

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

AMBASSADOR HELENE VON DAMM

Interviewed by: Ann Miller Morin
Initial interview date: February 15, 1988
Copyright Ann Miller Morin (used with permission)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Washington

Assignment
Ambassadors' Course

Views on Foreign Service

Public Diplomacy
Value of Communications Skills
Partisanship of Top-level Positions
Mid-management Career Levels

Austria as Ambassador

Analysis of Role
Impact of Her Austrian Origins
Favorable Press Treatment
Minimal Relations with Other Ambassadors

Vienna -- Staff Operations

Selection of DCM Felix Bloch
Country Team Meetings
Work Standards for Staff

Vienna -- Public Diplomacy

Concerts, Fund Raisers for Austrian Causes
Cabinet-level Exchanges
Prominent American Visitors

Vienna -- Trade Issues and Promotion

Diversion of High Technology
Computer Show
Trade Fair

Vienna -- Activities

Congressional Visits
Representational Entertaining
Foreign Service Inspection
Forged Document (Disinformation)

Vienna -- Post Operations
Residence
Private Representational Fund
Personnel Assignments
Fourth of July Party

Austria -- Relations with Host Government
State Visit to Washington of President Kirchschlager
Kurt Waldheim (watch list)

Post-Embassy
Adjustment to New Life
Relations with Successor

INTERVIEW

Q: Can you remember any of the details of your nomination? How it came about that you were nominated to become ambassador to Austria?

VON DAMM: Oh boy. All you have to do is read my book [Von Damm, Helene. At Reagan's Side. New York: Doubleday, 1988.] . I'm going to have it in detail in there. You should wait until I get my galleys. Do you want to do that?

Q: That would be wonderful.

VON DAMM: We can cut down on that.

Q: Sure.

VON DAMM: I'm going to have the galleys in another two months. It gives great detail about that; it was kind of unusual . . . and it tells a lot also about my ambassadorial life in Vienna. I can just give you that whole block.

Q: Very good. In that block do you go into your senate hearings? When you went before the senate and what they asked you?

VON DAMM: The senate hearing that I experienced really didn't amount to anything. Two or three questions, terribly easy questions, so in my case it was . . .

Q: Pro forma?

VON DAMM: Yes, totally pro forma. .

Q: Did you have to do many special preparations before you had your hearing?

VON DAMM: Again I have it in the book. Larry Eagleburger gave me a mock hearing which was kind of fun. He did it as a favor because he's a good friend of mine.

Q: What about the swearing-in ceremony?

VON DAMM: Swearing-in ceremony I had in the White House.

Q: In the White House? .

VON DAMM: Yes. I have that also covered in the book.

Q: Oh, that's all covered? Okay.

VON DAMM: Yes. Extensively.

Q: Then there's no point in our going through it here. Now, what about preparations for your assignment as far as briefing at the State Department goes? Did you go through the ambassadorial course that they have?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: What did you think of that?

VON DAMM: I was not very high on it. I found it very shallow.

Q: Can you recall who was leading it when you were there?

VON DAMM: No, I do not recall. As I remember it -- it's been a few years -- and what I didn't like, it was more of a bookkeeping course. You know? Also that you should be nice to the Marines. All those things that take place on the periphery. In my case it didn't make so much difference because I came from the world of politics and government and I knew how things worked. But when you think of some businessman coming from, maybe, Des Moines, Iowa, I don't know what that course should do for him. I think if you really wanted to design a course for the so-called political appointees or novices (as I understand, it is primarily designed for the political appointees) it needs to contain more substance and insights into how the system really works.

Q: I believe it is, although everyone has to take it now.

VON DAMM: A similar course could be given to all newcomers to Washington because they may know theoretically the way everything works, but soon are bewildered by the games and power plays. So a little preparation on -- of examples go a long way. Unfortunately, Washington appointees don't get that either, which I think is a pity. That's why a lot of them slip here. They don't know with what eagle eye they're being observed.

Q: What about the philosophical thrust of the new president's program? Is that something that should be addressed in this ambassador's course, do you think?

VON DAMM: Well, I guess it couldn't hurt but theoretically they should already know it and be in sync with the president's philosophy. Our administration placed great emphasis on public diplomacy and yet I venture to say that most people don't know what it is. Judging from the conversations with both political appointees and careerists, they didn't take advantage either of all public forum opportunities -- TV shows or discussions with university people. There is definitely the trend, from what I have seen in my limited experience, that people are afraid to expose themselves. It holds true for most career service appointees as well as the political ones. Unless they come from the political world, they are hesitant to go out. A politician is used to campaigning, used to go out and give speeches, used to reach out. Bringing our point across and influencing people is what public diplomacy is all about.

Q: So you say the ones who do well are the politicians who have come up through the ranks?

VON DAMM: I think so. Someone who has a communications background like, for instance, Galbraith in France, (he was not a professor either but he did lots of communications, he was a communicator). Now I'm sure there are others who do well, who go on talk shows and relate to students on university campuses, but of course it's easier for those who have learned it before.

Q: I was very impressed by an article you wrote about 1984 in which you explain that the young people of Europe don't understand about the United States. That our envoys should particularly address the young people.

VON DAMM: Yes, among other things, yes.

Q: You mentioned Amerika House as it used to be. Do you think that is a definite problem for the future, the fact that the young people are bombarded with propaganda from the Russian side but they're not getting enough propaganda in the good sense from our side?

VON DAMM: I think there's a problem already now. I don't think our ambassadors are visible enough and engage in enough philosophical discussions abroad. To help create a political climate favorable to the United States is, in my view, the most important part of his job now. Public diplomacy is here to stay! In this electronic age, the role of ambassador has changed a great deal. He no longer works out treaties! Now when there is a problem in a country, it's the State Department or Commerce Department people who

immediately show up. It's the experts now that actually do the negotiations! The ambassador at most makes the introductions! So the ambassador isn't what he was in the olden days, but that doesn't mean that he's less important. We need him as a communicator.

Q: Very good point.

VON DAMM: That has been very slow in coming. I did not see any real evidence that the careerists have embraced this idea yet. Even though our administration has talked about it all those eight years, you know.

Q: You know possibly it goes back to what you were saying about . . .

VON DAMM: Training also.

