when the movement had grown to the extent that it had already, ultimately numbering about 10 million, it gets kind of difficult to imagine blocking everybody out.

*Q: I want to comment on the Solidarity's contacts with the ILO, the AF of L-CIO, and the ICFTU during that period from 1980-1983. They seem very important from what I've heard.*

LACOMBE: Yes. This is a question of where to begin. I think it's safe to say that when things started to really move in Poland, nobody really expected it. Nobody really was expecting an independent labor movement out of Poland. I may be mistaken in that. Somebody could tell me today that there were folks in the AF of L-CIO at that time (I'm talking about the late 1970s and early 1980s.) that were prepared for that, but... Certainly, the government, I think I'm on safer ground. I've gone back and looked at the cable traffic from that period. I think it was pretty much a surprise to people. Certainly, the satisfaction, if you look at it from that point of view, the general kind of unhappiness with the way things were going was clear, but in terms of something that would lead to a mass movement like Solidarity, I think that caught people by surprise. I don't really know the inside baseball in terms of what happened, how the AF of L-CIO began to respond on a day to day basis to this. I know that there were certain individuals who had some background in Poland, people of Polish ethnicity who maintained contacts, and that, to a large extent, the AFL-CIO was served well by those people, who were within the international labor movement and had some contact with what was going on in Poland. So, they were maybe in a better position to respond than even governments at this point in terms of on the ground kind of assistance, knowing who to talk to, who was worth talking to, who were these people, both the intellectuals and then ultimately workers. There was something else in this context that I wanted to mention, but it escapes me at the moment.

*Q: What about Walesa's trip to Geneva to the International Labor Conference and his use of international labor standards?*

LACOMBE: I think that came a little bit later. In fact, besides the general sort of issue of raising his and therefore Solidarity's profile and using the existing mechanisms, worker's rights, to bring attention to the plight, that became much more important in Solidarity's "illegal" after 1983, after the declaration of martial law on December 13, 1981. At that point, the whole issue of how to help Solidarity became the key issue in the West.



I know what I was going to say with regard to the AFL-CIO and the international labor movement. I think another reason they were well positioned to respond is that they sort of had a better sense than most about what these regimes in that part of the world were about. I guess I attribute it in a very general way to experiences that the AFL-CIO had in the sort of post-war reconstruction era.

*Q: Jay Lovestone, Irving Brown perspective on communism.*

LACOMBE: Right, exactly, which I suppose I give myself away as a Cold Warrior myself, but understanding the subtleties or not so subtle aspects of real communism or real socialism in this case, as they were want to describe it. This was a real asset. I think a realistic view... Quite obviously, these were not worker paradises. This kind of realism was key. I think it's overlooked in terms of ultimately what accounts for the high regard that people in this part of the world have for the United States even today, that this kind of understanding, both the assistance that was provided in the sort of tough era of underground Solidarity, but the kind of intellectual, if you will, solidarity, a recognition on the part of a lot of Poles that there were people in the West who understood what it is that they were dealing with and grappling with. This was very important and isn't often discussed or talked about very much here. Certainly, in Poland, it's recognized. They talked a lot about it. But here, it's been sort of overtaken by the rapid changes. But it counts for why people have a high regard for the AFL-CIO as an organization. But various political administrations lended support, both Republican and Democratic.

*Q: Shall we move then to your assignment to Poland as labor attaché? You worked in INR up through roughly 1991, is that right.*

LACOMBE: That's right. I got to know, in the course of my work, somebody was following Solidarity as a kind of political issue and traveled to Poland a couple of times on TDY and got to talk to some people who were involved in the yet sort of underground Solidarity. I got to know Tony Freeman, who was the special assistant to the Secretary for International Labor Affairs. Just in the course of getting to know Tony and, in a sense, helping or at least providing some of the analytical backdrop to some of the things that Tony was doing. Again, that was kind of interesting because it was calculated or my analysis was prescribed to fit the bill, but more that it be sort of a meeting of minds and kinds of identifying what the important issues were and then going with... So, we kind of collaborated on various things. He included me in a lot of meetings that he had with visiting Solidarity people who were coming in and out of the United States, mostly prominently Agil Molesky, who ran the Brussels office of Solidarity in exile, so to speak.

*Q: And kept on after Solidarity was legalized. When was Solidarity legalized?*

LACOMBE: In the spring of 1989. These years were sort of tough years for Solidarity, especially tough for workers. This is also something that is not understood well in the West. When I spoke earlier about the differences in the United States or foreign policy circles about Solidarity, whether it was a spent force or not or whether it had any life left

to it or not, there were similar kinds of debates going on in Poland as well. Solidarity itself was not speaking with one voice on these issues and various emissaries were coming from Poland, giving their two cents, some self-appointed, others really speaking for the organization. That was always a difficulty on our side to know who was speaking on behalf of whom and why.

*Q: And those speaking for the organization presumably were more upbeat about its potential.*

LACOMBE: Not always. This was the interesting thing. If I have a kind of populous predisposition that sort of shines through on this point... I don't see the Polish intellectuals as playing a very noble role in some of this, the Warsaw intelligencia who associated themselves with Solidarity... I shouldn't say "associated themselves;" they too were part of it. I don't want to sound too cynical, but I would say that they were among many prominent leaders of that sort of intellectual milieu who said that it was time to sort of put the Solidarity era as a trade union movement behind. It may be worth interjecting here, if you were to ask me why it is to this day that Lech Walesa and Lane Kirkland appeared to hit it off so well, I think it's because of the fact that throughout this era, the AFL-CIO took to heart what I think is the majority view, which is that Solidarity deserved support, that it was pretty immature to sort of give up on it. Some of these people were not speaking for the organization. It's one of those sorts of things that happens. These people are also those who speak English, who traffic in the diplomatic and foreign press circles and kind of develop the role for themselves as kind of oppositionists and didn't have to deal with... many of whom were imprisoned during the initial martial law period and others later in terms of trying to help underground Solidarity survive, so I don't want to cast aspersions on the entire intelligencia class. That's not what I'm saying. But others, I think, were playing a slightly different game (It was more political opposition.) and thought that the best way of promoting political change in Poland was wheeling and dealing to get the best possible deal you could get. But workers were in a much different situation, where being part of the organization Solidarity, if it were found out or if it was known, as in many cases, that you were, you suffered consequences from that. You could lose your job. You could be forced to relocate in some other part of the country. So, the effects of involving yourself in opposition was different depending on who you were and where you were at. I think people in the AFL-CIO in general understood this. Certainly Walesa understood it. I think certain people in the Reagan administration also understood it.

