

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
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USIA: Arts Diplomacy Series

PAUL DENIG

*Interviewed by: Emily Fennell
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INTERVIEW

Q: Okay, so for the official record, this is Emily Fennell interviewing Paul Denig. Is that how I say your last name?

DENIG: Perfect.

Q: Okay, awesome. And then it's December 27 2021. So, Paul, let's start with a quick recap of how you came from birth to joining the Foreign Service.

DENIG: I would say the most important factor was my father being sent by his company in Pittsburgh to open and head a European office in Zurich, Switzerland. He traveled all around Europe to sell steel and coke plants, and was also visited in Zurich by businessmen from those other countries. Since he thought it would be a good idea for his four sons to experience these visits, he would include us in lunches and dinners that he hosted for these foreign businessmen. I found them absolutely fascinating and exciting and enjoyed learning a few words of different languages. In particular, the Turkish businessmen were very, very friendly. I still have the hotel menu on which one of them wrote several Turkish words. Since that time, I've always wanted to serve in Turkey; alas, that never transpired. So from an early age, I got used to international dialogue and attempts at mutual understanding and agreement. Of course, I experienced that in my daily life in Switzerland, as well, as I learned the language, got to know the people and tried to fit in. Another important influence was learning about Swiss and broader European history, which I found absolutely fascinating. That led me to major in History. In college, I had a double major with German literature. In turn, that led me to spend the second semester of my junior year of college at the University of Bonn in West Germany where I took a course on European diplomatic history, specifically, imperialism. I had a marvelous professor, and the course was a great experience. That was when I decided that the area of history that I would specialize in would be diplomatic history, primarily European diplomatic history, in graduate school. When it came time to do my dissertation research, I received a Fulbright grant to spend two years in Europe in various diplomatic archives. In the course of interacting with Germans and other international colleagues, I found that I was often explaining or defending the United States. I concluded that this is

fun, and perhaps even useful. So all of those things came together. After returning to my home university, one of my fellow graduate school students brought in a newspaper article that stated that the outlook for teaching history at the tertiary level was very dim indeed. That same day, this friend walked across campus to the law school, got an application, and is now a top lawyer in Chicago. Shortly thereafter, I took the Foreign Service exam and the rest is history.

Q: And I assume that the results were good.

DENIG: Yes, the first time. I hated taking exams, so I had said to myself, “if it doesn't work the first time, then that's a sign from God that I don't need to be in the Foreign Service.”

Q: Wow. I feel like that is a bit unique. Most people are kind of gung-ho on that. Okay. So once you join the Foreign Service, what anecdotes stand out from those early days.

DENIG: One of the things that my colleagues and I were very impressed with were the benefits that they explained to us that we would be getting. We joined because we thought it would be interesting and fascinating to represent our country overseas and to explain our policies and our country and our history. So we were pleasantly surprised during the initial orientation in Washington to find out that in addition to getting to do that, the Foreign Service was going to do its best to take care of us.

Q: How did you go from diplomatic European history to specific interest in cultural diplomacy? Did you kind of fall into that or was it?

DENIG: Well, I quickly learned from my older and more experienced colleagues that cultural diplomacy can be an important and useful part of overall diplomacy. And, in fact, I would argue that cultural diplomacy can and does play a big role in fulfilling the overall task of public diplomacy. The overall task of public diplomacy, as I see it, is to explain U.S. foreign and economic policy to foreign audiences, to get them to understand what we are doing and why we are doing it, and then, in a best case, to get the foreign audiences to agree with us or even to support our policies. An important part of this dialog is to explain the historical and cultural background out of which U.S. policies arise. For all of that, I think cultural diplomacy can play a big role. The part of the foreign service that I joined was the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) which carried out our nation's public diplomacy. Over the years, USIA had developed quite a few excellent programs, under Arts America and other rubrics. And these were toolkits that we as diplomats could use when stationed overseas. When posted overseas, we first considered the audiences which we were trying to at least enlighten if not persuade. We could then decide which tools in the toolbox might be most helpful to advance our goals. And speaking about cultural diplomacy, there are a number of ways in which it helps us in fulfilling our task.

Q: In your experience, what were the general goals of cultural diplomacy?

DENIG: First of all, perhaps most importantly, is sharing our cultural wealth or cultural successes and our cultural leadership with other countries. And I take a rather broad view of culture and cultural diplomacy, consisting of performing arts, visual arts, architecture, literature, history, and so forth.

Q: It sounds like these programs created a mutual learning environment. Why is it important to have a specific policy goal?