Q: Training, but also I don't know whether or not you are aware of the fact that many of the Foreign Service people fall into the same category of personality. They have discovered this. It may be perpetuating the same kind of interests. Because if people are the same, they don't break out of the mold. In other words, maybe we need an infusion of different personalities.

VON DAMM: Maybe you have to groom them right from the beginning. The Foreign Service officer by and large is a very intelligent open individual, and a studied individual. But I guess communication was never really part of the expertise that was required. So I'm sure it has laid dormant. There is always the exception like Larry Eagleburger, certainly a great communicator. He's really a politician. Larry was always a politician. So I think these kinds of traits should be developed more. There's no reason why a Foreign Service officer shouldn't be a politician.

Q: Of course then you run into the problem as far as an overlong career goes of changing administrations. If a person is too much of a politician under one administration he's always let go by the next administration. So then you don't have your continuity. Now, would you discuss that a little bit?

VON DAMM: An ambassador never makes policy. All he has to do is communicate it! He has to "sell" America -- that's all I meant by acting as politician. As far as top Washington State Department jobs are concerned, however, I have often thought that you can't really be all things to all people. If you happen to make a career in the Democratic administration, chances are that you are not going to make it under the other. And I think it stands to reason. A president that comes in likes to have the feeling that the people who help him develop policy have his prejudices and his outlook of the world. I think that's totally legitimate. That's always been my gripe against the Foreign Service. It isn't that they are any less competent, far from it, but I think a president has the right to seek his kind. And I have never understood why the top echelon couldn't be more outspoken as to their political leanings. Larry Eagleburger, as far as I know, never made it a secret he was a Republican. I don't think it hurt him. You cannot be always on top anyway. There is

always a certain rotation. So sometimes you have to sit it out. But I personally think that you would have -- now we're getting off the subject here.

Q: This is all the subject.

VON DAMM: But I personally think that you would have many fewer fights between the White House and the State Department and the service for appointments, for top level appointments, if the careerists that want those top level appointments . . . now if somebody is content further below, they don't have to tell what their prejudices are. But I am talking about if you want to be an assistant secretary, under secretary, deputy secretary, I think a president would be much more comfortable if he knows where they stand. I just don't believe professionalism has anything to do with your prejudices. We all have them. It goes back to our experiences, it goes back to the way we see things in life. Even if I want to be totally impartial, how can I be? It's impossible.

Q: But how are you going to attract very good people if they then are told you can only go so far without opting for a political party? Or maybe they're not really too interested in the political party. How can they ever hope to get to the top?

VON DAMM: Why should a civil service person expect to go to the top? It's our system. If you look at the Commerce Department or some of the others, there are certainly also fine service people, but they don't expect to have a presidential appointment and be an assistant secretary. And I think that's the way it should be. I don't think an "it" should be advising the president on policy, unless we no longer believe that a president should be able to make changes, big changes if his campaign promises demand it. Unless we get to the point where we just say, yes, we have elections, but we don't really want to make changes, we want to keep things status quo, that's a different story! But I don't think the American people are ready to say that. I think they expect a president to do the things he promised which is after all the basis of his election.

Q: Right. Perhaps you don't see a need for a Foreign Service? For continuity?

VON DAMM: I'm not saying that. Of course, we need continuation. But look, why would a political ambassador jeopardize continuity? Each embassy has huge support staff and they all have the institutional knowledge. How much institutional knowledge do you need?

Q: That's what I want to know from you. How much do you need?

VON DAMM: It's plenty. I had more than enough institutional knowledge. If anything, I would have wanted a couple of extra people that come in with new ideas, with things that haven't been done before, with new enthusiasm, yes, with my president's philosophy.

Q: You think they get too much in a rut, do things the same old way? Is there too much fear among Foreign Service people? ·

VON DAMM: Maybe it's legitimate. I think any time you belong to a club and your promotion depends on being the good team player, I think it breeds a certain person. You can't blame them.

Q: What are the solutions? How do you tread your way between a vibrant career and . . .

VON DAMM: I don't see the problem. For many careerists or bureaucrats, an interesting secure position is sufficient. For the specially talented and ambitious, seeking presidential appointments, a political declaration should be mandatory. At the end of the administration he will lose the job -- declared or not declared -- and he can either go back into the ranks and leave like other political appointees. I don't know why the Foreign Service finds it threatening. It wouldn't be any harder for them than other political appointees to find a lucrative business or career. You can't be a vibrant person and want an exciting career without risking anything. That's the way it is. You can't have it both ways.

Q: That's right. But more and more the young people are thinking along just those lines you're talking about, to try it for a while and get some background and then get out and then maybe come back in or do something else.

VON DAMM: Yes, sure. They could also come in as a presidential appointment at a later point.

Q: Yes, sure, which is what happened under Carter. A lot of officers left and came back in, and that may be the wave of the future. The only question I have is, would this not leave the Foreign Service then with just the deadwood?

VON DAMM: Oh, I don't know. I think you have all different . . . I have never really felt that the so-called civil servants, that they have to be deadwood. I think there are some very fine people. It's a matter of temperament. There are some people who like that very steady life without too many risks, but they can be excellent people to prepare staff papers. I would not call that deadwood. They can be very, very fine. You have them even in industry. You have those that don't want to become the managers, that don't want to opt for that. But you need them. It is the backbone of the organization. So I do see that a little bit different.

Q: Yes. That's very good, because this sort of puts your own role as an ambassador into, I think, a very good perspective. What did you particularly want to achieve when you went to Vienna?

VON DAMM: Well, I think first of all as an ambassador when you go to a country you have to look over what the situation is like. Is this an ally? Do we have other problems? Then you kind of set up the goals. So I think every country is different. Austria, being a neutral country, there were limits to what you could do. I figured out that the best use of my time that I could make is in the public area of diplomacy, to try and keep a strong friendship between us and to enhance that friendship. And I do think I was successful in

doing that. About 90% of the people, or 85% of the people -- I established a real presence -- knew who I was. I think it was in a positive light. It was also the Horatio Alger story where people would come up to me, "I didn't think it was any more possible today in America, your story." They thought it was like a hundred years ago when the shoeshine boys came over here and made a career, you know. So I think all of those things were positive. And in addition to that, of course, the only problems we had were in the trade area. Little disputes. I tried to handle those as best as I could. I also tried to convey to the Austrians that we try to be good neighbors, that we don't just want things from them, but that we also are interested in their problems, and for that reason I also got involved in fund raising over there, and in helping them with the projects for museums, for the school, for charities. I did a huge Frank Sinatra concert. You know to show "I want to be a good neighbor of yours and I'm aware of your problems. I don't just always want for me." You might say that these things all fell in the role of public diplomacy, which I think was very apropos in that country and in that setting, this neutral setting. You go into an allied country, that's again totally different. But I think an ambassador should always sit back before he goes and analyze what's required there. What's the biggest contribution he could make?

