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

ROBERT B. HOUSTON

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INTERVIEW

Q: Mr. Houston, it is a great pleasure to have you here today, I hope you won't be embarrassed by the fact that we have known each other pretty well over recent years, but I would like to get your very interesting career documented. Would you start by how you first became interested in foreign affairs, either from your early education, late education or by happenstance?

HOUSTON: I can certainly say we have known each other well. I can state in fact you are the best boss I have ever had in the Foreign Service. That commercial aside, my entry into the Foreign Service was accidental. I had been a radio engineer at the Naval Research Laboratory in Washington, D.C. during the war. When the war was over, I, who had spent the war years between Washington, D.C. and the experimental base on Chesapeake Bay, decided that I wanted to travel. I knew the Department of State had a telecommunications division so I went over to talk to Francis Colt De Wolf, the head of the telecommunications division. We had a nice meeting of an hour or so, but when it was over he said, "You know, we have no openings, but the Foreign Service is hiring people. Why don't you go over to the Walker Johnson Building and talk to them?"

I had never really considered the Foreign Service before, but I did go over and speak to the people over there. The Department in 1945 was desperately seeking to rebuild its cadre. They were taking people with no oral examination into something called the Foreign Service Auxiliary. I had interviews and went through the necessary credentials proofing and so forth and was brought into the Foreign Service class that met at the Lothrop mansion out on Connecticut Avenue in October 1945. We graduated, I think, in November of 1945. Then the day came to hand out assignments. When Mr. Perry Jester, who was the class monitor at the time, came to my name, he smiled and said, "Oh, this is a delightful one. Mr. Houston, you are going to Lagos." At that point I hadn't the foggiest idea where Lagos was. I had been convinced that I was going to be assigned to Rio de Janeiro, and had even started studying Portuguese on my own. I was told that until they could find me a ship to take me to Lagos I should go down and read the files at the

Bureau of African Affairs. It was then in the Old Executive Office Building, just west of the White House, but it was then still called the State-War-Navy Building.

Q: I don't think it was a bureau at that time, it was probably an office.

HOUSTON: Yes, it was an office that consisted of two people, Henry Villard and Joe Palmer. I was reading the files diligently until an emergency arose in the Foreign Service. An officer had come down with malaria in Accra, and had to be evacuated. So this created sufficient urgency for the Department to go to the terrific expense of sending me by air to Accra. I spent Christmas eve at Roberts Field in Liberia on my way to post. I arrived December 31, 1945 at my first post in the Foreign Service, Accra, then the seat of the British Gold Coast colony. We had established our first post there during the war because Accra was a landing point for ferrying aircraft across the Atlantic. The route was Natal to Ascension Island, then either to Liberia or the Gold Coast, and then across Africa and up to Iran for transport into the Soviet Union.

Although most American forces had been evacuated by my time, a small detachment was still in Accra selling off war surplus. The main *raison d'etre* for a post in Accra was ceasing. The focus now was consular matters and watching the emergence of independence movements. During my time in the Gold Coast the thinking was that preparations for independence would last fifty years. In other words sometime in the year 2000 the Gold Coast could aspire to independence.

Q: Like the liberation of Eastern Europe in the past year.

HOUSTON: Yes, it came much faster. I had entered the Foreign Service not necessarily to make it a lifetime career. So much of what I had studied at Harvard in physics had been classified during the war. There were all sorts of developments that had come out, the atom bomb, radar, computers, so I thought I would get the travel bug out of my system and then go back and study physics again. But three months after my arrival in the Gold Coast, because the new Consul had medical problems, I ended up as the senior American representative at what was then just a consulate but is now an embassy. I had three houses under my control, four vehicles, a household staff of twenty. I sat on the right hand side of the governor on every social occasion. For a young man of twenty-two this was pretty heady stuff. So thoughts of going back and studying dry old physics again tended to recede in the course of this first assignment.

After I had been in charge there for about a year, the Department was finally able to send out an experienced consul to take charge. My glory days were over, but I still liked the Foreign Service. So much so that I applied for Arabic specialization. I would hear more about this later at a most inconvenient time. I would like to point out that I entered the Foreign Service before the Foreign Service Act of 1946, under the Rogers Act. Many of the things that people take for granted today did not exist at that time. There was no absolute guarantee then of home leave. While there was an "April Fools Sheet" [the Post Preference Report due in the Department each April 1st] which you could fill out, it really

did not mean a thing. Travel orders, in those days, I recall, stated it very clearly: "These travel orders are not issued for your personal pleasure or convenience." The idea people have today of bargaining for where they would like to go and arranging travel to suit themselves was not a part of the Foreign Service in those days. On the other hand, some things were rather nice, too. We got maybe one pouch a month, and if we received two telegrams in one day, that was a busy day.

Q: They all had to be decoded on a one-time pad.

HOUSTON: That's right. If we needed money, we had a book of blank drafts drawn on the Secretary of State and we could fill one out and take it down to the bank and get as much money as we needed--an element of trust that seems extraordinary today. We made out our own accounts and mailed them off once a month. Apparently the system worked; I don't recall any cases of people absconding with the Secretary of State's funds in those days.

Q: Sometimes the books got a little messed up, but you made it up out of your own pocket, I understand.

HOUSTON: This was very much a learning experience for me. Even though I had majored in physics, I considered that I had had a fairly broad based education. I do feel that I was up to the job that was required there, and decided to make the Foreign Service a career. In December 1947, after two years in Accra, I was ordered to Bremen, Germany. Those were still the days when one traveled by ship. I spent twenty-six days on a ship coming up from Takoradi, the Gold Coast to Amsterdam. It was not that the ships were so very slow in those days. This was a combined freighter-passenger ship which anchored in a number of ports in West Africa on the way to Europe. It also anchored in Le Havre for three days, during which time I was in Paris. All this of course was while I was in travel status.

In many West African ports, it was necessary to anchor out in the roadstead. The freight would be brought to the ship by lighters. Natives would come out in outrigger canoes, one could bargain with them for a ride to shore. I was able to go ashore in Monrovia, Liberia; Freetown, Sierra Leone; and Bathurst, Gambia en route.

Q: I had a few trips myself but I don't remember any twenty-six day ones. Had you had any home leave?

HOUSTON: No, they were just getting used to the idea that Foreign Service officers should be given regular home leave. I would not get home leave until after I had been almost six months at my new post. On January 1, 1948 I took the train from Amsterdam to Bremen, Germany. I thought all the time my assignment was to Bremen, Germany. When I arrived in Bremen and met people there, I learned that my destiny had been switched, again without consultation with me. I was going to be the officer in charge of a Vice Consulate in Bremerhaven, Germany. Bremerhaven in those days was quite active

as far as American shipping was concerned, being the port of embarkation for U.S. forces in Germany. There was very little transportation by air then for either personnel or equipment, so there were many vessels going in and out. The powers that be decided that a Vice Consulate in Bremerhaven under the supervision of the Consul General in Bremen was needed, primarily to handle shipping matters, but also because of the large number of Americans residing in that city. The Vice Consulate would handle consular matters, not the full range of consular matters, but primarily applications for birth certificates and passport renewals. The Vice Consulate would forward these to Bremen, where the experts could complete action on them.