DENIG: I think that in general sharing our culture, even without a specific policy issue or goal in mind, does four things. First, when the culture that we're presenting is somewhat familiar to the audience -- through recordings or live broadcasts on radio or television -- that tends, I think, to reinforce the relationship between the United States and the foreign audiences. Secondly, when the cultural performance or the cultural artifacts that we're presenting and sharing with the foreign audience are not familiar to the audience, then our sharing constitutes a revelation of additional American depth and breadth. In other words, it contains the subliminal message that we are not just shallow Johnny-come-lately on the historical stage but that we have real experience and real value in our culture that we are happy to share. That leads directly to the third aspect of the usefulness of sharing our cultural heritage. It counters negative stereotypes and engages and encourages other publics to listen to us and pay attention to our leadership. Our activities do not guarantee this reaction, but they do at least encourage it. Fourth, when we go about trying to share an aspect of our cultural history and experience, the fact of doing so can initiate contacts with new organizations that we and the rest of the embassy or consulate have never dealt with before. And that can open doors to new audiences, all of which is very positive. So that's a summary of the effects in general of sharing our culture with audiences overseas, and the value or the usefulness of doing so in a broad framework of diplomacy. We can also use culture to advance specific policy goals.

Q: How was this achieved within these programs with American artists and foreign audiences?

DENIG: I remember years ago seeing a cartoon in the *New Yorker* magazine which depicted a pianist on a stage in a very large auditorium, perhaps La Scala in Italy, who knows. He bows to the audience and says, "Before I begin my concert, let me just say a few words about U.S. foreign policy." Like all good cartoons, it contained an element of exaggeration. But again, like all good cartoons, there's a kernel of truth there as well.

Q: Haha! I'm an enthusiastic cartoon reader, so it's nice to hear there are glimmers of truth. Can you give some examples of the benefits and challenges of cultural diplomacy programs like a concert?

DENIG: Presenting a very nice concert with an accomplished musician can do all sorts of helpful things for us. I tend to put that into two categories. First of all, using culture to advance policy goals. We can use cultural presentations to create an environment or opportunity, where we can speak to specific audiences who might otherwise not darken our doorstep about specific policy issues. For example, if you are stationed in a country

that is a dictatorship or otherwise hostile to the United States, it's sometimes difficult to get key audience members into the embassy, or even into your home for a dinner discussion. But if you have a nice cultural presentation, then either before or after over drinks, you can start talking about a variety of things. You may start with culture, and then veer the conversation into economic, political or diplomatic issues.

Q: Ahh I've heard reception chatter is vital, why do you think that these opportunities are important? And can you provide an example of such outcomes?

DENIG: Cultural receptions provide an opportunity for us to speak to key foreign audiences. Perhaps the most famous example of that, that I'm aware of, is our use of Spaso House in Moscow. Spaso House is the U.S. ambassador's residence which for many years has been the venue for marvelous cultural presentations. The Soviet and Russian elite felt quite comfortable in coming there and enjoying an evening of being immersed in American culture. And of course, our ambassadors and their staff appreciated the opportunity to speak to these elite members of society and government. In other words, these cultural presentations can provide a relaxed, friendly and positive atmosphere for conversation between us and key audience members. Secondly, we can use culture to advance policy goals by creating an environment or opportunity where groups within a host country society or government can talk confidentially with each other on difficult issues. As we even know from the United States, sometimes politicians and other government leaders don't want to be seen talking to their opposition publicly, because it may be seen as a sign of weakness or feeble-mindedness. But if they can go to neutral grounds, say the ambassador's residence or to the consul general's residence, or a theater downtown, then when nobody's looking, they can move off to the side and have intimate and very detailed conversations with each other, in an attempt to bridge gaps and come to mutual understandings. Since one of our goals typically is to encourage peaceful dialogue within other countries and working democracies, such venues and opportunities can be very helpful for stopping either unnecessary civil fighting, or coming to agreements that will benefit the host country as a whole.

Q: Does a personal anecdote come to mind?

DENIG: The most dramatic example that I experienced myself took place when I was stationed in South Africa city Durban on the Indian Ocean. While not the capital, it is the main city in the province of KwaZulu Natal. I arrived in 1994, just months after the first multiracial elections to the South African Parliament. The whites and the blacks had come to an accommodation, but, alas, various Black parties had not come to an accommodation with each other. In fact, in Kwazulu-Natal, the two main Black parties, the African National Congress (ANC) and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) were busy fighting each other. The worst part of the fighting was that it was not just verbal. Every weekend, party members from each group would target members of the opposite party for killings. And obviously, as often happens, even in the United States, there's collateral damage in the form of innocent bystanders also being killed. This situation created an incredible atmosphere of tension and hatred, and obviously, fear and death. That was poison to a functioning democracy. The U.S. consulate general, fully supported by the

embassy in Pretoria, of course, took on as one of its main tasks trying to encourage the two Black political parties, the ANC and the IFP, to cease this civil war and to instead talk with each other, not just at each other, and to try to come up with solutions that would benefit the entire population.