Q: How much of this was your own thinking and how much of this did you work out with people like Eagleburger?

VON DAMM: It was all my own thinking. _

Q: All your own thinking?

VON DAMM: Yes. In the next sentence I was going to add, if you feel not enough confident that you can figure it out yourself, I do think you get all the help you can get in the State Department. I must add I was actually surprised how much leverage they give you, the State Department. I did my own speeches. I never had cleared anything. As long as you didn't get into trouble, they let you on a big long string. That pleasantly surprised me. I thought it would be more confining.

Q: How much of your success do you think is attributable to the fact that you yourself were originally from Austria?

VON DAMM: My case was unique, I think, because I was viewed as sort of the homecoming queen. But I hasten to add that I was not certain my appointment would be a good one, for that reason. It could have also swung the other way. I do think that Americans sometimes are too quick to jump to the conclusion that if somebody is from a certain country, that must be the best thing to send him back there. I really actually don't think so. Because, take my case, somebody could have said, well why don't they send us a real American? Why do they send us somebody back who left Austria when times were tough here and didn't rebuild the country with us'? I mean, this is the other side. It didn't happen to me but it could have.

Q: Sure.

VON DAMM: So what I am saying is this is already something they could turn into baggage. I would almost say the good part, of course, is that you understand the intricacies of the country, the language, that's a big plus. But you have to be a little careful.

Q: You understand the psychology of the people too.

VON DAMM: Yes, as I said, that's the plus. But you can get some fallout. It is a little bit tough.

Q: Yes, I can see. You think this is mainly a matter of personality that you were able to pull this off?

VON DAMM: I can't answer that. You would have to ask somebody else. I can't answer that.

Q: How you were perceived there. But from the very beginning, was your press . . .

VON DAMM: Was very positive. But it was overwhelming to me. If I hadn't had some political experience I think I would have folded right then and there. I was not prepared.

Q: Really?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: You felt too much pressure, was that . . . ?

VON DAMM: Yes. I was always on stage.

Q: Oh yes.

VON DAMM: I was like a political candidate going to a rally. It's why I say, if I had not had that experience with Reagan and being out on the campaign trail I don't think I could have handled it.

Q: Is that so?

VON DAMM: Yes, because it was hard as it was. Because I was always in backup and I was always a so-called staffer even when I was assistant to the president. I was still not in the limelight. If you get hit too abruptly with that, and you're not prepared, it's not that easy.

Q: I can imagine. The press, then, received you very positively. Was there any negative press?

VON DAMM: No.

Q: Not at all?

VON DAMM: The only negative press . . . no, I didn't even get negative press when I divorced my husband and married somebody else. That was more of a -- everybody was stunned, if you know what I mean. But it was not negative. If there was any negativism in the press it was in this country, but not in Austria.

Q: Only in the US.

VON DAMM: It wasn't negative negative. It was a little snide, you know the way the Post would make it, like, "Viennese raised eyebrows." The way they do it over here.

Q: But over there they didn't?

VON DAMM: No.

Q: You were an Austrian originally but you also are a woman. There was never any reaction to your being a woman? They didn't feel that Austria was now second class because they were getting a woman?

VON DAMM: If there was, I paid certainly no attention to it. I was much too busy and I never paid any attention to that. I think a lot of it you can then make up in your own mind if you listen to the grassroots. I never did, I felt I was in that position and if somebody didn't like to deal with it, it was tough. That was his problem, but not mine.

Q: [Laughs] Yes. Very refreshing. Did you present your credentials right away?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: Can you discuss that or are you saving that for your book?

VON DAMM: I have it also in my book.

Q: You have that also in your book?

VON DAMM: I can give it also to you, so we don't have to go over it.

Q: Fine. Now what about your deputy chief? Did you select one before you went, or did you inherit somebody when you got there, or what was that all about?

VON DAMM: I selected him here but he was already there. [Felix Bloch, Foreign Service Officer who left the Service in 1989 under suspicion of espionage.]

Q: But you had selected him?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: Okay. What basis did you use for selecting your deputy? How much choice did you have?

VON DAMM: I think I would have had my choice but I found it almost impossible to make a real choice because when you interview some people, there's no way . . . what can you learn in an interview?

Q: Were you looking for certain things?

VON DAMM: Obviously somebody that's smart, and that's a good manager, and that can counsel me, that I can rely on, that knows the lay of the land, and that's why I chose somebody that knew Austria already. He was the economic counselor. I thought that was a plus.

Q: And did you look for language ability?

VON DAMM: Yes, he had that too. I mean that's really not a problem. If you look among the Foreign Service officers, usually they have all of the -- how should I say -- the training to support you well. They usually know the language, they usually know the country. The field is wide open.

Q: You say he was the economic counselor and you chose him but you did have a chance to talk to him before you went over there?

VON DAMM: Yes. .

Q: And how did it work out? Were you satisfied with him?

VON DAMM: Yes and no. I was very satisfied from the standpoint of the production of his work. He was a workaholic. He was smart. At the beginning when I was there I was extremely happy and I got him all kinds of special pay. I do believe when somebody works well for me, I fight for them. He got one of those bonus pays. But I was having problem at the end before my resignation with the remarriage. I had problems over here with the White House, a political thing. I felt him wanting on the most important thing. In loyalty.

Yes. It hurt me because I went all the way out. I chose him to be the deputy chief of mission. But, then, I don't know. I've often thought about it, maybe my expectations were too high. I'm not saying that he was disloyal from the standpoint of a staffer, I don't mean it that way. But you know it is very lonely for a political appointee to be in an embassy. Because you know that's just the way it is that everybody else belongs to a different family than I do. When everything is going well it's easier, but when you have a tough time, whatever that tough time is, on whatever level it is, I think you look towards

your deputy, because that's the only person you chose, to be the one that also holds your hand, if you understand what I mean.