Q: You had no visa office?

HOUSTON: We had no visa office. The only consular service that we performed totally in Bremerhaven were services to seamen and shipping. If there had been some sort of heavy weather, or if a ship's captain for purely legal reasons wanted to file a marine protest (which I learned about for the first time when I got there), he would come in and swear to me that he had run into this unusual weather. By doing this, if there was any damage to his ship or his cargo, he could claim that it was due to the weather and not his seamanship. Also there were a number of instances where seamen were problems. I can recall one instance in which a MP convoy, escorted by four armed MPs, drove up with a man in handcuffs. They took his handcuffs off outside and I was supposed to handle him from then on. I also recall an instance, I think this occurred on January 1, 1950, in which a ship, which had been supposed to sail that morning, was delayed because some of the crew decided to claim that it was unseaworthy. The responsibility of the consul in those days was to investigate the seamen's complaint. So on New Year's day I had to round up some friendly shipping experts to go around, look at the complaints, and decide if they were unjustified or not. The experts I had empaneled decided that the ship was as seaworthy as most that came to the port, and that the seamen were just trying to prolong their holiday by filing this complaint. The powers that consuls had, and may still have, in such a case, include assessing costs on those who are guilty. In this case I had to find that the seamen were at fault. I believe that the seamen's pay was docked for the expense of the survey. This is a sample of what the Vice Consulate was doing in those days.

We also performed some political work. When I arrived in 1948, we were just beginning to convince our military that the Germans were not our enemies any more and were going to become allies. I think I played some small role in getting the commander of the port of embarkation to pay a little more attention to local German sensibilities. I believe I introduced the Oberbuergermeister of Bremerhaven to the Army commander for the first time, the first social contact between the Occupation Forces, as they were called, and the German political authorities in Bremerhaven.

Q: There was something called "fraternization" which everyone was opposed to in the military at that time.

HOUSTON: Yes. The reason for my going to Bremerhaven was that my predecessor had been caught using the consular car to ferry cartons of cigarettes in a big black-market deal. Black-marketing was a sore issue in our early period of occupation of Germany, before we reached the status we now have.

Q: As I recall it, cigarettes were not legal tender, but illegal tender for all kinds of services. The locals often wanted to be paid in cigarettes rather than cash.

HOUSTON: That is true. Before the so-called Wahrungs reform (the currency reform of June 22, 1948), you could buy practically nothing with the old reichsmark. Cigarettes were the kind of currency. While I did not engage in it, using cigarettes for purchasing was practiced widely.

I went on my home leave early in June 1948. I was actually out of Germany when the currency reform took place. I attended the summer session at the University of Colorado in Boulder that summer. When I came back in September of 1948, I was amazed at what a change the introduction of a stable currency had made. The German economy was beginning to take off. You could buy things with the new currency.

It was while I was on home leave, on the ship on the way home, that I met my future wife. She came back to Europe so we could marry in Paris in January, 1949. To be married in Germany would have required my getting permission from General Clay, the Military Governor of Germany in 1949. The military had set up very complicated procedures to discourage GIs from getting married to *frauleins*. I would have to comply with this very discouraging process, and it did not sound very romantic. I decided that would be too much hassle.

Q: Were there legal complications in Paris? Or were they relatively easy?

HOUSTON: We had advice from an American lawyer in Paris as to how we could get around the requirement that one party to a French marriage had to have resided in France for at least thirty days. My passport showed I had been in France five days, and my wife's passport showed she had been in France four days. But it was easy enough with a carton of cigarettes to convince the *concierge* at our hotel that she had actually been living there for thirty days. His certificate to this effect was good enough for us to get married on. I don't necessarily recommend this procedure to others, but I thought it was appropriate for those days. And it has been a very successful marriage.

Q: What was your relation with the Consul General in Bremen and did he have much influence on you?

HOUSTON: The Consul General in Bremen in those days was Mr. Maurice Altaffer. He was very conscious of the fact that the Vice Consulate in Bremerhaven was part of his fiefdom. I went down to headquarters once a week, generally on Wednesday. I would take down the passport applications, the birth certificate applications, whatever, received

during the preceding week and leave them there for experts to process. I would confer with the experts on matters of interest. From time to time, the Consul General would deign to see me. I must say that when on January 1, 1950 a ship's crew decided their ship was unseaworthy, and I chose to handle the problem on New Year's Day using strictly Bremerhaven resources and not call on the experts in Bremen, I got in a bit of hot water. I think the Bremen people thought I was taking too much liberty with the long tether I was kept on. But it turned out all right. During the time I was in Bremerhaven, I sometimes questioned the utility of keeping the post. Only forty-two kilometers separated the Vice Consulate and the Consulate General. When the Vice Consulate in Bremerhaven was closed, it was found to be not all that necessary after all.

Q: Then you moved down to Vienna, where I first saw you. Was that a routine transfer, or was it somewhat different? Sometimes how one is moved about can be interesting.

HOUSTON: No, I had spent three and a quarter years assigned to Bremerhaven. It was time to leave. The Department gave me home leave and transfer.

Q: During this time you were a full-fledged FSO?

HOUSTON: While I was still in Bremen, I took the Foreign Service exam. It was a three day exam. I was very grateful in the fact that in those days, language ability was deemed important. While I was somewhat shaky in some areas, particularly in economics, I really clobbered the German part of the examination and passed with a 77.

Q: You had been out by yourself dealing with Germans all day.

HOUSTON: My German was very good. I had studied German in the university. I think I got 97 in the German part and this was enough to bring my overall written score up to 77. This was well above the passing level of 70, but I do think the German part did a lot to raise my average. I was not sworn in as an FSO until Vienna. I passed the oral exam during my home leave, between Bremerhaven and Austria. The oral exam was given in the old Walker-Johnson building, now torn down, which was where Personnel was. I remember that the chairman of my panel was the author, Louis Halle. In those days, orals did not include in-basket tests, or all those sorts of things they do today. A panel of three people interviewed you. The panel had a chance to go over your file beforehand. I assumed they were favorably disposed to my candidacy, as they asked me questions that I could logically be supposed to know the answers to. I thought I did pretty well, and before I left the building, Halle told me I had passed. By the time I got to Vienna, the paperwork had gone through, and I was sworn in as a proper FSO then.