Q: Wow. How did the embassy do that?

DENIG: We did a number of things. One of the important things that we did was to use one of the cultural programs that the USIA offered, the jazz ambassador program, to create an opportunity and conducive atmosphere for the leaders of the two Black parties to be able to speak discreetly with each other. I had already invited a jazz trio to come to Durban, and when we found out that the U.S. ambassador was planning a trip to Durban at the same time, we organized a reception in the beautiful garden of the consul general's residence. The ambassador gave a very good speech, after which I invited everybody to just mellow out and enjoy the jazz music. While the trio was playing, the leaders of the two parties went off to a corner inside the very large tent and came to some understanding. This was a perfect example of using cultural diplomacy to advance policy goals.

Q: Wow. And what was the ultimate outcome of the jazz event?

DENIG: That event together with other things that we were doing within the next few days led to a cessation of the violence between the two political parties. So I think that's a concrete example of how the United States really can help to ameliorate domestic situations in other countries and how cultural diplomacy can be a very effective tool for achieving that. I'm sure that if you were to talk to any other of my colleagues, they would be able to cite examples from their careers as well.

Q: Do you happen to remember the name of the jazz trio that was there?

DENIG: Not by heart. But I am confident that the State Department's Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) will have that in their records of the Arts America Program.

Q: And you mentioned the audience's interaction. Do you have any memories from that time of how the audience there interacted, in addition to the side conference between the ANC and IFP leaders to accomplish the policy goal. Was this just a casual jazz event open to the general public? Or was it invitation only?

DENIG: No, by invitation only. The event was two things. First, it was the introduction of our new ambassador to the elite of our province. And secondly, it was a presentation of American culture. It was all combined with the desire to have a positive influence on the province, and to advance our policy goal of trying to stop the inter-party killings and other violence.

Q: Ahh, I understand. Did you interact with the press at any point?

DENIG: The following day, the ambassador gave a speech -- I believe it was at the Chamber of Commerce luncheon -- to which I had invited all of the key media. I had also contributed to the ambassador's speech two important paragraphs that directly addressed the issue of inter-party violence, calling on the leaders to cease. Employing an approach that I had learned from one of my older colleagues very early in my career -- to make life as easy as possible for journalists -- I took all the copies that my staff had made of the speech, turned to the page where those two paragraphs were, and conveniently circled them in red. Well, guess which parts of the speech appeared in the newspapers the next day? Yes, it was a direct appeal by the ambassador to the political leaders on both sides to stop it, saying, in effect, "This is not helping your people. But if you stop this, that will help your people."

Q: Wow, very smart. Yes, simple. Simple things always happened.

DENIG: Little things. That's right, pay attention to the little things, to the details.

Q: Indeed. Did performers, like the jazz music trio, only perform one time, or were these programs a part of a series?

DENIG: The way it's usually arranged is that these musicians will have a series of events in various countries within a given region such as Africa. I don't remember this trio's schedule. But I would imagine that they played in various cities in South Africa, wherever we had a consulate, in Cape Town and Johannesburg, perhaps in Pretoria, the capital, as well. Since I love culture, I was always looking for opportunities to share American culture. And if it can do double duty, by advancing our policy goals, in this case establishing real democracy, real peace, etc., then so much the better. My colleagues in Cape Town and Johannesburg may have had different intentions, in terms of where the performances took place, what the audience was, and what, if any, policy goals they were pursuing. But all of us, of course, shared the first basic thing that I mentioned, which was the recognition that just sharing America's cultural wealth with foreign audiences is a positive end in and of itself.

Q: Definitely. And this is actually a really interesting trip for me to hear about because the other artists and officers that I talked to, they accompanied the American art group that they were programming to those different cities, but it seems like in this case this trio traveled from point A to point B by themselves.

DENIG: Yes. At least logistically speaking, South Africa back in the mid '90s and still today is a very advanced country where the planes fly on time and you can rely on hotel and restaurant reservations being honored. So it was entirely safe and fine for us to bring the musicians to the airport, get them checked in, and wave goodbye. The musicians go through the boarding process, arrive at the other end, are met at the airport by our staffers and are escorted to their hotel and then to restaurants and later the venue. So once they

arrive in a city, they're always taken care of as much as they want. But there are occasions where we will provide an escort for inter-city travel, especially if we have extra help. I remember in my last overseas assignment, which was back in Serbia-Montenegro, we had another jazz group come out. Coincidentally, we had a young American intern that summer who was a great fan of jazz. And so I asked him to travel around the country with them. This seemed to be desirable because we were asking the musicians to perform in cities where we did not have a consulate, so there was no resident staff, either American or local. In a case like that, yes, it's exceedingly important to send one or even multiple escorts with the group.

Q: So you escorted them through the remnant of Yugoslavia at that time?