Q: I do, absolutely.

VON DAMM: And comforts you, that will give you his brainstorming, what you could do. In other words, cares. I have talked to -- I don't know how outspoken some of your political appointees are in that regard.

Q: Very.

VON DAMM: You feel all of a sudden really deserted and that is a big thing.

Q: Do you think this has anything to do with his training as a Foreign Service officer or do you it's strictly a character thing with this particular individual? What I'm trying to say is do you think he put his loyalty to an institution, perhaps, above his personal loyalty? Was there any element of that in there? .

VON DAMM: No, in my case I don't think it was, because he wasn't torn between the institution and me. I didn't have the problem with the State Department. Also, in the meantime, we know that Felix has serious character flaws.

Q: Yes.

VON DAMM: It seems to me that institutions, as the Foreign Service or the military don't breed the same friendships as we are used to. They never seem to get that close, maybe because they constantly have to cut the cord.

Q: That's a very good point. You're the first one that's brought that up.

VON DAMM: I don't know. This is just the top of my head.

Q: But when you needed emotional support, it wasn't there.

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: That's certainly unfortunate, because as you say, being at the top, it's lonely at the top.

VON DAMM: This is another reason why often the political appointees in Washington like to be surrounded by some people that they can absolutely rely on and trust for both emotional and policy support

Q: Especially with the press sniping at you, or whatever is going on. How large is the mission in Vienna?

VON DAMM: With the Austrians we were between 300-350 people.

Q: Three hundred fifty people?

VON DAMM: Approximately, with everybody.

Q: A lot of responsibility. How many Marines do you have?

VON DAMM: 25. About 20-25. It was right in there.

Q: How were you able to develop a relationship with the head of state, or did you? Was that perhaps not important?

VON DAMM: In Austria?

Q: In Austria, yes.

VON DAMM: Oh yes, I had a great relationship. I had total access to anybody. But again my situation was a little different because I was so popular in Austria. The politicians of Austria wanted to be photographed with me and wanted to . . . like I say it was a unique situation. I don't think you have that so quick. So one cannot conclude this way or that way, because it was different.

Q: And that you were able to develop very, very soon?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: What about running the embassy itself? How often did you have staff or country team meetings?

VON DAMM: Every week. Every week a country team meeting and I had every morning a staff meeting.

Q: Who was at the staff meetings?

VON DAMM: All my counselors.

Q: I suppose that was just a short thing just to pull the day together?

VON DAMM: Yes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes. We talked about our projects, what everybody was doing.

Q: Then once a week you had the country team meeting. You conducted those, did you?

VON DAMM: Yes. The country team meetings were larger than my staff meetings. Staff meetings were like economic counselor, just immediate, you know.

Q: The reason I said did you conduct that, in some cases the ambassador prefers the DCM to conduct them, that's all. But you conducted them yourself. Did you conduct these along collegial lines?

VON DAMM: What do you mean?

Q: Collegial meaning you wanted input from everybody. You just didn't give them directions.

VON DAMM: No, it was very informal. I wanted input from everybody. I made it clear that everybody can [contribute]. . . I enjoy discussion, and I also . . . I was Helene to them. I did not wish to take home the ambassador when we were together. No, we were informal.

Q: I see. But in public they called you . . .

VON DAMM: In public.

Q: What did they call you? Madame Ambassador or Ambassador?

VON DAMM: Ambassador.

Q: Did you have a preference there as to what you were called?

VON DAMM: No, I don't think so.

Q: What about your other diplomatic colleagues? Were you particularly friendly with any special ones?

VON DAMM: No, I really didn't feel that was my job. I had all the access I needed to the government, so it wasn't like a country behind the iron curtain where you mingle with the other ambassadors to get information. I didn't need it. I never really set out to be particularly friendly. Once in a while when I was invited I would go, but that was not my priority. In retrospect I would do more. The American ambassador is always the most sought-after invitee and particular small countries can easily feel slighted if you always decline their invitations. It's also public diplomacy I realized too late!

Q: One thing I have discovered is that in some cases the ambassador who is alone can find friendship with another ambassador because you sort of have a pool of interests. But even when that happens you always have to remember you are the American ambassador and that person is representing another country so you really can't get too close, I suppose.

VON DAMM: A lot of them do. I have watched. They just share information about Austria mostly, not about their government, because that's really what they have in common.

Q: Where there many iron curtain diplomats there?

VON DAMM: Oh sure.

Q: What were your relations with them?

VON DAMM: Same.

Q: The same?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: Now you must have had an awfully, awfully heavy schedule as far as representation and entertaining go, didn't you?

VON DAMM: Yes, but I tried to steer them the way I wanted pretty much. I just did too much in retrospect, I think. When all is said and done, it's really not appreciated, let's put it that way. An ambassador is very far away from here. I have also concluded the reason, I think, that by and large the ambassadors are not better than they are -- there's always going to be a political football -- because the American people don't pay enough attention and the only way you really get a better cut is if they pay attention. But everybody is guilty and that includes the State Department. If a new secretary or a new assistant secretary comes in and he has a person that he wants to bring with him and he needs a spot. Where's the guy going? They look for him to send him abroad. . And it can be an Asian expert that goes to Africa. So what I'm saying is they are all guilty. The White House is guilty, the Hill is guilty, they're all guilty. And they get away with it because the people don't watch it. As a consequence, as long as they do a halfway decent job up there, nobody pays attention. The State Department pays attention if things go really wrong. But you can also on the other hand do an excellent job, knock yourself out, it gets the same no attention. You see. [Laughs]

Q: You really knocked yourself . . .

VON DAMM: I felt I really did too much. I always remember Larry saying to me, "When you go over there you will never have an experience like this. Also don't forget to enjoy it." But if you've worked 18 hour days and if you have worked very, very hard like you do when you work in the White House, we are really under the gun all the time, you cannot just change overnight. You can't. You are your own worst enemy. Nobody told me I had to do it.

Q: You were the boss. Could do what you want.

VON DAMM: I know I drove the embassy also very hard.

Q: Did you?

VON DAMM: Yes, very hard.