*Q: Were the workers less prone than the intelligencia to compromise in general?*

LACOMBE: Yes, I think so. They were willing to risk a little bit more, to put themselves more... I'm sorry, I took you afield from this subject.

*Q: That's alright. To go back to your assignment, did Tony approach you about...*

LACOMBE: Yes. I guess Tony had a sense based on what we had talked about that I

might be the person when we had a labor attaché... because we didn't. That was part of our policy not to have a labor attaché because, willy-nilly, that person would be subject to dealing with the official trade union movement, which we didn't want to do. We didn't want to give them the pleasure of association with the U.S. government because they were illegitimate. They were and are not democratic organizations. They didn't speak on behalf of - (end of tape)

*Q: There was a labor attaché in Warsaw named Alexander Wadomski, who was withdrawn when the regime consolidated power and became repressive. So you were the first labor attaché after a 35 year break.*

LACOMBE: Yes. I guess Tony just figured... Probably because I had a pretty firm grounding in the political aspects of it. Perhaps he sensed that I had some basic empathy with labor itself, that I would be the person who would be qualified.

*Q: And some contacts with Solidarity.*

LACOMBE: I had some contacts with Solidarity as well. I was kind of a known commodity already by then. So, actually, the job didn't exist really. It was a position that was in Bonn before the changes, so to speak, in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

*Q: They moved the assistant labor attaché position to Warsaw.*

LACOMBE: That was Tony's doing. It is my understanding that it was with the assistance of Larry Eagleburger, at the time deputy secretary. That position was also thought to be or was a kind of AFL-CIO position. That was a position that was reserved for an American trade unionist who would go to Bonn and see how things were done in the embassy and in the labor movement in Germany from this perspective of the U.S. government. So, the AFL-CIO also had to give their blessing, not so much to me, I don't think, although I may be missing something, but just the idea that the position would be moved from Bonn. I think they were supportive because they saw the need to have somebody on the ground in the new environment of building capitalism, to have somebody who was charged with dealing with labor issues.

*Q: So you took a leave of absence from INR, had some training at the Foreign Service Institute-*

LACOMBE: Thanks to Don Kienzle. It was actually kind of a rush job. I took some Polish. My Polish was rusty or non-existent, so I went into the 24 week Polish course and had the telescoped or compressed labor training, tutoring, from Don Kienzle, yours truly. I think Tony got the approval for the position in the summer or fall of 1990. Then I was off and running in February 1991.

*Q: Do you want to describe your duties there and what you saw as the main challenges? There must have been many.*

LACOMBE: Yes, there were a lot of challenges, including, in a sense, creating a position which exists on paper but hadn't yet existed in fact. That means the sort of bureaucratic problems in the embassy. When you create a position, you're kind of willy-nilly taking turf from other people. I think it was fortunate to have... I'm not sure how it was determined, if it was pre-agreed upon between Tony and perhaps the ambassador or how the position was classified as a political position; but I think that was. In other words, I was working out of the Political Section, which kind of helped tailor-make the job to the environment in the sense that the issues themselves, although they certainly had economic aspects to them, were essentially political. I can get into more of that as we go along, but just to say that that was an important thing right then that the labor attaché position was in the Political Section, where it belongs. I think it was fortunate that the ambassador at the time, Thomas Simons, was supportive of the idea of having somebody who was focusing on these issues. So, I think there was a clear signal from the top down in the embassy that this was something worth focusing some attention on. That helped in terms of carving territory. On the other hand, it was easy, in a sense, apart from the bureaucratic sense. The fact was that we weren't doing a lot of grassroots political reporting. If there was a campaign of some kind going on, of course, you had to get out and see what people were thinking and determine what the issues were. There was a lot of that. In Warsaw at the time that I landed in the country, the embassy was better at covering the grassroots than others in the region, I would say, as someone who viewed it as a consumer prior to having shipped out there. But nevertheless, the new environment of building, transforming both the economic and political systems meant a higher priority for grassroots -

*Q: Civil society and the role played in the democratic process.*

LACOMBE: That's right. So, that was kind of open. Nobody was really doing that. It was something that I really look forward to doing: getting out in the embassy and contact work. I probably throughout my three years traveled more than anybody else. I saw just about every part of the country except a little chunk of the southeast near the Ukrainian border. Other than that, I think I pretty much hit them all. I found that to be one of the most enjoyable aspects of the labor attaché position. Obviously, it's not just labor per se, but it's people, it's the grassroots as well.