DENIG: I didn't, but our young American intern did. They were escorted by him throughout the entire trip.

Q: I've seen from these interviews, the benefits are not only on the policy level, but also on the individual and for American culture, and music and the progression of that side of it as well. Were you able to see how American artists benefited?

DENIG: Yes, that's a very good question. I'm glad you asked that. Absolutely. Just as our presentation of American culture by itself has an impact, even if we're not trying to do anything else, it has a positive impact on the audience, and on the relationship between the American people and the foreign audience. But obviously, it also has a positive impact on the American artists. There may be individual cases where there were some glitches, and that was a negative impact. But on the whole, there is a very positive impact on the musicians.

Q: How so?

DENIG: They got to experience new countries, new cultures, new cuisines, and new ways of thinking. Often enough, if you bring in a group of American musicians, you will find them late at night jamming with local musicians who will be introducing them to local instruments or local folk songs. And so that's a very positive experience. And it's also good for them to have the experience and to see how audiences in different countries, in different cultures, react to public performances. Not everyone applauds in the same way as American audiences do. And some audiences talk more than others during performances. And in some cases, food and drink is consumed during the performance, which is usually frowned on by American performers of classical music. I know this from my wife who is a classically trained violinist. But performing under the aegis of the U.S. government can also have a very positive influence on the musicians' careers, as they perform overseas and themselves conclude that this is a marvelous experience. "I am doing a good thing. And this is fun. And I could even get paid for doing this just as I am getting paid by the U.S. government right now." Sometimes we brought over either classical music ambassadors or jazz ambassadors on fully structured and funded tours, sometimes we would assist an American group, say a jazz group or a

pop group or maybe even a rock band, with some arrangements. For example, we would make an agreement on their behalf with the city, the local theater, or whatever local arena that was most suitable that the local venue would get x percent of the ticket income and the performers would get y percent. So those performers could conclude, "Aha, I can perform overseas and I can earn real money. I can have a great time and have a very appreciative audience." This was especially helpful for a group whose popularity in the United States has gone down and plateaued to suddenly be performing in front of a foreign audience that's never had that opportunity to hear them live. Such performances can be a real boost to their ratings and to their morale, not to mention their wallets.

Q: Are there any memories of this career boost from artists you worked with directly?

DENIG: I remember, in particular, one pianist that I had at my first independent posting, which was in Sarajevo in the Yugoslav Republic of Bosnia. This was in the mid 80s, it was post-Tito, but before the civil war. I invited an American music ambassador, I believe his name was Philip Hosford, a very engaging young man, an excellent pianist, and arranged performances for him both in Sarajevo and in a city which later became much more important than we ever thought it would be -- Banja Luka, which today is the capital of the so called "Republika Srpska" (Serbian Republic). He enjoyed his experience so much that he basically, as far as I know, made a career for himself going around the world, playing for foreign audiences. I believe that he has done very well in doing that. So yes, these programs can give a real boost to the musicians, and probably to other artists as well. If you're a visual artist, and you show your works in a foreign city, the local venue will sometimes agree to make their artwork available for sale. We would always try to arrange for media interviews for both performing and visual artists. If the artist gets good traction with the local media, and in some cases, even the international media, that can give their career as a visual artist a nice boost as well.

Q: Definitely. I also want to ask, so on your side, you arranged media interviews and these other performance opportunities. But you also mentioned that performers would often interact or the American side would interact with local counterparts. Was that something that you would arrange? Or did it just happen naturally?

DENIG: Yes, both.

Q: Okay, what do you mean by that?

DENIG: Sometimes we'd arrange it. Let's say we knew a few musicians in that genre, or one of our local staff members did. The staffer might suggest getting our artists together with local counterparts after their performance in a restaurant or dive around town. Then we would suggest that to the musicians and, or the other performers. They would usually gladly accept that, even if they had to get up at five o'clock the next morning to catch their connecting flight, since it was an opportunity they would not want to pass up. So that worked out just fine. And then in other cases, audience members might come up to the green room after the performance and a conversation would develop. Then the

audience members might invite the Americans to come with them to a bar or restaurant for late night food or drinks conversation. So it's all very convivial, all very positive. That's one of the neat things about these programs and experiences. This is all extremely positive, friendly -- good vibes, as they say.

Q: That's all I've seen from cultural diplomacy is good vibes and outcomes. Moving into the details of the Bosnia trip, did you escort the pianist or was it an American intern like in Serbia-Montenegro?

DENIG: Actually, I did.

Q: You did?

DENIG: That is, I took him to his various activities and venues within the Republic of Bosnia, the area of Yugoslavia for which I was responsible as the sole resident American diplomat. And, actually, both my wife and I escorted him up to Banja Luka for his public performance there. As we were getting ready for the evening, Philip suffered what is today called a "wardrobe malfunction" either with his tuxedo or black tie, so I lent him mine. So it was good that I was there.