Q: Did you keep pretty much on top of the reporting schedule?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: Ride herd on them?

VON DAMM: Most of the cables and everything was initiated by the various departments, but I looked through them all carefully, particularly the political analyses because the way political instructions are interpreted reflects very much the writer's prejudices. I was pretty much an initiator of programs, of projects, but I'm also a good delegator. So I let them actually do it and I just ride herd.

Q: Did you draft your own cables?

VON DAMM: Sometimes, but mostly I let them do it. It freed me, as I told you, to do and initiate things others couldn't, like the three benefit concerts. Nobody else could get the Bellamy brothers or Frank Sinatra or Bernstein, negotiate terms, location, etc. etc.

Q: Tell me about those? This is unique. Tell me about it.

VON DAMM: Is it unique? I don't know.

Q: Yes, it is.

VON DAMM: Well, for the Freud Museum I did two fund raisers. One was with Lorin Maazel and Rudi Buchbinder. Rudi Buchbinder is one of Vienna's most beloved pianist and Lorin Maazel was the conductor of the Vienna Opera at the time.

Q: Lorin Maazel I know.

VON DAMM: He played the fiddle. They did a garden concert. It was so successful and gave the museum such a shot in the arm that they convinced me I should do another one to really get them financially set. So I had Bernstein do a concert! Then I convinced Frank Sinatra to do a Christmas concert for all the children's charities of Austria. And a fourth one I did with the Bellamy brothers for the International American School.

Q: Who are the Bellamy brothers? Excuse my ignorance.

VON DAMM: That's more of a, not a rock group, semi-rock group. A country rock group.

Q: That was for the school?

VON DAMM: The American International School, yes. But all of these things are very time-consuming and taxing -- you have to line up the stars, then you have to get certain permits from the Austrian government. There are always hurdles and aggravations of course.

Q: Oh, sure. Sure.

VON DAMM: I also had a great exchange on the cabinet level of people from Austria and the United States. In two and a half years I had almost the entire cabinet over there, including people like Bill Buckley, and Jeane Kirkpatrick. Because I felt that was important, if I could do it, for the Austrians to get to know those players. So I had a lot of activity when they came over. I had press conferences scheduled. I put them on political television shows. They have those political shows there like they do here. I would have parties at the residence, dinner parties for an exchange of views. All of those things of course take a great deal of time.

Q: How were you able to get a name as big as Sinatra? You must know him personally, then.

VON DAMM: Yes, because he was a close friend of the Reagans.

Q: How do you approach somebody like that.

VON DAMM: I did it mostly through the people surrounding him. I knew his lawyer and his agent very well.

Q: I see. Then you make all of these [concerts] and then you have parties for those people too, and put them on TV and so forth?

VON DAMM: Well for Frank Sinatra, I didn't put him on TV but they showed excerpts from his concert. They covered it, obviously. It was great press for the US because here is the American ambassador doing a charity event for the Austrians. Again it's public diplomacy. You create a good feeling in the Austrian people's minds and hearts that the Americans care.

Q: I also notice that you brought Geoffrey Beene? ·

VON DAMM: Yes, the fashion show.

Q: That was pretty successful, wasn't it?

VON DAMM: Yes. We tried to facilitate, as well as we could, American business in Austria; the increase in trade was a real priority. For that purpose we also sponsored a computer show at one point.

Q: That's just what was I was going to get to, your major policy problems. You didn't have really diplomatic problems, so it was mainly trade and promoting US trade?

VON DAMM: Well, these were problems, for instance, the specialty steel issue, we needed to negotiate a new quota for Austria. And one of the most irksome problems over the years has been the diversion of high tech through Austria to the eastern bloc. While I was there we did succeed to get legislation passed that would curtail that.

Q: Legislation passed?

VON DAMM: To curtail the transfer of western technology to the east bloc.

Q: You mean Austrians passed legislation?

VON DAMM: Yes, Austrians. We were leaning on them for years.

Q: Oh, I see what you mean, yes.

VON DAMM: And again it was all a little bit difficult because Austria is a neutral country and they obviously take great care to keep their standing intact the way they see it. But we did persuade them and, as I understand it, it works fairly well. We're not quite there yet where we want to be, but it's at least the basis for it.

Q: Very good. Did you have much problem with drugs?

VON DAMM: I guess there was some, but we had a completely [on] its own unit in all this drug area. They were just more or less attached to us, the embassy, because we weren't really involved. I mean, I never had occasion where I as an ambassador had to get involved.

Q: Does it come in through Austria to the US?

VON DAMM: There's actually little. It has never come to my attention that it would be a big problem.

Q: So the area, then, of your greatest emphasis would be in the economic side of things?

VON DAMM: Well, trade.

Q: Trade, did you have a trade fair while you were there, international or US?

VON DAMM: We had, yes, but nothing major, huge. You see, one of the problems was that I discovered very quickly, that American companies' interest in Austria was marginal. Austria is a very small market. Many of them felt it was not really worth their time and effort or money to have any big campaign going, or new products or what have you, because the market is so small. So it wasn't that we weren't eager and ready to do more in that area, but the interest wasn't there from the US.

Q: What about the flow of goods the other way? Does the US import anything special from Austria?

VON DAMM: Yes, they do import things. That was not my area to promote. That usually has to do with the ups and down of the dollar, how much it is, but there is trade, yes.

Q: You said you were given a lot of leverage by the Department. Were you given any policy guidance from the Department?

VON DAMM: They were always there to ask if I needed them, but they pretty much left you alone. If that's how you decided to do it, you know?

Q: Okay. Did you have many congressional delegates?

VON DAMM: Enough.

Q: I thought Austria, being so centrally located and such a beautiful country, you might have had a great many of them.

VON DAMM: Yes. It wasn't as many as some of the other ambassadors would joke, they were constantly . . .

Q: I think they get a lot in Nepal. [Laughs]

VON DAMM: They were constantly inundated with these things. I don't think I was inundated. I had enough. I didn't miss more if you understand what I mean, but it wasn't so that it became a problem.

Q: It wasn't?

VON DAMM: No.

Q: But when they came, I suppose you had to see that they were properly entertained.

VON DAMM: Yes, of course.

Q: Do you think that those serve a good purpose?