*Q: By this time, the Soviet Union had disintegrated. Were there still Russian troops on Polish soil? Was there still a residual force? In reality, perhaps the big issue was what role Solidarity would play in the government of Poland in the post-Soviet era.*

LACOMBE: Well, that and how best to split the difference between supporting the transition and the development of a free market and a real democracy and at the same time not being a conduit for simple protest (just a destructive kind of debilitating protest). So, Solidarity played the very important role of channeling popular dissatisfaction with the changes that were going on. If you didn't have it, you would have had more serious problems. That, of course, created, as we saw, predicaments for Solidarity. But to address your point, the Solidarity role had shifted from being the opposition mass political

movement to a real trade union. I think sometimes we, people in the West and the western trade union movements, kind of forgot about that. Basically, you had an organization that was new. It was only above ground allowed to operate like a real trade union since 1989 and yet it had this reputation internally as the trade union movement, Solidarity, which overthrew communism. In between the two things was where the reality was, but it was kind of... I remember, throughout the course of my tenure when American trade unionists, American politicians, or analysts would come through. They would go through this process of first being kind of shocked at the degree to which Solidarity was not up to task or not ready to play that role and, on the other hand, having misgivings about whether Solidarity should, that if Solidarity became a channel for protest, might it not, in effect, be disrupting of the process and actually set the entire country back? So, there were all kinds of these ying-yang issues that were afoot during this time. But basically the game had shifted from opposition movement to now a kind of constructive partner or loyal opposition in the process of change.

*Q: Wasn't there also a period when there was something of an identity crisis in Solidarity, whether it would be a trade union or a political party?*

LACOMBE: One of the first things that I did upon entering the country was attend [inaudible] February ahead of my personal schedule was the fact that there was a Solidarity congress going on. I believe it was the third congress of 1991. This issue of identity, which was a manifestation of this sort of question of "Where do we go? Opposition movement, trade union? What kind of a role are we going to play here?" There were a number of things going on, of course. People who were otherwise interested in political careers were using the trade union as a potent organization capabilities as a kind of trampoline into the political scene. That was going on. Walesa himself, I think, had some ambivalence about Solidarity, the very organization which he led. Now he was called upon to be the president of Poland and felt maybe overcompensated by intentionally keeping the trade union at somewhat of a distance. I think in hindsight that is fair to say. He kind of took his role as president so seriously that he kind of burned some bridges really with the trade union on certain issues. That is more now, I would say, than it was back then, but nevertheless, that took place. But this kind of identity issue all throughout my tenure was a major issue. The union took some hits in the public imagination as well. Many of the old Solidarity leaders, the intellectual types who were a part of Solidarity, from a programmatic or ideological point of view thought that Solidarity's day had passed as well and the country would be better off for it, that the new task at hand was to build capitalism and free markets and that Solidarity as a trade union would be a real problem. So that was also an interesting undercurrent through all this, that old colleagues were really on the other side now of the barricades and, in effect, created a lot of real tension. I remember in particular then Prime Minister Olszewski going to Warsaw University to a special meeting with the trade union. This was somebody who came out of the movement, was a colleague, telling them that, "Thank you very much, but I'm not really much interested in your support."

*Q: Wow!*

LACOMBE: Yes, it was really very striking. It didn't get much play at the time within the embassies, but I remember myself being very struck by that and thinking that this was going to come back to haunt them at some future point. But part of it was, in my view, naiveté on the market cheerleaders and the Polish intelligencia as well. Their image of Poland was not one of... You remember the National Geographic cover of the miner. I think part of it was a psychological element, that the intellectual types, it wasn't their image of Poland, the coal digging Poland, the dirty, working class poor. They saw a different vision of Poland that was going to assemble computers, I suppose, or engage in some other high tech activity. They were kind of embarrassed by the trade union. They were interested in burnishing their credentials in the West as pioneers in the building of capitalism. So, these guys were kind of like baggage.

*Q: Did they sort of sever themselves then from the mainstream of Solidarity as a trade union?*

LACOMBE: Yes. I think both politically and ideologically, that is to say, some parties literally did in the sense that they passed themselves as (UPR as one extreme) a kind of Polish Thatcherite party, which sort of said, "Poland would be a lot better off without trade unions." Mind you, these were people who came out of the Solidarity movement. But even people in the so-called center had the kind of ambivalences that I'm talking about. While they may not have said, "We do not want your support," they kind of made it clear that "You could support us, speaking as a trade union, but you're going to do so on our terms. We're not going to bargain in good faith" as it were in some cases. In fact, the fall of the Suchocka government in 1993 I attribute to a lot of that. She had as her chief of staff, prime minister, a kind of headstrong young guy, Jan Rokita, from Krakow, who throughout the course of various labor disputes did not treat the union very well and in [inaudible] Solidarity introduced the vote of no confidence in the parliament, which led to her fall, which led to new elections, which put the so-called former communists in power in 1993.

*Q: So there was no effort to negotiate with Solidarity, perhaps the terms of the Austerity Program and soften the blow in human terms to the rank and file worker?*

LACOMBE: Well, there were attempts. Part of this is probably unfair criticism by an outsider, but in my view, first of all, no one had gone down this path before. This was, to mix metaphors, uncharted water going from a socialist centrally planned economy to a free market economy. Made further interesting yet is the whole Solidarity legacy here. So, it's not as if there was a roadmap that was available that they didn't follow. It wasn't that simple and I'm not suggesting it was. But the Solidarity government didn't, in my view, make a big effort at establishing rules of the road. It was obvious to a number of people that a new kind of social contract was going to be necessary. The immediate term was going to impose a lot of hardship on people. You sort of had to balance that with outreach, negotiation, and dialogue with Solidarity, which was representing workers. I think this kind of straightforward criticism, the Solidarity elite that was now sort of

government wasn't that interested in...

*Q: Took Solidarity as a trade union for granted and [inaudible] their support without actually negotiating the terms and developing a [inaudible] contract.*

LACOMBE: Yes. Part of it was just general lack of political skills as well on the part of some of these elite. The vision thing was missing. Here you were, undertaking something that was of a magnitude (I'm talking about the grander political transformation.) that is probably only comparable to our own economic depression of the 1930s in terms of scale, magnitude, effects, on the society, or maybe post-war European reconstruction. The political issues by and large didn't bother not only to deal with Solidarity as an organization, but didn't really make a point of coaching the public at large through this process. It was as if you would expect Roosevelt to have a fireside chat and to lecture the American public on the virtues of budget austerity or something. Certainly, you can do that, but this is kind of what the... It was almost as if they were saying, "We have this formula for introducing the market. This is the correct way Western advisors are telling us is the correct way. There is no other way. That's it."