I was in what now would be called the consular cone, although they did not have cones in those days. I had been assigned to two consulates and while I was now in an embassy I was in the consular section of the embassy. I was specifically officer in charge of the visa part of the consular section. The supervising consul then was Bill Affeld, an officer I very much admired who did a lot to steer me out of trouble in Vienna. Vienna was beginning,

in those days, to be part of the exodus route for refugees from Eastern Europe. A Refugee Relief Program was established there, primarily, I guess, to get around what was seen in Washington as the slow-moving pace of normal consular work. We performed a full range of consular activities. Vienna was an exciting place to be in in those days. The inner city of Vienna was still under Four- Power occupation, with a different one of the Four Powers assuming control every month. There were appropriate military ceremonies, bands, the hoisting and lowering of flags, parades and so forth. Vienna was the center for spy activities in those days, the Third Man film came out, and it was really an exciting place. Plus, Vienna is one of the most charming cities, I think, to be assigned to. It was still suffering from the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire, a city without a real mission in those days. Being behind the Soviet lines, tourism had not really developed. You could still get a seat at the opera for a dollar. I remember at the Rathauskeller, run by a fellow with the name of Otto Kaserer. So his initials were "OK" and one could get an "OK" steak dinner for one dollar, 26 schillings, which is what the dollar bought in those days. A delightful place to be. Of course, don't try to go there today and try to get a dinner for a dollar. We went back to Vienna several times since then, and we know how it has changed-- still a delightful city, however.

Q: You stayed until the end of 1953.

HOUSTON: Before we left, I was reminded of some of the work I had done in Bremerhaven regarding shipping. I was brought back to the U.S., at the expense of the Justice Department, to appear as a witness at a trial in the Federal Court House in Alexandria, Virginia. Some surplus merchant ships had been sold, and the law required that these merchant ships be sold to American companies. It was alleged in this trial that foreign companies hiding behind American dummies has purchased some of these ships. It so happened that one of these allegedly foreign-controlled ships put into Bremerhaven during my time and there had some crew trouble. I had written what was called a despatch in those days reporting the crew trouble. When the Justice Department was researching how to make a case, they came across this despatch and decided that I would make a fine witness to put on the stand. The Court House in Alexandria was not air conditioned, and this trial was in July. The judge and jury, the Justice Department feared, might have a tendency to doze off in the afternoon if the testimony were dull. I was kept as their surprise witness to be used if it looked like the judge was dozing. This was perhaps the only time that any of my reporting work in the Foreign Service had any impact. [Laughter]

Sure enough, I was put on the witness stand when they thought the judge was dozing. The defense lawyer, as I recall, got up and said, "I object to all this hearsay testimony". I was able to beat him down, saying that I had been on the ship, I had seen the ship's articles under which this foreign crew had been signed on, etc. Later on the Justice people told me I had been a very valuable witness. It does show the untold consequences of something you write, sometimes it may mean something.

We did leave Vienna in September 1953. Again, I must have been in the consular cone, as I was to be the number two consular officer in our Consulate General in Edinburgh. It was a two man post. I might note that Edinburgh was my fourth Foreign Service post, and I was going to a slot that could be performed by someone who was brand-new. The Consul General there was a very kindly man who would have just loved to have a neophyte to educate. Edinburgh had never been on my April Fool's wish list, but one did not think then of challenging an assignment, you did what you were told.

I drove my car from Vienna to Edinburgh, and the family flew out later for what we thought would be a relatively long assignment. But it turned out not to be nearly that long. It was a delightful place to be. I had Scottish ancestry. My names are Robert Bruce and they treated me like one of them. My fondest memory, I think, was of going to a celebration, at the ruined Arbroath Abbey, of the anniversary of the declaration of Scottish independence. Afterwards, we all repaired to a local restaurant for a proper banquet, with all the things Scottish people eat and drink. Some of the speeches there were extremely fiery. I thought that Scotland Yard could break in at any time and arrest the lot of us for treason. This was not so far fetched. This was during the time the Stone of Scone was still missing from Westminster Abbey, secreted somewhere in Scotland. It turned out later our Public Affairs officer had unknowingly been the custodian of the Stone of Scone for a period when Scotland Yard was looking for it. Friends had foisted it on him unknowingly.

Q: He just had it in his basement or something?

HOUSTON: He had it in his basement, he was just storing a trunk for a friend. It later turned out that the trunk had the Stone of Scone in it. We still have Scottish friends from that period there, and exchange visits with them. The place where we lived was a miserable Victorian house. It was advertised as centrally heated because it had in a scullery a small one-pint coal burner that heated a two-rail towel rack in the bathroom. This rack was the only "radiator" in the house. We had fireplaces in every other room, which had been converted to electric fires. The first time the guy came to read the meter, he said that we must have been using electricity all the time. The next time, he found the meter did not have enough capacity to keep track of all the electricity we were using to keep warm. They had to put in their very largest meter. In December in our hall, the temperature could get up to around 50 degrees with the heating we had. But Edinburgh was a delightful place. We learned about chilblains, and eating Scottish lamb. A Scottish dog bit me, but the National Health Service fixed it for free. Our children got free orange juice. This was quite an experience for us.

Q: In those days they had not yet discovered oil so Edinburgh was not the great commercial place?

HOUSTON: The city had the Edinburgh festival so it was a great cultural center. The city very much depended on coal, and bad coal at that. The center of the city was black. Now they have gotten rid of the smoke, the city looks much better.

We had barely started our touring of Scotland when in the fall of 1954, orders came transferring us to Bangkok, Thailand by way of home leave in the United States. We took a ship out of Southampton to New York. A German friend from Bremerhaven, who had immigrated to the United States, picked up our new car for us from General Motors in New Jersey and met us at dockside in it. After going through a briefing in Washington, we had driven to Kansas City, my hometown. There, at Christmas time, my orders were changed again. Instead of going to Thailand, we were to return to Washington after the holidays and learn Polish. This perhaps reflected the fact that years ago, I had applied for Arabic language training. Now they were finally getting around to giving me language training, Polish. My wife and I had been looking forward to a tropical post. Thailand with its palms seemed ideal. Much of our effects were on the high seas between Edinburgh to Bangkok, but I persuaded my wife that this was an opportunity not to be missed. Back we went to study Polish.

The Foreign Service Institute in those days was in an apartment building which had to be torn down later to make way for the new State Department building. I had various instructors in Polish, and was really enjoying getting ready to go to Poland. I was still in the consular cone, and I was to be the one man consular section at the Embassy in Warsaw. This was before the Khrushchev thaw had really affected Poland, although the very perceptive might have sensed it coming. I went on ahead in October, 1955. My wife and three children came later, staying in Berlin until our quarters could be prepared for us in Warsaw.

This delay left me alone in Warsaw and prey to the UB, the Polish secret police. I feel sure that the very attractive young girl who came into my office on the first day I was there wanting to know if I could help her was a UB ploy. She said her father in Poznan had thrown her out, that she had no place to live, and couldn't I, the American consul, find some place for her? After consulting with my predecessor, who was still there for overlap, I told her that the embassy had no means of helping. I wonder if this was a UB effort to see if they could get at a young married man in Warsaw without his wife. I thought about this again when in 1961 an American FSO was compromised in Poland by a young Polish woman, and convicted of passing on classified documents.

Q: Did you start on consular work?

HOUSTON: I spent about a year in Warsaw doing consular work. It was during this period that it became clear that things were changing in Poland. No longer were just a handful of old Poles trying to go to the United States. The floodgates were opening. I had to try to convince, first the management of the post, and then Washington, that a one-man consular shop was no longer adequate in Warsaw. Before I left the post, I think the consular section had gotten up to four officers.