VON DAMM: I suppose so. I think they could serve a greater purpose if, for instance, some Austrian-related issue came before Congress. It's easier to lobby someone you know or who knows the country. But they shift ambassadors so quickly that that whole argument falls by the wayside.

Q: What do you think would be an optimum time for an ambassador to stay? Or would that, again, depend on circumstances?

VON DAMM: Well, obviously it depends on circumstances too. I think in a country by and large if you have no problem you can replace the ambassador pretty frequently and it won't interfere with the job. To me the ideal situation would be to do away with the so-called "tour of duty," but rather have an open-ended appointment and periodic review of the impact a particular ambassador makes on the country.

Q: It seems a shame to take somebody doing such a job as you were doing and then you only had two and a half years?

VON DAMM: Two and a half years, yes. But what I'm saying is, I think you should measure their work, and consider how does that person fit into the country? From all angles. That to me would make a lot more sense. Then you really are talking about the interests of the US and not the interests of the individuals. [It] shouldn't be the interests of the individuals, whether it's the Foreign Service or whether it's the politics of it. I don't think you should go over five years or so because then there is an argument to be made that person becomes isolated. He's no longer an American, he becomes more one of them. I do believe in this argument when it goes over a certain amount of time. But four years or five years, I think. You know, it takes a certain time to get to know the players. That does not seem to me like it would be so terrible.

Q: That certainly has been a complaint from other governments, that we shift them so often they just get to know you and then off you go. And the staff people underneath, too, they're shifted all the time.

Did you have any particular consular problems while you were there?

VON DAMM: No.

Q: Within your mission itself did you have any problems with rivalries? Quite often there is a rivalry, say, between the CIA and the political section, for example.

VON DAMM: I'm not sure. I'm sure there could have been, but I was a very strong supporter of the CIA and the mission chief, and I think as ambassador you can set the tone of that. As far as I was concerned they had an important job to do and sometimes you have to weigh the political risk.

Q: So you were able to keep that down by setting the tone. How frequently did you entertain, would you say?

VON DAMM: Too much. I found that the least pleasurable part of my job. All the entertainment responsibilities. I like people but I came from concentrating on substantive matters. And entertaining, a lot of it does get to you, if you're not brought up on it.

Q: Seems superficial.

VON DAMM: Yes. I know it's an important part of it.

Q: Did you primarily have dinner parties, or did you vary it?

VON DAMM: I varied it depending what it was. If a cabinet officer came over I usually tried to have a dinner party with twenty people on the one table so you get discussions going. It depends what the groups were and what you tried to get done. Sometimes you just had to receive the Chamber of Commerce. Certain things you had no choice on how you wanted to do it.

Q: Did you include the members of the diplomatic corps?

VON DAMM: How do you mean?

Q: Did you have ambassadors from other countries at your parties?

VON DAMM: Seldom.

Q: What about the Foreign Service inspectors, did they inspect the post while you were there?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: What did you think about them? Did they do a good job? Were they fair?

VON DAMM: I think they did a good job. From what I could tell they were fair. What do you call them, the inspector general?

Q: Back here he's the inspector general then they send out teams of inspectors. How many times did they come while you were . . . ?

VON DAMM: One time that I remember.

Q: Just one time. Did you have many young officers at the post who needed training, and if so, was that a concern of yours that they get the proper grounding in how to write reports and how to interview people and so forth?

VON DAMM: I left that pretty much to their departments. I felt they were part of the Foreign Service unit, and they would be better trained by their immediate bosses than by me.

Q: I just wondered if it was something that you kept an eye on and checked it out.

VON DAMM: No, actually, really not.

Q: Okay. You've mentioned some of the things that you did that were so helpful to promote American interests, especially these concerts that you gave, and also the Americans that you saw were introduced to the people, such as Jeane Kirkpatrick and William Buckley. I wondered, can you think of other major successes you had while you were at the post?

VON DAMM: Like I say, it was mostly in the field of public diplomacy in which I involved our cabinet people. I also succeeded in getting the first state visit ever by an Austrian president [Dr. Rudolf Kirchschlager] to come over to the United States.

Q: Can you give me more detail on that? I remember reading about that and what a coup it was.

VON DAMM: More detail on what?

Q: On how you were able to succeed in getting him over here.

VON DAMM: By leaning on the White House to get the time.

Q: That is an example of what you mean why it's a good thing to have a political appointee, because you knew the right people?

VON DAMM: Yes, but on the other hand, the State Department obviously has also something to say as who it's going to be. It was hammered out between the State Department and the White House.

Q: Was it your idea?

VON DAMM: Yes, sure it was my idea. But I felt it was totally legitimate, even though Austria was a small country and a neutral country, that with the longstanding relationship we have had it was way past due that we should have the president over here. So I mean I lobbied both. I lobbied the State Department plus I lobbied the White House.

Q: Have you, I'm sure you have, kept up with the matter of Kurt Waldheim and the very bad press he's getting in the United States?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: Do you know, has that affected the relations with the ambassador over there, the current ambassador?

VON DAMM: This matter did have an affect, yes. I admit, I don't like this law to begin with. It's so un-American. Under our system, we are innocent until proven guilty. Do you know anything about the law?

Q: No, I don't.

VON DAMM: Well, as I understand it, individuals suspected of Nazi crimes can be placed on the watch list in order to keep tabs on them during the time they are investigated. Fine, but how are you going to lose track of a head of state? I think it called for a political decision of our administration to leave him off. There was no reason in the world to offend a friendly country that way. I admit I was very disappointed by the Reagan administration that they gave in to internal political pressures. Like I said, to my way of thinking that law shouldn't even be on the books, because if you do, what about all the other crimes to mankind? Where are they recorded and brought to justice? I do not like selected morality.

Q: Do you think in a way this has undone all the good you did?

VON DAMM: I would say yes. It will take a long time for Austrians to forget this slap in the face.

Q: That's too bad.

VON DAMM: Yes, but it's a matter of fact. But I have my own ideas about that too. With our foreign policies; we often tend to moralize. Or try to moralize. I don't think diplomacy is here to moralize. If you need to, do it in the AID department. As I understand diplomacy we should try to establish the best possible relationship between countries, respecting the difference and not aggravate the climate. To send a black to South Africa during the emotional time when they try to come to grips with their racial problems does not fall into that category. [Edward J. Perkins, U.S. ambassador to South Africa, 1986-89]

Q: It's not very diplomatic, is it?