Q: Those little snafus are often the most interesting. Do you have any other anecdotes from that trip with Philip Hosford?

DENIG: I would just point out that in terms of audiences that I had to deal with in the course of my career, the audience in Bosnia was perhaps the toughest nut to crack. Even within the Slavic nations the Bosnians were known to be hard-headed and close-minded, particularly the political class. They and their bureaucrats were utterly devoted to the Communist Party hierarchy and dictates from above. So if anybody at the top decided that a cultural activity would not take place, it would not take place, not in Bosnia anyway. And so it was a challenge to deal with the local officials. As was traditionally the case in Europe and many other countries around the world, the art institutions were not NGOs, they were part of the government and fully funded by the government. Basically, if you wanted to arrange a performance, you had to work through the official bureaucracy. And even when you thought you had a friend within the bureaucracy, that friend had to answer to his or her boss, who was listening very carefully to what his political and other bosses were saying and thinking. So that made it challenging. But on the other hand, as I said earlier, when you take the initiative to go to new institutions, and you dangle a very nice cultural activity, it really can and does open doors. With Philip Hosford the pianist. I was able to get into Banja Luka and deal with people in the various institutions regarding the performance. Then, on subsequent visits to the city, it was much easier to talk with the officials on other topics.

Q: Wow. Now that is quite remarkable. Is that normal?

DENIG: It's not always 100% successful. I'll give you a dramatic example of where it didn't backfire, but it didn't quite reach the level that I had been hoping for. In the course

of my career, USIA came up with a long series of wonderful exhibits, and while I was in Sarajevo, they produced one on industrial design. It was a great combination of that and economics, both of which were important to Yugoslavs, including Bosnians. In addition to culture, I had identified two other areas for opening doors in Bosnia, environmental issues and practical economic matters, which could serve to open doors and perhaps even minds. Regarding environmental issues, they suffered from heavy air pollution, and we had solutions to offer. As for economics, they had a socialist system of economy, and it was not exactly flourishing. But individuals within the economy were open to practical new ideas, new approaches, and connections with the world economy. So I thought that the exhibit on industrial design coming from the United States would be an effective key to unlock the minds of my audience.

To prepare for the exhibit in Sarajevo, I traveled at my own expense to another city in the former Yugoslavia, Zagreb, the capital of the Republic of Croatia, to check out how my older, more experienced colleague ran the preparations and the opening of the exhibit in his city. I returned to Sarajevo with a number of helpful tips and approaches. USIA sent out an expert who had been involved in the planning and construction of the exhibit who actually supervised the unpacking of the exhibit and the setting up of the various components. This was my first exhibit in a centrally located museum in Sarajevo, and this was really a very important exhibit, capable of making a big splash. At length, opening night arrived. We had invited all of the social and political elite, the media, other museum directors, academics, and businessmen. First, the director of the museum spoke. Then our exhibit curator spoke very briefly, just explaining the exhibit. And then, an elderly professor from the university held a very long talk. All of this was filmed by the local TV crew, which had multiple klieg lights and cameras set up. Finally it was my turn to speak, to welcome the audience and to emphasize the broader significance of the exhibit. But the minute I stepped up to the podium, the television crew very ostentatiously clicked off all of the klieg lights, put all of their cameras in containers and walked out. And I said to myself, "Aha, they are not about to feature one of the running dogs of imperialism on the evening news show." Nonetheless, I gave my little prepared speech. Overall the impact was, in fact, very positive; we received good coverage in the local newspaper and many kudos from our contacts. And so it was a good thing and the right thing to do, but the experience shows you that sometimes even with the best of efforts, doors and minds can remain closed.

Q: Well, it does sound that you still had an impact even if it was a smaller audience.

DENIG: TV audience did see most of the opening night ceremonies and evidently enough to entice them to come to see the exhibit, which enjoyed large numbers of visitors. And perhaps they didn't miss too much in not hearing my little speech.

Q: Can you paint that picture of this exhibition, do you remember any high points? Or any themes that it focused on within industrial design?

DENIG: As you might imagine, it started with kitchen gadgets, workshop gadgets, and went all the way up to architecture. So the exhibit covered the gamut from the very small,

intimate and personal to the large, gigantic, grandiose and “impactful” to use a horrible contemporary word.

Q: Yeah. Wow. I mean, that sounds like quite an undertaking.

DENIG: It was one of the larger exhibits produced by USIA, and like all the exhibits out of USIA, it was wonderful; it was beautiful and informative at the same time.

Q: And you modeled that after a similar exhibition done in Zagreb, right?