*Q: And these were basically the intelligencia rather than the dock workers from Gdansk?*

LACOMBE: Yes.

*Q: So they couldn't plead lack of education or...*

LACOMBE: No, just a kind of different approach to politics, where being right is more important than succeeding politically. In other words...

*Q: Sort of an authoritarian -*

LACOMBE: Kind of an elitist point of view, where "We're telling you how we're going to have prosperity at some future date." For a lot of the Polish public, who have heard a lot of isms thrown their way through the course of 45 years, it begins to sound a little shallow after a while: "Put up with hardship today for some grander future tomorrow." They've heard that before. So, there comes a point at which they tend to sort of dismiss that. It's kind of like as an economic [inaudible] will provide prosperity somewhere along the line. So, I think a lot of the people had a kind of technicians approach, a lot of people in the government, towards reform. "If we do the right things, follow the right procedures, adhere to macroeconomic stabilization policy, the rest is going to fall into place." The game is stretching out social tolerance to the point where things will begin to turn around and then it won't be an issue anymore. In hindsight, some people believe that that has already taken place in Poland and they already say that it has been a success, past tense, that's it.

*Q: Is that premature?*

LACOMBE: The jury is still out, in my view. That is sort of another issue. But this was sort of the underpinnings of the divide. The other issue lurking in the background had to do with basic issues of economic opportunity. In other words, if we're building this grander future, what's in it for me? Who is supposed to benefit from this process? I think a lot of people in the Solidarity elite camp thought that that was just a kind of natural process that would take care of itself, the social Darwinism; the more talented people will find their spot. What that meant in fact, however, was that some people were identified from the get-go as losers in the process and those losers, in effect, were industrial workers in their 40s and 50s who didn't really have much of a shot at the new system. Approaching it from Solidarity's point of view, the question then becomes, "Is this what we fought for?"

*Q: These people were the corps of support, weren't they?*

LACOMBE: Yes, exactly, which they proved later on... As I mentioned, the Suchocka government was an indication of that. But they still had some power and some influence to do that. They remained, by the way, the largest democratic organization in Poland. The Solidarity trade union is far and away the largest representative democratic organization in Poland. Its membership has at least leveled off, it not actually grown a little bit.

*Q: In the 10 million range?*

LACOMBE: Oh, no. That era of social movement-

*Q: [Inaudible]*

LACOMBE: Yes, but that is an unfair comparison in a way. Solidarity is not a social movement. That is the whole point. It's now trying to act more like a trade union, so you can't compare Solidarity as a social movement fighting communism in 1980 with today's trade union, which is trying to find itself in this new environment. It's membership is down to under two million with about 1.6-1.7 dues paying members. But the point that I was trying to make is that part of what now animates Solidarity is not so much opposition to reform, but to try to ensure that the reform provides opportunities not only to those who are well positioned by virtue of their former association with the old regime to take advantage of the market situation, but is more democratic, provides opportunities to a broader range of people to have a stake in the system. So, I think that is often misunderstood in the West. I found myself in my reporting, wearing my reporting hat, making that argument more clear, to sort of remind people that the union wasn't against reform, very clearly not. You can look it up, as Yogi Berra says. At key moments, it has come down solidly in favor of market-oriented reforms, but the emphasis is on how to make that market available so that their constituency can benefit, and not just through redistribution in a socialist egalitarian, sort of after the fact sort of way, but economic opportunities.

*Q: Equitable share of the improvement.*



LACOMBE: Yes, stressing again opportunity. How do you do that? Those are some of the questions. From the outside, you might say, "Well, that's a nice idea," but in the real world, that's kind of hard to provide, as we all know in the West. But the very fact that Poland is going through this transition, Solidarity would argue and I would tend to agree, means that there are certain opportunities to level the playing field in a way that you don't have in the West and, in fact, are necessary in order to build popular confidence in the process.

*Q: What kinds of measures?*

LACOMBE: If you're talking about privatization, for example, and if, after all, what you're privatizing when speaking of that process of changing ownership in the formally state sector of heavy industry, you make sure that people literally have a stake in that process of privatization. It might mean opting for a coupon privatization scheme instead of privatization via management, especially a management that only got its status because it was appointed there by the former communists. That adds another measure of salt to the wounds when the people who are apparently succeeding, the new capitalists, are the same old bastards who were benefiting from the old system. That was my final point. There was also, when talking about social or economic justice here, that element of who benefits is key, but also the fact that this old crowd is too often the beneficiaries of the new system.

*Q: And the alternative would be some sort of stock option plan?*

LACOMBE: Yes. There are various options -- one used by the Czechs, for example, not with necessarily the best results in a lot of cases, but presumably you could distribute those shares in what otherwise is the national patrimony, right? This raises the basic issue of ownership. Who should have ownership rights over this which was state?

*Q: Assuming that workers had worked in a particular plant, when it's privatized, wouldn't they have some kind of stake normally in the plant?*

LACOMBE: Yes, they might, depending on how privatization... That is exactly the point. This is all up for grabs. It raises the question indeed. How should it be done? There is one argument that says that the faster the better and it doesn't really matter how you do it, as long as you get it done. If you don't get it done sooner or later, it will never get done and you'll have to live with the economic efficiencies that result and that means that everybody is worse off in the long run. There is something to that in the sense that, I think, speed is an issue, but I think to a certain extent, I personally believe what the trade union believes: that you can have your cake and eat it, too. You can have quick ownership transformation, but you can also do it in a way that gives the common man, the average Joe, a stake in the process. It doesn't have to be the province solely of the "new elite." In doing so, the argument goes, you will enhance the popular consensus and social support for those changes.