VON DAMM: No, it's the opposite of diplomacy. It's moralizing and diplomacy is the place for it, nor do other countries appreciate it.

Q: No, it should be pragmatic.

VON DAMM: Diplomacy I think has to be.

Q: But it isn't, you know. As you say, we send a black man to South Africa which just exacerbates the problem. Are there any other things that you wanted to mention as far as your successes go?

VON DAMM: No, no.

Q: Was there something you wanted to do that you couldn't get done while you were there?

VON DAMM: I tried to sell them F-16 fighter planes and they bought from the Swedes. There are instances like this where I think that a careerist would probably have been smarter than I and spent less time on it because he probably would have anticipated that they were going to buy from another neutral country. But I took it on face value when they told me everybody has the same chance and everybody can bid and we spent a lot of time and energy on it. So there are definitely times when the experience of a Foreign Service officer has its advantages. But I'll give you those pages from my book that deal with that era and you can pick up some stuff.

Q: Terrific. Getting to the personal side of this, as far as a house goes, how did you handle running the residence? Did you have a person assigned to do that?

VON DAMM: I could choose one person to come with me, a so-called political, and instead of my secretary, I had a Foreign Service secretary, I had an assistant who was going to do my house. She ran the house.

Q: She did? That was somebody you knew back here?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: And paid by the State Department?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: What about entertaining, did you have to pay for any of that out of your own pocket or were you able to cover your expenses with your allowance?

VON DAMM: I started that famous fund, private fund. I was very angry when they did away with it. I thought there was no reason for it.

Q: That wasn't done away with until after you had left, is that right?

VON DAMM: Yes, but the State Department never liked it. I thought it was a typical example again of the rivalry between the Foreign Service and the political because they probably felt it gave the political appointees another edge.

Q: That's the one that Faith Whittlesey had so much trouble with?

VON DAMM: Yes. Have you interviewed Faith yet?

Q: No, she has talked to me on the phone and also we've written back and forth, but she's resigning next July and she'll be back then. So with the help of those funds you were able to cover this. Would you go into that just a little bit, where you got the idea and how it worked?

VON DAMM: Well, both the White House and the State Department raised private funds for refurbishing certain quarters. What we did wasn't based on an original idea. We just wanted to establish the same thing for some of the residences abroad. The matter of fact is that some of the residences are in terrible shape. Not all of them are showcases like Rome. It seemed as legitimate as everything else. Then as the entertainment funds also got smaller and smaller and smaller, why couldn't it be extended? I accept the demand for good housekeeping and an intelligent expenditure of these funds. That's legitimate, but it appeared the State Department was thrilled when some of the so-called "abuses" surfaced so they would have an excuse to do away with them. "Abuses" they called instances when this fund was spent in a bit more liberal fashion.

Q: I think you're quite right on that. Now, did you have the same secretary all the time you were there? Now had you selected her too?

VON DAMM: She was already in Vienna and part of the Foreign Service. I interviewed her when I was there.

Q: You went over then to Vienna before?

VON DAMM: No, I did it when I arrived.

Q: Did you have many women officers? Did there happen to be many women?

VON DAMM: None. Just USIA had some women who did the art work and this kind of thing.

Q: That then is nothing that you feel one way or the other about? You weren't particularly anxious to have them? It just didn't enter your thinking?

VON DAMM: Yes. I didn't turn anybody down. My personnel was assigned to me by the State Department. I didn't choose them.

Q: And you didn't ask specially that they send one or another?

VON DAMM: No. I tried not to interfere in the Foreign Service apparatus. It wasn't my place. I did that in the White House. I tried to promote women and look out for women and so forth, but that was my job there. But here I was really the person that came into an institution. It wasn't my job to change the institution.

Q: What was done at the post on July Fourth? And did you change that at all?

VON DAMM: We had quite an elaborate party at the residence. Again with the help of private donations and help from US corporations. I don't think they will ever have another party like that. We had a garden party where we served all the traditional fare like hamburger, hot dog, and brownies. Girl Scouts helped to clean up. We had all kinds of shows and music -- from square dancers to jazz to country music. There was entertainment galore. Then at the end fireworks that lit up the sky saying "Happy Birthday America." That was quite something.

Q: And who came?

VON DAMM: What do you mean?

Q: To the party?

VON DAMM: All the Austrians. I had only selected people from the post because if I invited all 350 people there's no room for the others. But it was a festival shared with the Austrians. People from all walks of life.

Q: Did you organize that pretty much yourself?

VON DAMM: Well, again, the idea. Then between the State Department people -- and my husband helped me a great deal on that.

Q: Was this the first year you were there?

VON DAMM: Since I arrived practically a couple of days before my Fourth of July when we had just the usual reception. This one was the second year.

Q: Okay, second year. Did you include your staff at various parties to help you in the entertaining?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: Did you have a rotation list of them?

VON DAMM: It depended what the event was. If it was a very large one, I would invite all the counselors. Otherwise if it was a small party I would invite those who were affected by it or had an input. If it was a trade matter I would get the trade guy and this kind of thing, or the political or economic.

Q: Did your officers ever ask you if you could put on a party and include certain people, certain of their contacts?

VON DAMM: Oh, sure. The invitation lists we made up together. They always had input on the invitation list.

Q: How did you divide your entertaining allotment, representation money?

VON DAMM: I supplemented with the money I raised. So that was never a problem.

Q: I meant as far as your officers went, how did you decide who would get how much?

VON DAMM: I let the deputy chief of mission handle it the way I was told was standard State Department procedure. Obviously you can change it. But I accepted the suggested guideline from the Department.

Q: You traveled around a great deal, didn't you, within Austria?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: Did you have much time for recreation at the beginning?

VON DAMM: I tried to get that in between as best I could. ‘

Q: Did you have any troubles with your health?

VON DAMM: No.

Q: No, no health troubles. You were not threatened or in danger of your life?

VON DAMM: Not that I know of, no. Besides I'm not a person that pays too much attention to that. I don't mean to say that one should be glib about it, but I'm convinced if somebody really wants to get you, they're going to get you. On weekends I felt the safest actually by myself. When you go someplace yourself people don't take note unless you have five people walking behind you. Weekends I drove myself even. What time is it?