DENIG: It was the exact same one. But what I did was to go to Zagreb for a few days before their opening night, so I could be in on the thinking and the planning that went into preparing for opening night. My colleague there was more experienced than I; as I said earlier, this was my first independent assignment. My Zagreb colleague had been around the block a few times. He was also the one who gave me the tip about circling the key paragraphs in speeches for the journalists. He was a class act and he knew what he was doing. So that's why I went up there. I took copious notes and applied what was relevant in Sarajevo.

Q: And what was his name?

DENIG: His name was Bill Lawrence. Think of Lawrence of Arabia.

Q: Wow. Was that normal to kind of have these mentorships with other USIA officers doing similar projects?

DENIG: I would say that, based on my career, sadly, it was not a norm. And, sadly, it was not directed from the top. It would be good if it were the norm and if it were directed from the top. In fact, this year, as you may be aware, there's been a great deal of talk about reform of the Foreign Service, and reform of the State Department. And one of the things that many people call for is, in fact, more mentoring. It's usually mentioned in relation to keeping minority Foreign Service officers in the service so that they don't leave. But frankly, mentoring could benefit every ethnic group and every racial group.

So I had to arrange that myself, going up to Zagreb to see my colleague. My bosses in Belgrade would not even pay for the trip. So I paid for it. I considered it important enough to pay for the train and the hotel myself. Interestingly enough, a very experienced colleague, who was just in the process of arriving in Moscow as the counselor for public affairs. And at that point in the mid-80s, I'd be hard pressed to think of a more important public affairs officer position. He recognized the potential impact of the exhibit and he came down to Sarajevo. I can't tell you for sure if he got the government to pay for it or not, but it certainly was his initiative to want to do this. He came to see the exhibit as it was displayed, and had the opportunity to talk to the curators. So again, it's very helpful to have opportunities like that, to learn about preparation and insights ahead of time.

Q: Did the curators work with counterparts in the country or were they all American?

DENIG: There was only one American curator, and he worked well with the local curators in Sarajevo and the director of the museum where we held the exhibit. To get the cooperation of the local curators, I can't remember if we put out an advertisement in the newspaper or if we did it by word of mouth. In the event, we got curators from various other museums in town to assist him, and they were very good. And so it was a very pleasant experience working with all of them. It was typical that USIA would send out one person with the exhibit. That person would then have in his/her mind the whole plan of how the exhibit would be shown, all those important little things, as you mentioned. If the venue where it was going to be shown did not have adequate staff of its own, we would throw our net more widely and talk to other museum directors whom we knew because we already had an exhibit at their museum. And so it was a nice community of museum professionals plus us lay diplomats working with them. It always turned out very nicely; it was a very good collaboration. I'm sure that's an experience and a memory that stayed with both the local curators and the American curators. People working across languages and across cultures can achieve good collaboration and good outcomes.

Q: Definitely, I think your stories are proof that it can be done. For sure. And I don't think that you mentioned this, but how long did the exhibit usually stay up or general exhibits like this for

DENIG: For a major exhibit like this, because it is so expensive to ship the exhibit and the curator and to pay local salaries as well for the local curators, the duration is usually. I can't remember exactly, but I'm sure this exhibit was up for a month. Whereas if it's, let's say, a visual arts exhibit of one person's paintings, it might be up two weeks, maybe three weeks, depending on the local museum's schedule. It also depends on the overall schedule of the exhibit, where and when it is needed. For example, if Paris needs it by a certain date, then you know that you need to shut it down in time to take it down properly, pack it up, ship it, and then for it to be unpacked and displayed in Paris. So all that is planned, and the staff in Washington worried about that. They were very good about that, very well organized. And they had done it a million times, of course, so they knew how long it would take to set up an exhibit, to dismantle the exhibit, to unpack, pack, etc. They were also experienced enough to build in "glitch time" in case the truck gets lost, it misses the train or plane, and so forth. They are really wonderful colleagues.

Q: Wow, excellent. I mean, this is all amazing. Sounds like such a wonderful experience for you. Did you go into the Foreign Service thinking that you'd be working with artists and curators?

DENIG: Initially, I did not actually; I thought that I would be doing traditional diplomacy, much as I was studying and finding in the European diplomatic archives. But at the time when I took the Foreign Service exam, depending on how you answered questions in different areas, they then said you're eligible for the following specialties, or cones, within the Foreign Service, and you're not eligible for these cones. And the one cone that they said I was not eligible for was a traditional diplomat, a political officer. But

that turned out to be a blessing in disguise because they then gave us the names and phone numbers of an officer in each one of the other cones, and you could call them and ask them what the work and the career are like being in your cone. So I talked to officers in the various cones, and finally with a public diplomacy officer working for USIA. I wasn't too excited about what I was hearing from people in the other cones, but when I talked to the lady at USIA, the picture she painted left me with a sense that I can't afford not to be part of this. She mentioned working with art, academics and journalists and also said that public diplomacy officers tend to get more management experience early in their careers with more responsibility, including managing large budgets. All of this sounded very interesting and exciting. So, I said, "Count me in!"