*Q: Whoever has a stake in the outcome. How did they decide which companies would be jettisoned and which ones would be promoted? How did they go about allocating investments? There must have been a central process to decide, well, this company will be privatized and it's potentially profitable.*

LACOMBE: With the exception of some major industries, most of whom were the subject of discussion because they were the object of a foreign investor's eye, so far, Poland has been kind of ad hoc privatization, which (another political advertisement here) tended to benefit those people who had insider information, connections, to privatize. That is the problem. It has been very much ad hoc. There has been a proposal on board from the 1990-1991 era called Mass Privatization Proposal, which Solidarity as a trade union officially supports with some refinements. That is to say you would take -- now the number is about 414 and divide them into 15 funds of 30 firms, roughly speaking, and you would establish supervisory boards kind of like the board of directors and give the management a certain equity stake in the firms to investment funds to manage.

This would do two things. It would do the process more quickly. You would take a chunk of firms and do it. Then you would bring some real management expertise into the operations of that firm to give it a shot at surviving in the competitive global environment. That is a big problem in Poland. Another centrally planned economy is going under this change. There is a dearth of real management there and some entrepreneurial wherewithal to compete, besides questions of capital and what have you. So, this was indeed supported. Then certain numbers of shares in each firm would go to the workers. I think that's 15%. Then another percentage (If memory serves me correctly, 10%.) would be offered at preferential terms to workers. Workers means employees, by the way, not just blue collar workers, but everybody who works in that firm, management, administrative, and blue collar people alike. But this program has been in the planning stages since before I went to Poland and long after I left. It's about ready to be implemented.

*Q: In the meantime, these are technically state owned?*

LACOMBE: Yes.

*Q: And the state has continued to subsidize the ones which are losing money?*

LACOMBE: Well, subsidize or not, depending on the firm and depending in large part on the connections the management of the state management firm has to do it. Some firms have kind of withered. In fact, the very number of firms in the project has changed because some of the firms have, in a sense, essentially gone bankrupt. Other firms were taken out of the Mass Privatization Program because certain political figures didn't want them in there.

*Q: Was there a massive unemployment as a result of these changes?*

LACOMBE: Yes, that is one thing we haven't talked about and which is... I guess I didn't lead with that point because I thought during my tenure as labor attaché and I still think now that sometimes the attention on unemployment and the kind of pathologies of reform almost get too much attention in the sense that that is certainly a problem. You're talking about 15-16% unemployment. But sometimes when you're talking about society's fatigue with reform in the region, so much attention is focused on the pathologies of lower living standards and unemployment that little attention is devoted to the questions of economic opportunity, which I found, in Poland at least, to be high on the list of concerns of the Solidarity people, for example. Again, their recognition that changes have to occur, there is no doubt about it, and that those changes are going to result in hardship. Consequently, the union even negotiated reductions in force in a lot of cases to keep factories going (I could cite a host of examples of that.), but that it should be accompanied by policies and approaches that help give economic opportunity. But back to your point, there is no doubt that the undercurrent here from the beginning or sort of the backdrop has been an incredible amount of... I can't find the word that actually describes it, but...

*Q: Tough dislocation?*

LACOMBE: Tough dislocation, yes, on a scale that is only comparable to our own economic depression in the 1930s.

*Q: Did the safety net sort of cushion the blow for most of the workers who were displaced?*

LACOMBE: Well, it's hard to give a yes or no answer to that. On the one hand, the social safety net... I guess this leads into another aspect of my job because not only did I do the reporting kind of requirements, I would say about 60% of my time was taken up with reporting. The other part, 40%, was sort of acting as project officer or program manager for labor programs that U.S. technical assistance was doing in Poland. Primarily the Labor Department was given a chunk of the so-called "seed monies," but also some more generically-speaking, what we were doing as the U.S. government in the area of labor and social policy. That was a very time-consuming operation. One of the things that I guess I found myself doing is, I found myself acting as the spokesman of those issues within the assistance working group that was formed by the ambassador. In other words, no one agency such as AID in the embassy in Warsaw was directing assistance programs. Rather, we gathered as an assistance working group to decide what our priorities ought to be as an embassy. That provided me with an opportunity to the extent that I wanted to open my mouth and say something to speak up on behalf of some of these issues. Most of our assistance was from the beginning and still is in the area of promoting privatization. There were numerous projects, technical assistance efforts, and consulting firms involved in that process. What I did was try to leverage on the ground in Warsaw what the Labor Department was doing and could be doing; also what the AFL-CIO was doing in some other areas with Solidarity directly, only because no one else was doing that. It was really the AFL-CIO's bailiwick and their effort, but for a long time they didn't have somebody

on the ground. I found people in the embassy were not aware really of what those programs consisted of. So, from time to time, I volunteered information saying this was what they were doing, why it was important, and why we should continue doing it.

*Q: Do you want to describe those programs briefly?*

LACOMBE: They ranged the gambit from model vocational training centers that were done in conjunction with the Department of Labor, the AFL-CIO, Solidarity, the Ministry of Labor in Poland, to model employment service offices and vocational counseling offices.