1956 was a very critical year in Europe. Most people only think of the events in Hungary in 1956, but there was almost a war between Poland and the Soviet Union in that year. It

was the year of the riots in Poznan which led to divisions in the Polish party. Nationalist Poles wanted to bring back Gromulka, who had been imprisoned during the Stalinist crackdown, as party leader, but the old-line Muscovite Poles were opposed to it. There was a very tense moment during the party congress of that year. Khrushchev, Mikoyan and Bulganin flew in to try to convince the Poles not to make Gromulka the head of the party. Even though the Polish army was ostensibly commanded by a Moscow-leaning Pole, Rokosovski, the Poles were able to muster enough military forces to start moving tanks around. Khrushchev then backed off and decided not to intervene militarily to prevent Gromulka from being made party chief.

Q: That is fascinating.

HOUSTON: Well, I think it worth recalling one of the surprising events of the time. In that near uprising, at a time when we thought Soviet tanks could cross the Soviet-Polish frontier to put down this Polish rebelliousness, we sent our military attachés out to observe the frontier. The attachés had a flat tire out along the border. To the attachés' surprise, the Polish secret police were helpful, they changed the tire for them, and got them on their way as soon as possible. This was a complete reversal of roles. They were the enemy usually. This time they really wanted American military attachés out observing the border.

Q: So there really was a feeling of independence there at that time?

HOUSTON: I can recall the crowds of students marching through the streets of Warsaw shouting, "Rokosovski do Moskvi! Rokosovski do Moskvi!" They wanted Marshall Rokosovski to go back to Moscow; he was not Polish enough to have stood up to the Russians in this instance. There was a period after Gromulka was in power. The Russians had accepted this, not with the greatest of grace, but they had accepted it. In a week, 4 or 5 ostensibly Polish generals were given medals and sent off to Moscow. The Poles really cleaned house at this point. This house cleaning made it possible for the Poles later on to play the leading role they did in the breaking up of the Warsaw Pact. That, and of course the all-powerful influence of the Catholic Church. Also the Poles had never eliminated the peasantry. All these elements all played a role in giving Poland its independent outlook. There are 35,000,000 or 40,000,000 Poles; none of the other Eastern European nations are nearly so numerous.

Q: The Polish Church has always fascinated me for they were headed by a very skillful man during all of that time, or at least they handled themselves very well during that period.

HOUSTON: Yes. The Poles are perhaps the most religious people in Europe.

Q: Its all Catholic, no Protestants?

HOUSTON: Yes. The Church throughout history had been identified with preserving the Polish national spirit against Russians, and against other invaders. So the Polish Church was uniquely positioned to play this role. Somehow the Polish Communists decided they never wanted to tackle the Church head on the way they had done in other countries. I think the abortive Polish uprising in 1956 was one of the few instances in my career in the Foreign Service where I could have been on the scene when history, I mean a big part of history, was being made. Because of what happened later in Hungary, people tend to associate 1956 with the Hungarian uprising. They often overlook how close it came to bloodshed in Poland in that year.

Q: There were some troubles in East Germany too, as I recall.

HOUSTON: 1953 was the big year in East Germany

Q: Now, all of this time you were not doing consular work?

HOUSTON: After about a year, Art Wortzel came. He was supposed to go to Moscow, but there was not a place for him there. So he was sent to Warsaw, took over the consular section and this made it possible for me to go to what was one of the more unusual jobs in an embassy. There was a joint British-American service to translate the Polish press. The joint press translation service had some commercial aspects to it. We tried to get money back to help meet expenses. We sold subscriptions to this service to other embassies, to newspaper people, to whoever would pay us money to meet some of the costs. That job was essentially an early morning job. You had to get in early to get the press translated and the bulletin out. This left your afternoons free, so the morning work was combined with an afternoon job. This was to act as head of the German permit office. West Germany was not recognized as a sovereign state then by Poland, or by the other East European countries. Poland needed, as did the other countries, to send certain people to West Germany, so the East European countries agreed to allow Western allies to issue permits for local people who wanted to go to Germany. We issued permits to Polish people going on visits or to ethnic Germans being repatriated. Again, the job had unusual financial arrangements. My salary continued to be paid by the U.S. taxpayer, but my staff of 15 or so Polish nationals were all being paid by Bonn, as were the expenses of the office.

Q: The West Germans?

HOUSTON: The West Germans were paying all that. Of course all decisions were being made in Bonn. Everything had to be referred to Bonn and I was simply the front man.

Q: You were representing West German interests in Poland.

HOUSTON: No negotiations were conducted by us on anything substantial, we were limited to consular matters. Still this combined job of running a commercial press

translation service jointly with the British, and representing the Germans in consular affairs there, made the job an unusual one.

Q: About as unusual as you can think of. How big was the embassy in Poland at this time? Had it been cut down to a skeleton staff as we were in many other Eastern European countries?

HOUSTON: Yes, it had a small staff. We had three people in the political section, a one man consular section, we had a one man USIS section, we had an agricultural attaché who had certain regional responsibilities, the ambassador and DCM. On the military attaché side, the Army controlled the DAT function. There was an assistant Army attaché, an Air Force attaché and a Navy man there. We had the usual communicators. We did have a sizeable local staff, but the Germans were paying part of them. We had our commercial earnings to pay the locals working on press translations. We had a combined British-American school staffed by wives, essentially. Our medical supplies were supplied by the United States, and the British supplied the doctor.

Q: You probably had a fairly sizeable administrative group to take care of all these disparate things?

HOUSTON: Well, we had an American administrative officer and a budget and fiscal officer. One other interesting observation about our operation in Warsaw: the owner of our Embassy building at that time was the Peoples' Republic of Bulgaria. Between 1950 and 1960, we had no diplomatic relations with Bulgaria, yet they were our landlords. The Swiss Embassy was nearby, and they represented our interests with Bulgaria. Thus if we had any problems with our landlord we would talk to the Swiss, who then would take up the problems with the Bulgarians.

Q: Who were the ambassadors and DCMs when you were there and did they leave any particular impression on you?

HOUSTON: When I first arrived, Joseph E. Jacobs was our ambassador. He was, I think, the most senior ambassador in the service at the time. He started, I think, in 1912 as a language officer in China. He enjoyed the distinction, in my eyes, of having headed our mission to Albania after the war, the only mission we sent to that country. The mission had to leave when Albanian mistreatment in, I think, 1948, became unbearable. Ambassador Jacobs was a very skeptical person. He was, you might say, from Missouri. He was very distrustful of the Communists. I think the Department in time felt that while he was a very good ambassador when the Cold War was really cold, when things started to warm up, someone with a different outlook was needed. We were fortunate to get as our ambassador then Jake Beam.

Q: Hardly a radical liberal (laughter). But a very experienced, very intelligent man.

HOUSTON: One of the customers of the press translation service was the New York Times correspondent, Sidney Gruson. I can't tell you that date, but in 1957 or 1958 he wrote the embassy was still in its bombshelter after the all-clear had been sounded. Maybe as a result of this article, the Department decided that it was time for a new ambassador to be sent out for a fresh approach. The DCM, when I first arrived there, was Fred Exner. He was there for a while, then Willard Barber came in. He was a Latin American expert. Warsaw was his first experience in Europe in a Communist country. Before I left, there was another DCM change. Frank Siscoe, an ex-FBI official, came in as DCM.