Q: Wow

DENIG: That's what it turned out to be.

Q: Sounds like you seized the opportunity. Do you have to remember if you spoke with Sandra Rouse or Beverly Gerstein on that phone call?

DENIG: Neither of them. I believe that the person at USIA with whom I spoke was Geraldine Bernier.

Q: Okay. I knew they were in charge of arts America specifically. So I wasn't sure. In general sense, what did you gain from these experiences? While working with all these artists and furthering cultural diplomacy did you see that you helped find mutual understanding? Any memories that come up related to that?

DENIG: I'll give you an example which shows the impact that we can have, and sometimes the unexpected impact. When the pianist Philip Hosford came to Bosnia, we needed to hire a translator for him. I chose one of the English professors, the one that I thought was most in tune with the arts. It turned out to be the perfect combination. In fact, he was so excited about the opportunity to interact with this young musician and to bridge the linguistic gap between him and our audiences, including audiences in the music, school, that when I tried to pay him, as we always paid our interpreters, he refused payment, which was very generous of him, since at that time in Yugoslavia, people could really use the money. So that was a great donation to the cause of mutual understanding on his part. He and his wife became good friends to me and my wife. But the story continues. Years later, we were stationed in Germany, and in the city of Hannover, and this would have been in '92, I believe. Things were starting to heat up in Bosnia, during the civil war. The professor got in touch with us and said that he and his family would like to visit us in Germany for vacation. We immediately said yes and pointed out that we had a nice big house so that they could all stay with us and their kids could play with our daughter. Which they did. And they continued to stay with us because the situation in Bosnia went from bad to worse. And so finally I said to my friend, "you cannot go back; it would be a disaster." I could tell that he was going through an enormous internal struggle, because people don't leave their homeland just on a whim.

Q: Yeah, could you say this specific interpreter benefitted from the experience during times of need?

DENIG: He recognized the reality of where things were headed. And he had to think of his kids and his wife. When I was still in Bosnia, I had sent him to the U.S. on two programs. One was the International Visitor Program, on which I also sent several other English professors from Sarajevo. The second program was a Fulbright grant. He was actually awarded a two-year grant, which is testimony to how well he fit in at American universities. From those experiences, he had contacts in the U.S. and he got in touch with them and explained his dilemma. At one of the universities, his contact praised his timing and told him that on that very day, one of their professors had resigned, so they had an opening. His contact added that they would be thankful if the Bosnian professor would come and teach. Our friends quickly got their few things together and flew off to the United States. The teaching gig worked out extremely well, since he always did a great job. The kids got a great education at American universities and now have good careers, and they all became American citizens. So it all turned out very nicely in the end. I often say to myself that the government sends us places for official reasons, but God sometimes has additional issues in mind.

Q: Wow, so you started from an international family. And then the foreign service took you to places where you could implement those experiences to create connections. Would you consider the relationships as an important outcome? I always think that someone who is an advocate for the arts, or at least has an appreciation for the arts finds community internationally.

DENIG: That's very true. It's perhaps a tired saying to say that the arts are an international language, but it just happens to be true. Just because people say it often doesn't mean that it's not very true.

Q: I think it's too often forgotten, and I'm hoping that it will become more pronounced in this project. Do you have any other anecdotes that you would like to highlight from this idea of an international language?

DENIG: One episode does come to mind. While I was stationed in Hannover, Germany, I was also given responsibility for one of the former East German states, Saxony-Anhalt. We arrived in the summer of 1990; as you know, the Berlin Wall had fallen in November of '89. So this was really the beginning of the tremendous efforts to bring together the citizens of the former German Democratic Republic with the citizens of the Federal Republic of Germany. There was already a little bit of contact between the U.S. embassy in Bonn and a teacher's college in the capital city of this new German state, Magdeburg. I started going to Magdeburg about once a week, sometimes more, going to various institutions trying to meet as many people as I could and hand out my business cards, look for opportunities to collaborate, and discuss things that we could offer to help them with their work and their integration into the West. One of the things I quickly learned at the teachers college was that previously, all the students -- all future teachers -- had had to learn Russian. Since their country had been part of the Warsaw Pact and very much

under the domination of the Soviet Union, this was not surprising. But with the unification of Germany, and the opening to the West, nobody wanted to learn Russian anymore; everybody wanted to learn English. So, what to do?

Q: What did they do?