*Q: This was the Department of Labor?*

LACOMBE: Yes, Department of Labor programs. Those were in Gdansk and Gsechec. Those two programs I'll mention were among the more successful in my view, largely by happenstance. I don't think there was a lot of... We didn't really have the insights into knowing what exactly we should be doing, although obviously, before I got there, it was pointed out that this was an area where, if you were going to have mass unemployment, you were going to have to sort of deal with the structure, the social setting that deals with those pathologies. Largely, or by accident fortuitously, the Labor Department ended up in Gsechec and Gdansk. I say that because they, unlike a lot of other assistance projects, didn't focus on Warsaw. Consequently, it didn't get wound up around the axle in doing technical assistance through a given ministry or center, which was terrible and just sort of ground you down, wasting resources and time. They basically attracted some people from state employment offices throughout the United States as consultants to go up and begin projects that would automate and also change the working culture of these employment services offices and make them more responsive to private sector employment opportunities. Remember, in the old state system, it was just one hand of state dealing with the other state enterprise. It didn't really function as an employment service. So, all this had to be learned from scratch. So, the Gdansk office in particular, in large part because of the Polish side... There was a woman who ran the office in Gdansk who was terrific. I wasn't involved in actually doing the assistance, of course. There were other people. But I sort of was involved in a kind of advisory role, a contact person, a troubleshooter. DOL didn't have somebody in country. The other project was a vocational training program. Similar role. I didn't get involved in the actual vocational training. A large part of the program was actually launched before I got in country, but I did serve as the person who could be called upon to make some decisions about the program when the Department of Labor or the building trades of the AFL-CIO couldn't. I wrote checks in some cases, monitored the accounts for a short period of time. I kind of just saw to it that things were getting done when they were supposed to. There was another center established in Gdansk during my tenure. That turned out to be pretty good, actually, not quite self-sufficient in the way that some people had hoped, but that, I think, will come over time. But that was a cooperation essentially the depended very much on Solidarity and the AFL-CIO with the Department of Labor.

*Q: How did the shipbuilding industry fair under the economic reform? Given the role that shipbuilding had in the formation of Solidarity, one would wonder whether it benefited.*

LACOMBE: In some cases, it's found a niche for itself. I confess to [inaudible] what's going on and the demand for capacity out there, but the way I understand it is that there are certain things that the shipyards (for example, the shipyard up in Gsechec) does that makes it competitive. They do some non-corrosive hull construction that requires a certain amount of fairly sophisticated welding techniques and metallurgical design capabilities that is doing pretty well. Again, it's kind of found a market niche for itself and done pretty well. Other shipyards have gone from full-scale construction to kind of repair shipyards as the world's capacity goes through cycles of needing this kind of repair. The actual shipyard where Solidarity was born, so to speak, the Gdansk shipyard, appears to have, at least during my tenure (I don't know the situation at the moment.) gotten quite a few orders. One of the interesting things was that at the end of my tour, there was a skilled labor shortage and the shipyard was employing Russian labor to sort of fill in the gaps. Again, this was always portrayed to me as a skilled labor shortage, as opposed to, say, a kind of cost-cutting issue. But I didn't know the situation well enough to be able to say one way or another what it was, what was driving the decision to employ Russian labor. It's just another irony upon irony upon irony that, here Gdansk, which had some of the lowest unemployment rates in the country because the private sector was doing pretty well, still was not meeting the demands, so they went outside and hired Russians.

*Q: Were there training programs to go along?*

LACOMBE: Well, that's a problem. I was about to say that when you begin to get into the weeds of what's wrong with this wholesale economic and political transformation, all these sorts of bottlenecks kind of appear. Vocational training is one of them, the fact that the old vocational training network was actually a semi-government, but for all intents and purposes a government operation, which was co-located in enterprises and was training people by the time I was there for jobs that didn't exist. So, you had really the worst of both worlds. That went on throughout my tenure. In fact, we tried to deal with these people when we were doing the construction [inaudible] retraining. We had real problems with cooperation with these so-called official vocational training organizations. They resented the fact that the American side was working with Solidarity. They wanted to work with Solidarity when it was "their business" to do vocational training and yet they were very difficult people to work with because almost from the beginning, it was clear that we determined (not just the Americans, but others that had come in and looked at the issue like the Germans and others) that their vocational training system was and continues to be a real disaster. Part of it is that it's like everything else. We all deal in sound bites. My latest sound bite in trying to explain what's going on in this part of the world to people who don't really have the time to focus on it (That's why I'm still the Polish analyst in INR.), one of the things that I try to tell people is that you have to get away from your simple reform, anti-reform dichotomy when looking at this part of the world, that you'll be mistaken. That leads you down a lot of anti-roads. If you extrapolate

that workers, for example, are willy-nilly anti-reformist because what they want is incompatible with the new economic system... That kind of thinking pervaded...

*Q: The stereotype.*

LACOMBE: The stereotype. Especially now, six years into the process, you can't speak in these kinds of generalized terms. It's not only possible, but probable that someone who is pro-business in Poland today is also anti-reformist. They've now managed to carve a niche for themselves in the new hybrid economy and they like the status quo. I'm talking about the businessman, whether it's the nomenklatura businesspeople or the other businesspeople. Nobody turns down a monopoly position out of the goodness of their heart. So, that is what's happened. So, if you're looking for real reform, I don't care if it's capital market development or banking, you might, in fact, look around for some otherwise strange bedfellows in terms of your partners. On an issue like capital market development, for example, Solidarity training might be your best partner. I could spell that out, but I'm just saying that you have to think more creatively about this and you can't rely on these old clichés about who is supporting reform and who is against reform.

*Q: You have to look at where people are in the society and how they would be impacted by the changes that you're talking about.*

LACOMBE: Yes, and knew that we shouldn't expect the static situation where the old set of political and economic interests that were there in 1990 at the beginning of this process are going to be the same ones, the same configuration of political and economic interests five years along. There obviously will have been some changes and there have been. To elaborate on your point, what happened with the vocational training institutes is that they didn't want to surrender or give up the turf of vocational training because to do so would have meant sharing in things like property, the very assets that these organizations, although they were state organizations, gradually moved a lot of what were otherwise state assets into the hands of private individuals. The same thing happened in the official trade unions, that Solidarity is sort of competing with. They took their insider connections in the state apparatus and used that as a vehicle to sort of set themselves up in a "private sector" environment and jealously guarded those prerogatives to do it. One could ask the question, as some people do, "Well, how is it that an ostensibly state organization should allow its managers or administrative staff to assert private ownership over those assets or over the right to do vocational training."