Q: Do you have any final thoughts on Poland before we move on to Washington?

HOUSTON: No, Warsaw was a pleasant experience overall. I don't think I was unusual in feeling a strong attachment to the Polish people, and how difficult has been the role they have played in history. We actually wanted to stay in Poland a little longer, but the Department was fearful, in those days, of keeping people too long in hardship posts.

Q: Particularly Eastern European ones.

HOUSTON: So I was transferred to Washington in February, 1958. An officer who had left the post before me had said, "Is there anything that you would like me to try to line up for you in Washington?" This was Richard Earle Johnson. I said, "Well, they are starting this exchange program under the Lacey-Zarubin Agreement of February 1958." Bill Lacey was the American negotiator and Ambassador Zarubin was the Soviet negotiator. They signed this first exchange agreement between the United States and the Soviet Union. There was a provision in the immigration law banning the issuing of visas to Communists, so there were many new procedures to work out while this went on. The agreement reflected a relaxation under Khrushchev of tensions in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. So the exchange program was where I ended up in Washington in mid-1958.

Q: Who was your boss there?

HOUSTON: Bill Lacey was our spiritual mentor, he was listed as an advisor to the Secretary. The actual bureaucracy running the program was placed in the Bureau of Public Affairs. The particular office I was assigned to was called the Office of East- West Contacts in the Bureau of Public Affairs--P. The head of the office was Freddy Merrill.

Q: He was an Eastern European hand.

HOUSTON: Yes, he and Bill Lacey were the same expansive type: "Don't bother me too much with details, I'm a broad picture man." But that was the sort of vision, I think, needed for that kind of operation. Our office was set up in the ground office of an apartment building at 1500 Massachusetts Avenue. We were close to the Soviet embassy, and they would come around to see us frequently. For someone who did not know much

about bureaucracy in Washington, getting his first taste of it in this assignment, was perhaps as good an assignment as possible. We had to coordinate activities of the whole government vis-a-vis the Soviet Union in respect to these exchanges. This meant that we dealt with many different departments, and got a broad view of how those departments worked and what their foibles were.

Q: Did you find this at first to be pretty frustrating to be in the bureaucracy after so many years of being relatively your own boss?

HOUSTON: Yes. One could not just write a message and expect to send it out. Messages had to be coordinated everywhere, particularly in this sort of activity where all sorts of agencies believed that they had an interest at stake. A message had to be coordinated and rewritten. This was quite educational in that regard. One of the things that I recall most clearly from this period was when we brought over a delegation of Polish political leaders in the fall of '58. Because I was just back from Poland and spoke Polish, I was tapped to be their escort, to go across the country with them.

Q: That was interesting and checked your language out too.

HOUSTON: Yes. Also it was to give me the first opportunity to assess the premise behind this program, namely that if we bring the Commies over and show them how nice it is in the United States, they will go back home as different people. So, this was my opportunity to see at first hand the immediate impact of America on people brought up in alien cultures, who knew nothing about the United States, and had been fed the Communist propaganda view of the United States all along.

Q: Did you feel that this premise was a solid one, did it work?

HOUSTON: I felt that indeed there is merit in the premise. True, they came here under tight discipline. Bolislaw Jaschew, the head of the Polish delegation, was a dyed-in-the-wool Communist, according to his biography. But even in his case, I felt that we were making an impression. We had arrangements with Department of State contractors in those days to line up meetings that would make this kind of impact. I particularly remember we were booked into Garden City, Kansas because also in the group were people representing the so-called Peasant Party of Poland. The generosity and open-heartedness of the people of Garden City...

Q: I must say that over the years they have built up a tremendous corps of people all over this country who have given unstinting help on these things, it is quite fascinating. What other problems did you tackle?

HOUSTON: In the exchanges program there was a lot of paper shuffling, particularly to get a waiver for every Communist to come in, the waiver of the visa exclusion. Procedures had to be developed for that. We had to have liaison with the security people to be sure that we were not taking Communist agents to places where they could see the

combination to Fort Knox, or that sort of thing. But a big problem was also that we were running this on a shoestring. We were depending on private enterprise wanting to conduct exchanges at their own expense. In those days this was not too much of a problem. Many people instinctively felt the exchanges were a good program to break down some of the hostility, and they wanted to do their share. When, however, technical exchanges were concerned, then questions of proprietary information and so forth would come in. The Department of Commerce was concerned: "Was this a way to get around our export licenses?"

I would say that the biggest problem was simply how to get around the bureaucracy. It was fascinating to get to meet so many of the people brought over. I can recall entertaining Russian doctors, including some who had been targeted by Stalin in his Jewish doctors' plot. They were in Washington on a Mother's Day or some other holiday. Nobody else would take time away from honoring their wife or mother to entertain these Russian doctors, so I persuaded my wife to take them on. That turned out to be a good experience. The doctors were all very nice, and were willing to talk about "the doctors' plot" and so forth.

Q: They were willing to talk about it?

HOUSTON: Yes, Stalin was dead; Khrushchev was in power, and a new era had arrived.

Q: Now this job lasted through the end of the Eisenhower Administration. About the time Mr. Kennedy took office, or soon thereafter, did the program change anyway after the change of administration?

HOUSTON: No, it still continued. After the breakdown of the Paris summit, after the U-2 episode in May of 1960, things were perceived as being different, but the change between the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations did not mean much for exchanges. I certainly do not recall any difference. I left the program in the summer of '61, the Department giving me an academic year off. I would no longer have to tell people I was a graduate of physics; after this year I was able to say I had a master's in political science. I had made myself legitimate, so to speak.

Q: This was out at Indiana, which in those days was <u>the</u> school for Eastern Europe and also, somewhat, for Africa.

HOUSTON: They were known, in addition to their Soviet and Eastern European studies program, for real *politique* studies. Africa, I'm not too sure about. I was given a choice of either Columbia or Indiana when I was tapped for the academic year. Since I don't like New York City, I had not the slightest hesitation in opting for Indiana. We really enjoyed the year, not just myself academically, but also the whole family. Bloomington was a nice community.

Q: Were there any outstanding highlights of that year or contacts that you made?

HOUSTON: Well, Bob Burns was the head of the Soviet and Eastern European Institute at the time. He was an old RFB hand. I had as my advisor one of the Czechoslovak Benes; he may have been a nephew of Jan Benes. We had on the faculty at that time Robert C. Tucker, who later moved to Princeton. As it turned out, we had both gone to the same high school in Kansas City. He had been a few years ahead of me so I had not known him. Bob Tucker had been assigned to the embassy in Moscow. He had married a Russian girl and ultimately was able to bring her entire family over. We got to know his Russian-born wife well and *mamoush*, the grandmother.