DENIG: Well, the leadership of the teachers college decided that they needed to transform all of the Russian teachers into English teachers. What a challenge. But I realized that this was a great opportunity to have a positive impact at an impressionable time. Over the course of many months I arranged for various speakers to come out and work with the former Russian teachers. The effort culminated in a multi-week, off-site workshop for these former Russian teachers, for which I brought in many American academics and colleagues, as well as West German colleagues with teaching backgrounds and fluent English. So there was a whole coterie of us working with these former Russian teachers, and it was truly a marvelous experience of trying to help them and bring them up to the point where they could at least teach rudimentary English. It was humbling and exciting at the same time. The former Russian professors were very appreciative, the school leadership was appreciative and we all got a lot of job satisfaction out of this effort. Learning and teaching languages are other aspects of culture, because language is, after all, one of the main vehicles through which culture is transmitted. So trying to help people to understand languages is an important part of cultural diplomacy and a very rewarding one, I think.

Q: Certainly, I mean, that is one of the longest standing efforts, not efforts necessarily, but essence of USIA that I continued to see as I mean, I first went on a cultural exchange program through a ballet school, but also to learn the language. And I think that that's a really great point to bring up, did USIA have other language cultural programming or make efforts towards language learning?

DENIG: Yes, we had English language officers, and they would be assigned to countries and work with local institutions to either initiate or improve English language instruction. But of course, no one had thought that there might be a need to send English language officers to modern, industrialized very western West Germany, or now united Germany, not realizing that hidden in all the teachers colleges are all these former Russian professors who are potentially jobless because they didn't learn English. You might say that my staff and my colleagues in Germany, plus the specialists we were able to get from the U.S., all jumped into the unexpected breach. So flexibility and seizing the moment are very important in diplomacy.

Q: Definitely, I mean, as I've learned from this project, that there are no there's no perfect exchange program. We create effective things.

DENIG: The official programs that USIA organized really were for the most part excellent and extremely well organized, very well planned. One exception was when they sent out one of the English teaching specialists to Durban to talk to teachers about online resources. He was very well-meaning, but somehow no one had told him before he came

that most of the schools in the rural areas of KwaZulu Natal did not have any electricity, much less computers or laptops or online access. So my job was to try to bridge the gap between his expectations and reality once he had landed in Durban. We managed to patch it over reasonably well.

But in addition to the great formal programs that USIA organized, based on years of experience. There were often opportunities for individual officers in the field to just step into the breach, as we did for teaching English, or for other things. For example, USIA offered a grants course that we could take to become grants officers, so that we could give official U.S. government grants to individuals or organizations. So if your budget allowed, then you could use some of it to very carefully target seed money, grant money. And I remember one example took place in Belgrade, my very last overseas assignment. There was a young lady from one of the organizations we were working with in the area of English teaching. She had taken several advanced courses in English, but needed one more. She had gotten a scholarship from the American university that was offering that course, a one semester course. The only thing she was lacking was the airfare; institutions in Belgrade simply did not have the money for that. So we gave her a grant to cover her travel expenses. She was very grateful for that and wrote us a very nice letter, saying how useful that course at the American university was to her work in Belgrade. This is another example of how, with open eyes and just a little bit of money with the right timing, you can do a great deal of good and advance the national interest at the same time.

Q: Certainly, it seems that a lot of USIA's programs are not as extravagant as the industrial design exhibit that you ran, but equally as effective and important.

DENIG: I would not say that money is not important. We always wished we had just a little bit more money, including for hiring local staff or for hiring more American Foreign Service Officers. There's never enough American Foreign Service officers -- please tell all your audiences that fact. Okay, sorry. That's a little advertisement. But yes, there are good things you can do even with small amounts of money. Things don't have to be expensive in order to be successful, or to have a positive impact. But sometimes, as with a major exhibit, then yes, you do need large sums of money or it doesn't work.

Q: Certainly, well...

DENIG: And, you know, the variety of costs associated with a major exhibit are astounding. And it's nothing you think of in five minutes. You really have to have done this a number of times over the years. And as you can imagine, insurance rates for some of these exhibits are enormous.

Q: Oh, I actually have never thought about insurance for these exhibits.

DENIG: Now sometimes if it's a wealthy country like say, France or Germany, you can persuade the local art museum to pay for the insurance since they're obviously getting

this very nice exhibit for free. But in other cases, like in the Balkans or in Africa, it's just not in their budget. They have more elemental things to take care of—

Q: Elemental things such as?

DENIG: Such as education for the kids, school lunches, safe transportation, basic things like that.

Q: Things that are generally considered good,

DENIG: Or paying the soldiers and bureaucrats enough so that they don't have to demand bribes. Things like that. Elemental.

Q: Well avoiding bribes is certainly positive, and you have given me a lot to think on. I feel like this whole interview has been about the importance of the little things as well as the larger impacts of cultural diplomacy. And I think that's a very nice point to end on maybe for today. Unless you have any final words, I think this is a good point to close it out for today. This is Emily Fennell interviewing with Paul Denig and today is December 27, 2021.