*Q: Good question.*

LACOMBE: That's a good question, but these are the kinds of things that fuel the fire, why it's hard to say, "Well, this group is pro-reform and this group is anti-reform." But the other thing, which is more the point perhaps, is that in the meantime, nothing is being done on vocational training. It's called ZDZ, the vocational training organization. What ZDZ is basically doing now is training people in some white collar skills, office skills, computer skills, and driver's licenses.

*Q: I take it that the Labor Department was not active in the vocational training area?*

LACOMBE: They have tried and, I think, somewhat successfully, in the construction skills training that I mentioned before. That was a joint cooperation between the Building Trades, the AFL-CIO, the Department of Labor, Solidarity, and ZDZ, the official organization, but the cooperation got to be very, very tough with the official vocational training organization because they correctly saw that “If the Americans come in here and help Solidarity establish our centers, it’s real competition for us and they could branch off, as we would have expected them to, and go into some other trades and areas and that would be a problem.”

*Q: What about exchange programs with groups here in the United States? Has there been any extensive work there?*

LACOMBE: Yes. One of the part assistance/part exchange programs is in the area of union to union contact between Solidarity and the AFL-CIO, principally at the Free Trade Union Institute. [Inaudible] established what’s called the DKN, the Polish acronym for Negotiations and Consulting Bureaus within regional offices of Solidarity. What these offices are designed to do and the functions they do perform is to provide Solidarity with a kind of consulting organization to deal with issues like privatization so that Solidarity can compete, as it were, as a trade union, but almost as a sort of economic entity in its own right with not only management in the classic sense of the word, but perspective owners of state factories, for example, in the process of privatization. The staff would include people who are lawyers or have some economic or financial background that could look at a set of books and say, “This makes sense” or “This doesn’t make sense” or “Somebody is trying to pull the wool over our eyes” or what not, not so much on collective bargaining issues, although that too, but mostly on issues dealing with privatization of state enterprises.

*Q: What about the successor organization to the official unions? How large is it? Does it have any legitimacy? Have there been contacts with the AF of L-CIO?*

LACOMBE: No, there haven’t been, to my knowledge, contacts with the AFL-CIO, nor with unions in the AFL-CIO. This is a tough issue. I think there is a view within the American trade union movement that now that the playing field has dramatically changed and we’re no longer fighting the Cold War, all workers, whether they’re organized in official movements or from official movements or movements like Solidarity, independent organizations, have the same basic interests at heart. Therefore, the emphasis should be more on workers solidarity. To my understanding, that is still a minority view, but it’s one that you occasionally find expressed because it’s basically the approach of a lot of the international trade secretaries, so it finds its way into various American affiliates of those international secretariats. That sounds good, but it flies in the face of the reality as I understand it. Unfortunately, a lot of these official trade unions do not operate democratically, to say the least. The people who are representing these so-called

trade unions abroad do not really have worker interests at heart and are not democratically elected individuals. So, when you recognize their legitimacy by extending the relationship to them, you are giving them undeserved legitimacy at home. So far in Poland, because of Solidarity's strength and reputation internationally, the OPZZ, the official trade union movement, has not managed to break out of its isolation.

*Q: How many members are there?*

LACOMBE: When I left Poland, they were still sticking to the line (It really was a line.) of about four and a half million members, although there was one official trade unionist who was a member of Parliament who was kind of breaking away or trying to lead a certain faction out of his [inaudible] that I had established a relationship with. This is something that I may want to be more careful about when we get to the point of editing my comments. It's premature to talk about it in these terms even yet. This gentleman is still a member of Parliament. He was elected on the platform of the official trade unions, which is something else I'd like to get to. He confided in me that, actually, the membership was a third of that, about 1.5 million, and was even lower if you imposed a dues paying qualification on that. With the exception of the teachers and miners, they were hollow organizations and enterprises that I visited, with the exception of those two sectors of teaching and mining.

*Q: You've had contacts with the teachers?*

LACOMBE: I didn't really have a lot of contacts. First of all, I didn't feel like I needed to. I had the sense that apart from its electoral impact (and I'll get to that in a minute) in terms of its strength on the shop floor as a trade union, I was fairly confident that throughout my tenure, it was something that I really wouldn't have to pay much attention to. I think I was right. I never really was at a loss because I hadn't cultivated those contacts. So, it was a reflection of the policy as I understood it in talking with Tony Freeman that we weren't going to go out of our way to make contacts with the official trade union movements. I didn't. It would have been one thing if these people actually represented a potent force on the shop floor. To not have contacts would have meant to miss something important. On the occasion that I did cross paths with these people and found out what was going on on the shop floor, it was apparent to me that they really didn't have much in the way of an organization. They would have an office in a given factory. I would pop in in the office to talk to some people. Sometimes I couldn't find people around or couldn't find people either in management or on the shop floor, non-Solidarity members, who could tell me who was the head of OPZZ in the factory.