And this all became so relevant for us when we were assigned to the Soviet Union some 18 years later. At the time I was at Indiana, I wrote a thesis, based on my Polish experience, on the German-Polish frontier. Today everyone accepts the Oder-Neisse line. Back in 1961, the Line was not nearly an accepted boundary. I assumed that I was going to be assigned from Bloomington to Belgrade where I would run into Richard Earle Johnson again. He was then in Belgrade as a political officer. But as so often happens in the Foreign Service, near the end of my academic year, there was a PNG action [*persona non grata*], as a result of which I was moved to Sofia. I was very disappointed at first. Belgrade was a bigger post and Yugoslavia was not a hard-line Communist state, whereas Bulgaria was one of the most rigid of the Warsaw Pact states. If people caught cold in Moscow, Bulgarians would sneeze in Sofia, and that sort of thing. But Sofia turned out to be a good assignment, we got there in July of 1962.

Q: Was it still a legation then?

HOUSTON: It was a legation. Our minister was Mrs. Eugenie Anderson, a big figure on the Democratic National Committee from Minnesota, who had been Truman's ambassador in Denmark. She was quite a savvy person, very much public affairs oriented. She had been the supporter of Hubert Humphrey rather than John Kennedy. If she had been the supporter of Kennedy she might have gotten an embassy other than Sofia. She did have good relations with Averell Harriman, another Democratic stalwart. Thanks to her connections with Averell Harriman, we were able to get the Department to pay for leasing the famous Borovets villa, which everyone who served in Bulgaria subsequently has profited from.

Q: What was the Harriman connection, the money?

HOUSTON: Yes. Funding is something we would not have gotten otherwise, without the use of her political connections and Harriman's weight in getting that into the budget. There are other posts in the world perhaps more deserving of a recreation place than Sofia, but we got the money through Eugenie's good connections. The previous minister, Eddie Page, had tried but without success. I was Bulgaria during the Cuban missile crisis which started for real on October 22, 1962.

Q: I was in Budapest at the time, and I know that it was quite an experience for us, how was it for you?

HOUSTON: The local reaction was one of great fear and caution. Our DCM, Charlie Stephen, was out of the country at the time, so I was acting DCM. I don't think the Bulgarians ever believed they were going to be the number one target. But we came very close to nuclear war, and I am sure they realized how close it was. My wife, our youngest daughter and I happened to be held at gunpoint for about twenty minutes during the height of the crisis. I had taken the wife and child out to show them what I thought was a quick and easy way to drive to Belgrade in case the need arose. We were in a part of Sofia I had never been in before. The place was not on the main road to Belgrade, and was not shaping up to what I thought it should be. I stopped along the road and pulled out a map to see where I was. Unbeknownst to me, the stretch of road where I had stopped was marked by two no stopping signs separated by a couple of kilometers. Unless you happen to see the beginning sign, you don't know the ban had started, and if you don't see the ending sign, you don't know the ban had stopped. Where we stopped happened to be along the road nearest to the main radar control site for the air defenses of Sofia. The Bulgarians were sure I was there with nefarious purposes in mind. They were out there holding us at gunpoint and interviewing me to see what my story was. I showed them my map and told them I was trying to get the road to Belgrade. They said, "No, you're not, you are out here in connection with your friends." I said, "No, I am out here only with my wife and daughter." The secret police were then trailing our military attachés on their way at that moment to observe the radar site, and there I was. Probably I went down as suspicious in the books of the secret police at that time. I was officially the head of the Embassy political section, but I was probably marked thereafter as somehow being connected with spying operations.

Q: This was right during the crisis?

HOUSTON: Right during the crisis.

Q: We had somewhat similar things in Budapest during those days.

HOUSTON: Our being in the area was completely innocent. I did not know where the main radar site was, I had not seen the no parking sign, and I was lost.

Q: Didn't they name the chief villain in their favorite spy movie after you later on?

HOUSTON: Later on, there was an incident when a spy, an undercover Bulgarian allegedly recruited by the CIA, was caught. The Bulgarian security service was trying to establish a link between this spy whom they had and the legation. They captured the spy's radio transmitter and radio schedule. He was supposed to be heard by a listening post in Greece if he had any serious information to impart. The Bulgarians tried to use this radio communication link to set up a meeting with the spy on the main street in Sofia, to be attended by someone in the legation. Well as it came out later in some newspaper article,

at the very hour of the assigned meeting and on the street corner where this fellow was waiting and was supposed to be picked up, I walked past him just as I did every evening on my way home. Several other people in the legation who lived east of the chancery went past that same corner too on that evening, it was the natural way to go. Again their suspicions must have been aroused, "What was this guy Houston up to?" The worst thing was that in press articles later, they did not describe me by name. They just said that a short time after one legation officer went by, smartly dressed, another legation staff member "in a cap and a crumpled raincoat" came walking by, trying to disguise himself. Well, my raincoat was crumpled and I did wear a cap, so I was sure they were talking about me. Later, in talking about this with John Anderson, the husband of Minister Anderson, he said, "You think that was you, I'm sure it was me." So it is a matter of dispute who the guy in the cap and the crumpled raincoat was whom Bulgarians thought was trying to meet the alleged spy that evening.

Q: Was John Anderson living there all the time?

HOUSTON: He was an artist who became a Foreign Service dependent and adjusted to this status quite well. The only other important incident in that first tour in Bulgaria was the Kennedy assassination, November 23, 1963. Eugenie Anderson wanted to have some sort of public commemoration. She was always very sensitive to the public relations aspect. She arranged with the local Catholic Church to have a memorial mass. She invited members of the Bulgarian government to come, and the chiefs of diplomatic missions. The Protocol Office sent some low-ranking officer, that was the only Bulgarian Government recognition of the Kennedy death. They were very much atheists, and if they would go to any church, it would not be a Catholic Church, but an Orthodox Church. The only Communist ambassador to show up at the mass was the Romanian. He was a good Communist and would not go inside the church door. He simply stood outside during the service and made sure that we knew that he had come. In retrospect, this was the first sign of Romanian deviation I can recall.

Q: That was when it was just beginning. You got the usual two year treatment and then back to what looks like something that you were doing before.

HOUSTON: I came back from Sofia to the same organization I had left in 1961. It was now in the Bureau of European Affairs. We had offices in the main State Department building. Our DCM from Warsaw, Frank Siscoe, was now running it, and ran it for quite a few years. I guess my assignment indicates that the Department really did not know what to do with me. They certainly did not follow their rotational policy very well with me. I had two tours in the cultural exchanges business, just as I had two tours in Bulgaria and two with BEX. I don't think many people have such double tours in the Foreign Service now.

Q: How did you get along with learning three Slavic languages? Did you get them confused?

HOUSTON: It is very difficult to distinguish between them. I must admit that learning Bulgarian was facilitated by knowing Polish. During that summer in 1948 that I spent in Colorado, I studied Russian. That may have helped my Polish later. Bulgarian is the easiest Slavic language, since the nouns and adjectives don't decline. I got my test score in Bulgarian, I was 4+. Whereas my Russian was only 3+ and Polish was 4 when I finished FSI.

Q: Do you have any extensive report on your European exchange job?