Q: It is 11:25.

VON DAMM: Well I don't really have anything more to add other than the defense minister called me over once and showed me a letter over my signature suggesting NATO considers Austria as one of them and would come to its aid if in need. At first I was really dumbstruck. It looked like my signature. It looked like my letter stationery, but the contents of the letter was impossible!. I didn't know what to make out of it. All I could say was, "I'll take it with me and I'll see."

Q: Did it cause you any other trouble? How did you prove that it wasn't you who had done this?

VON DAMM: We sent it back to the US to be analyzed and they came back with the decision that it was a forgery. In the meantime I could only assure the government that I didn't recall ever signing such a letter.

Q: And you were believed?

VON DAMM: They did believe me.

Q: So it didn't do any damage?

VON DAMM: No.

Q: I guess that's quite a usual ploy?

VON DAMM: But again a Foreign Service officer probably would have known that right away. I did not. Because I had never experienced that. In fairness, they tell you about things like that in the briefing but you just don't believe it happens to you.

Q: Exactly. Now do you want to discuss a little bit the reasons why you left when you left. Because presumably you . . .

VON DAMM: That's all in the book. I have it pretty detailed in the book, yes, so I don't think we need to go over it now.

Q: You had a very high-ranking job in the White House. But you were, as you said, in the background. What effect did this have on your own perception of yourself to be in a position of such power?

VON DAMM: That never really entered my mind that I was in a position of such power. Time races so quickly, the pressures are so great, the responsibilities so awesome, that you just go from day to day and you hope to get through it. It's not the kind of thing where you sit back and say, 'Ah look at myself and all the power I have now.' At least it didn't work with me that way. I would doubt that others have. I doubt it.

Q: I think it's more an accretion of power and you don't realize you have all of this until suddenly you don't have it any more.

VON DAMM: I don't know.

Q: Did you have any feelings like that afterwards when you had to give up the official car and all of those things? Did that bother you at all?

VON DAMM: No, but then I think I'm a little bit unusual in that. My life has moved so fast and has moved into so many different directions that I'm extremely flexible. I go from one chapter to the other and I can close it. I have seen some of my colleagues that had a difficult time to adjust to reality again. I did not at all.

Q: You don't have decompression problems?

VON DAMM: No, I never had it. I'd be too far away anyway to have them, but I never had it.

Q: You're quite right. Some of them say it takes six months or a year. We've already discussed the impact of your embassy and then what happened afterwards. Do you want to discuss at all your successor, young Lauder, and the problems he got into? [Ronald S. Lauder, U.S. ambassador to Austria, 1986-87. Criticized for publicly expressing the view that anti-Semitism was widespread in Austria. He was subsequently charged with purchasing and exporting Austrian works of art without government permission, a move considered politically motivated and without merit.]

VON DAMM: I don't know that has anything to do with the book.

Q: No, it doesn't have too much except how a successor can undo all the good that you have done.

VON DAMM: I'm not sure that he was responsible. I think it was as I said before, I made more the State Department and the administration responsible. Because if they had said to Lauder, Look you have to go to shake the president's hand or you have to do this and that, if he didn't want to do it out of his own personal thinking he could have resigned. I don't like to make somebody responsible that in my view really isn't. I think that was leadership lacking from back here.

Q: Okay. Isn't it a delicate thing, though, trying to keep relations between people going on an even keel when it can fall between the stools so often and it does. Did it bother you, though, to see relations between the two countries falling apart that way?

VON DAMM: Certainly I was kind of sad because I felt it was unnecessary. In my eyes totally unnecessary. But then I have worked here long enough in Washington to know that the internal politics of the country always take precedent. So I should not have been surprised.

Q: It is not too usual for an ambassador to stay on in the country where he or she has been ambassador. Did you have any problems with that at all? You just moved in other circles, perhaps?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: Did you meet your successor?

VON DAMM: I knew Ron before.

Q: Oh, you knew him.

VON DAMM: I supported his candidacy. But I tried to stay out of his way from the standpoint of, you know, I gave no press interviews or anything like that for at least a year. I was not really seen or heard, and I did try to pay my dues to him, so to speak. I think that's only right. .

Q: Sure. You did that quite deliberately? You just dropped out of sight?

VON DAMM: Yes. Out of official sight.

Q: Okay. Have you continued with your work helping the museums and schools and things?

VON DAMM: I don't have the time now. I have to concentrate on my own business interests now.

Q: You went to writing your book, didn't you? The one that came out in Austria?

VON DAMM: Yes, I did a book and released it in Europe and then I have this book. Those are pretty full time jobs.

Q: Oh yes, I should say they are. So you're planning now to spend half your time, not half, but part of the time here and part of the time there?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: Go back and forth?

VON DAMM: Yes. '

Q: Would you like to be an ambassador again?

VON DAMM: I don't think I would like to be a government employee anymore. That's part of my life that I have closed. I have entered the business world and enjoy these new challenges.

Q: Do you have any connection with your husband's hotel? [While serving as ambassador, von Damm married Peter Gürtler, the owner of Vienna's prestigious hotel, the Sacher.] Do you do any work?

VON DAMM: No.

Q: You're in business now. How did the Speaker's Bureau and you get together?

VON DAMM: I happened to know Harry Walker from the days when Ronald Reagan was scheduled.

Q: I see.

VON DAMM: Doubleday wanted me to start the speaking circuit because it's part of the promotion of the book.

Q: When do you anticipate your book will be out?

VON DAMM: Not until next January. It takes a long time. But I will probably start speaking in the fall.

Q: So in other words, you will be back and forth?

VON DAMM: Oh yes.

Q: Are you going to be in Austria next summer, do you think? You're not planning to do any campaigning then? You're out . . .

VON DAMM: Of campaigning, but I do some fundraising, yes.

Q: That is for whoever the candidate is? [The reference is to George Bush.]

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: With your contacts you mean?

VON DAMM: Yes.

Q: You certainly have had some very good insights into an ambassador's role. Do you have any thing else that you'd like to add to this?

VON DAMM: No, not right now thank you.

Q: Well, I certainly look forward to reading your galleys.

VON DAMM: Okay.

End of interview