*Q: Did Solidarity run a competing operation?*

LACOMBE: Yes, in most cases. This was another common occurrence where, basically, the OPZZ guys followed whatever Solidarity was doing. It was a simple point that maybe sounds too simple, but it gets to issues like this. They never operated as a trade union of the official trade union structures in terms of... So, here they are in a new environment



and they don't know what to do in many cases. Again, I think the exception is the teachers' union, who I thought were better organized and knew what to do -- and to a certain extent, miners, although even there, they occasioned a lot of "me, too-ism" with Solidarity. On the shop level, they would piggyback on what Solidarity was doing. There were other unions, some Solidarity offshoots like Solidarity 80, August 80 in the mining area, who tended to take a more combative approach than Solidarity did on the shop level. That was promoting themselves in the process of being more protective of workers' interests and especially with "solidarity" governments being in power, portrayed the Solidarity trade union as co-opted by the solidarity governments and cast themselves as the independent union on the ground. Occasionally, with a couple of cases, they pulled off some fairly dramatic labor actions. One was down in the Fiat plant down in southern Poland. Fiat made an investment there. The local Solidarity 80, an offshoot of the mainstream Solidarity, basically led that wildcat action down there. But those were the exceptions to the rule. The official unions, in some mining areas, they pulled off a strike in a copper mine. But even in that case, there was a lot of evidence that this was not a case where there was an official union labor action strike. It was not a labor management issue. In fact, what you had was one part of management colluding with the official trade unions versus the new management that was trying to force this enterprise into privatization. So, even in this example, where the official unions manage to pull something off... Again, this was three years in my tenure.

*Q: So, it was really playing one faction, management, against another, rather than representing worker interests.*

LACOMBE: Right. This was as a national organization. There were cases on the local level where a given [inaudible] organization, I would admit, probably did defend workers' interests in some fashion. But on the whole and certainly as a national organization, they didn't deserve to be treated as a democratic representative organization.

The other thing I wanted to mention as a component issue of both technical assistance that the U.S. was providing and also another element of concern. You mentioned the social safety net. This is one area where, even to this day, five, six years into the transition, no government has managed to deal with the social welfare situation, which, on the face of it, kind of looks analogous to our own, where there is concern that entitlements are hemorrhaging the budget and what not. But there are a number of issues or aspects to the issue which make the situation in Poland even more dangerous from a fiscal point of view, but also from just the point of view of doing what it portends to do, which is provide people with a safety net -- that is to say, getting assistance or resources to the people who really need it. You've got a system that promised cradle to grave benefits, but which really didn't deliver. For the longest time, the U.S. and its technical assistance offers didn't really want to deal with that issue. Despite the fact that the payoff of providing technical assistance would be great, you might say, "Is this an area where we really want to be offering our technical assistance? Isn't this something that maybe the Europeans would better provide, given that Poland, after all, is in Europe, hopes to join

the EU, and so on and so forth?” That may be the case, but I thought and still believe that this is an area where we have some competitive advantage in the technical assistance area. Without getting into the details of that, just to point out that one of the things that I found myself doing, one of the major time-consuming things, was making that case in the American technical assistance world both in the embassy and back in Washington.

*Q: Did you get a lot of headway there?*

LACOMBE: Some headway, to the point that I think it became maybe less so my efforts, frankly. The enormity of the problem became increasingly obvious. When I first started out making the pitch, however, I didn't get much of an audience for it besides the ambassador and maybe the deputy chief of mission, who were sympathetic to the argument. I think part of the problem was that it was seen as a soft issue when, in fact, it was a very hard issue. On the one hand, we were telling the Poles to adhere in IMF (International Monetary Fund) conditionality and budget deficit targets. On the other hand, we were not really providing them with the tools to do that, to get the social safety net issues under control or get them on the path of sustainability. So, it was kind of strange. On the one hand, we were keeping up the pressure to stick to these targets, but weren't and still really aren't doing it. Partly that is because the successive Polish governments have not wanted to tackle what is a very sensitive issue. It is here in this country. It is in Poland as well. Nobody is going to make a big political career of cutting benefits. To a certain extent, part of what needs to be done is at least cutting back certain, say, disability levels or certain tiers in the benefit structure -- a means test or something. So, there are people who will feel the pinch. Presumably, there is enough (not so much fat. That would be inappropriate.) give in the system that you would be able to shift resources for people who are getting, say, family benefits to people who need disability payments because they can't work and so on and so forth. So, means testing would play a role. You never had to do that in the old system. The state was guaranteeing employment. The benefits were provided at the workplace. It was sort of a minuscule part of the overall budget. As you move to the market situation, it put much greater demands on the social safety net and it couldn't respond.

*Q: And probably also the increase in unemployment to 15 or 16 percent.*

LACOMBE: From zero.

*Q: A nominal zero.*

LACOMBE: Yes. Even approaching it from an administrative point of view, how do we get the checks in the mail? It was a nightmare when automation is non-existent and the opportunities for abuse are tremendous and terrific. First of all, the Washington assistance community kind of fought the idea. It was seen as a soft issue. But then when it became more obvious that it was more than just social welfare but a budget issue, then it got people's attention a little bit more.

*Q: Are there other issues you would like to describe before we conclude?*

LACOMBE: No, that pretty much covers it.

*Q: You've provided a very comprehensive review of Poland. Do you plan on going out again as a labor attaché?*

LACOMBE: I don't know. That is an interesting point. I don't know if there would be an opportunity to do so. I might think about it. I guess I would do so with an understanding of having a little bit more ability to get some things done and to do some things, if I had that kind of ability, a few more resources at my disposal to do some things, that would actually be a much better assignment. But certainly, I made a number of good friends and contacts there. It's kind of odd: Poland is still after these years probably more pro-American than even the United States. I know that sounds kind of contradictory, but there is a kind of reflexive warmth towards the Americans.

*Q: They're liked there.*

LACOMBE: Not only liked. That's putting it mildly. I remember once going down to the miners' holiday, where they have a kind of camp combination cabaret and drinking bout for a couple of days, sort of traditional. I was on the podium as sort of an honorary guest of the miners down there and treated to a standing ovation of "USA! USA!" knowing full well that, of course, it wasn't me personally that they were applauding, but the United States. I don't know of many other countries where you would get that. Then sometimes I wonder whether it's deserved.

*Q: On that note, we'll conclude. Thank you very much, Patrick, for your interview. I appreciate it.*

LACOMBE: Sure.

*End of interview*