HOUSTON: I think the exchanges assignments laid the groundwork for my later appearance in Moscow as Counselor for Science and Technology. Normally you have to do an apprenticeship in Soviet Affairs before you can get a Counselor rank in Moscow. I think this is one factor that stood me in good stead when I finally did go to Moscow.

The job of Albanian/Bulgarian desk officer, which was just down the hall from the Exchanges office, was useful to me later on. When Woodie White left that desk officer job in the middle of 1966, I grabbed it. I was well qualified on the basis of my time in Bulgaria, of course. The job gave me time to learn a little more about Albania. I recalled my conversation with Ambassador Joe Jacobs in Warsaw, and with his secretary there, who had also been with him in Albania. Albania seemed like a quaint little country. Ultimately I hoped to be assigned there. Now that I am retired there are signs that U.S.-Albanian relations might be restored. Curtis Kamman is reported as having discussed this very subject with the Albanian representative recently at the UN. I can't say that much went on in Bulgaria or Albania when I was on the desk. I was called recently as a possible witness at an espionage trial in New York of a Bulgarian trade representative, because of conversations I as desk officer had had with Bulgarian officials. I was never put on the stand. The U.S. and Bulgarians had agreed that the Bulgarians could have a commercial office in New York. The question arose as to whether persons assigned to that commercial office were entitled to full diplomatic immunity or not. I had conversations during my time on the desk with the DCM at the Bulgarian embassy on this very subject. But other than that, I can't think of anything I did that will go down in the history books. Certainly there was no movement to restore relations with Albania at that time, relations were completely frozen.

At the end of 1968, I was transferred briefly to Vancouver, Canada, ostensibly to replace the number two man there. Although I outranked him, he arranged with the Embassy in Ottawa to stay on, with me as his deputy. This was not satisfactory to me; my assignment was shortly thereafter broken.

I came back to Washington to work in something called the Substantive Information Systems Staff. This was the Department's commitment at the time to try to computerize its information handling, a very initial effort. We envisaged some very wild blue yonder types of projects. Our boss was particularly keen on having a system in which Department officers told the information managers the kinds of information they were interested in. Thereafter, the distribution of messages in the Department would be done by computer

strictly according to those profiles. If you did not get a message, it was because you did not ask for it in your profile. As a Foreign Service Officer, I tried to add a little common sense and Foreign Service background to what the wild blue yonder boys were dreaming. I was never enamored with computer distribution of messages as much as perfecting the retrieval process so that if you wanted a historical document, you could get it quickly rather than search around, perhaps in vain, to find it. I am afraid that all that came out of the effort was the introduction of the TAGS system, or putting codes on all telegrams, airgrams and so forth which came in, to aid in retrieving messages.

Q: It is hard to think at this time that the computer as such did not exist, at least in the substantive parts of the Department, there was certainly no Apples, Wangs.

HOUSTON: There was considerable resistance, I think, to the idea, and that is why, perhaps, the project I worked on, which had such wild blue yonder ideas of automatic distribution of messages according to user profiles, was never adopted. The Department managers were willing to go along with introducing the TAGS coding system. After all, the old-fashioned way was putting a file number on a message and putting it in a folder. TAGS coding really was not that much different.

Q: I actually served myself on some kind of committee at that time that met periodically and heard reports on the computer progress.

We have come back to the great occasion when you and I got together to do something.

HOUSTON: This came about when Jack McSweeney, the first person to be elevated from minister to Bulgaria to ambassador to Bulgaria, was looking for a new DCM. Richard G. Johnson, who had been together with me, Richard E. Johnson and Waldemar M. Johnson in Warsaw, was leaving as McSweeney's DCM in Sofia. McSweeney, to whom I will always be grateful, remembered the assistance I as desk officer gave him when he was first going out as minister to Bulgaria. I was delighted. While I liked the computer job, I really did not feel it was vital, and so I jumped at this chance to go back to Bulgaria. Richard G. Johnson had to be back in the U.S. for graduation of a child at the beginning of June of 1970. In May 1970 I went out for an overlap with him. Between the time Jack McSweeney asked me to be his DCM and the time I got there, the Department had changed their plans for Jack. He now was not to stay on long after I arrived. The Department had Ambassador Horace G. Torbert in mind to go out to replace McSweeney, but Ambassador Torbert was busy tending the shop in Congressional Relations. It was not certain when he could be sprung. So just a few weeks after my arrival in Sofia, I became charge. The chargéship lasted until Ambassador Torbert arrived in early October. This is the time when I most appreciated the idea of being thoroughly prepared before going to a post. Having served two years, 1962- 64, as head of the political section in Sofia and then two years as Bulgarian desk officer, I had, perhaps for the first time, really adequate preparation for my Foreign Service job. Language and everything.

We did not have the problem of young children, this time, to educate. It was my first DCMship, we had better living conditions. My second tour to Bulgaria, was the most delightful, I think in retrospect, of all my Foreign Service assignments. And particularly so because Ambassador Torbert, when he arrived, proved to be a very fine boss.

Q: [Laughter] We should strike that. [N.B.: The interviewer is Ambassador Torbert] What kind of problems did you have? Communist countries have a tendency to test people out fairly early when they think they may be vulnerable. Did you have any problems?

HOUSTON: No. The whole time in Bulgaria was a very pleasant one. As I recall, you arrived after the Plovdiv fair. I thus had to escort personally the Communist Party boss, Todor Zhivkov, through the Plovdiv fair and explain things to him. Things went well there. We had a few minor problems, but nothing like the test of fire Eugenie Anderson was given on her first year of the Plovdiv fair. Then the Bulgarians seized our fair brochure and were not going to allow us to distribute it. She stood them down. Generally U.S.-Bulgarian relations at the time were on the upswing, not very far up, but the direction was right. A man now important in Bulgarian affairs, Prime Minister Andrey Lukanov, appeared as a vice minister of foreign trade in those days, the first real new-thinking man in the Bulgarian leadership.

We had the beautiful dacha in the mountains to repair to. I just remember this period as a very pleasant time. No Cuban missile crisis, no presidents assassinated. True, we were frustrated in our long-standing wish to get out of the chancery that we had in Sofia. The chancery was surrounded on all sides, except the street side, by Bulgarian buildings, a security officer's nightmare. It was also a fire trap. We made absolutely no progress on that front. I just don't recall any particular problems, it all goes down as a rosy glow in my memory.

Q: Well, you did a lot of good work there and one of the things you did towards the end was to negotiate, finally, a consular agreement. Do you want to talk about the history of that? It did not revolutionize things, but it was the only agreement that was signed over many years.

HOUSTON: Well, to say that we negotiated the consular agreement is an exaggeration. A lawyer came out, an expert from LT (Treaty and Legal Division, office of the Legal Advisor), who really did the negotiating. The agreement had been under negotiation for a long time. Bulgaria fell in line on a consular convention after other countries, including the Soviet Union, had negotiated an agreement. The Bulgarian agreement did provide, at least on paper, assurance that we would be promptly notified if American citizens got into trouble. We had another agreement not so formal perhaps, to cooperate with the Bulgarians in combating narcotics. Much of what was done under the agreement is classified, but we did always consider the narcotics agreement a mark of how U.S.-Bulgarian relations were improving. Later on, the assassination attempt against the Pope occurred, and there were all sorts of charges of Bulgarian government agents cooperating with Turkish drug smugglers, setting up Mohamad Agca, who was responsible for the

assassination attempt, etc. I could not help but think then that maybe the cooperation between the United States and Bulgaria was really designed, in Bulgarian eyes, to give Bulgarian security authorities a better view of how much we knew about drug smuggling in and through Bulgaria. Then they could devise better ways to smuggle drugs through Bulgaria without our knowing it. But this is the way one becomes after years of service in Eastern Europe, I suppose, suspicious of everything.

One curious thing that came out when it was time for me to leave Bulgaria. Ambassador Torbert had decided he wanted to retire, I believe, in January 1973. I know you had some problems convincing the Department that it was your wish to retire. You had to send in two letters of resignation before they would believe it. In any case, the Department was not ready to name a new envoy when Ambassador Torbert retired. Perhaps there was some struggle going on. Kissinger may have been struggling with various career people as to who would take over the embassy in Sofia. I was left as charge. It was clear that since I had completed over three years there by May of 1973, I could not be left there. As they did not have a new ambassador ready to be named, they simply named a new charge. The new charge was Helene Batjer, an old Eastern European hand, who was now, perhaps belatedly, being recognized as the valuable officer that she was. But instead of having her designated as charge from Washington, as legally should have been done, she was sent out with no special accreditation. I was ordered to turn the embassy over to her two weeks after she arrived, and then leave. So it fell to me as charge to inform the Bulgarian government that I was leaving the embassy in the hands of Helene Batjer as charge. I think the Vienna Convention prevents that sort of thing. In any case, the Bulgarians challenged this. I think Bulgarian *amour propre* was offended by the idea that we were leaving the important Sofia mission without an ambassador for an extended period of time. Helene Batjer, I am told, ultimately had to be designated as charge from Washington. Finally a new ambassador, Martin Herz, was sent out. This is a technical point, and I must admit that I have not done a lot of research on it. I do know that Helene Batjer's credentials were challenged because they came from me rather than from Washington.

Q: One of the fascinating things that happened at that time was the death of the Foreign Minister and the emergence of a new Foreign Minister who became quite famous. I know that you made quite a study of it and I wonder if you could tell about what we knew about it?

HOUSTON: I am not sure that anyone outside Bulgaria knows the truth. Bulgaria had a very popular Foreign Minister, Ivan Bashev, at the time. A relatively young man, and relatively more flexible than many in the Communist government at the time. He was an athletic skier. Periodically he would go skiing on Mount Vitosha. One time he disappeared in a snow storm not very far from a ski lodge up there. The story put out was that he had gotten confused in this snow storm, and froze to death up on the mountain. He was buried as a hero. Unofficially, it was rumored that he was a man in trouble with the hardliners, and that he may have been so driven into a corner by these hardliners. The rumor was that he took his own life. That is theory number one. Theory number two,

which is far less accepted, is that he was done away with because he had become inconvenient to the party boss. Zhivkov was overthrown in December '89, one of the last East European hardliners to go. Subsequently he has been accused of all sorts of nefarious deeds. Bashev's replacement was Peter Mladenov. Far from being a trim and athletic figure like Bashev, Mladenov was a rotund man who became even more rotund. In his role of Foreign Minister, he had to play the role of a liberal, or quasi-liberal. He is now acting as a reform Communist, hoping that the Bulgarian Communist Party in its new reform image will continue to play an important role, although no longer a constitutionally guaranteed leading role, in Bulgaria. The forthcoming elections will tell if he has been successful in that regard. But cause of the death of Ivan Bashev under mysterious circumstances in the storm on Mt. Vitosha, as far as I know, is still unknown.

When I left Bulgaria in September of 1973, I was told by Walt Stoessel that the Department had something good in mind for me. They could not tell me just yet what it would be, but in the meantime I would be assigned as an European expert with the U.S. delegation to the Twenty-Eighth General Assembly meeting later in September in New York. I never really thought highly of multi- lateral diplomacy, having been brought up in bilateral diplomacy. I did profit, educationally, from having this exposure to multi- lateral diplomacy as practiced at the UN. My principal work assignment there was to lobby European countries, usually the European neutrals, to support U.S. positions. And also to report what they had to say. One of the more unusual things that I remember doing was going out to Washington Heights to escort Henry Kissinger's parents to the General Assembly session in which he made his first appearance as Secretary of State. They were delightful people, and I was happy to do it. I was also seated, at one time, in one of the U.S. seats on the floor behind Henry Kissinger when the two German states were admitted as UN members. The two Germanys had been blocked because the East did not want to recognize West Germany and the West did not want to accept East Germany. But by 1973, an agreement had been worked out that the two Germanys would be admitted as sovereign states. I was behind Henry Kissinger when Willy Brandt got up to deliver the speech for West Germany. Henry Kissinger put on earphones so he could listen to him in English; I was proud that I could listen to him in German without the earphones.

Another interesting moment from that session: The U.S. and Soviet UN delegations and permanent reps had a tradition that they would meet before a new session got underway, to talk to each other and warn each other about anything they were planning to bring up. The idea that we were trying to catch each other by surprise had gone by the boards. As an European expert, I was present when Jacob Malik came in to meet John Scali, who was the U.S. permanent representative. This was an interesting session. By no means did they tell us all that they eventually brought up in the session, but the Soviets went through the motions, at least, of big power comity.

Q: What is your view of the function of the UN General Assembly and Council?

HOUSTON: Well, I am glad you asked this question. The UN is a very extensive operation. Fortunately it does have a Security Council where the really serious war and

peace issues are discussed. I say fortunately, because as we look at Europe now, we wonder what is going to be the future security system in Europe. NATO, which is premised on the West having a permanent enemy in the Warsaw Pact, may have a limited future. What is going now is the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, CSCE. It operates on a basis even worse than the General Assembly. CSCE operates on absolute consensus, as was so clearly illustrated in the period leading up to the convening of the Helsinki Final Act of July and August 1975. Then Malta for months prevented an agreement by holding out for special provisions concerning the Mediterranean. Many people are suggesting that NATO will have to go, that we will have to rely on the CSCE to preserve the future security of Europe. If you think the rules for the General Assembly in New York are bad, imagine a situation where Malta or Albania, which may join shortly, will have a veto. How can you really trust the security of Europe to an organization like that?

Going back to the General Assembly of 1973, I met there my future ambassador in Helsinki, Marc Austad, who was a U.S. public delegate to the General Assembly that year. I also encountered the Finnish attitude towards neutrality for the first time.

What the Department had had in mind when they brought me home from Bulgaria was to be the first DCM in East Berlin. Along with allowing East Germany to join the UN, we were recognizing her and exchanging embassies. My assignment as DCM was premised on the State Department candidate being named ambassador. He wasn't. Instead, John Sherman Cooper was named ambassador. From his previous experience in India, Cooper had his own candidate for DCM. As a consolation prize I was sent to Helsinki as the DCM where there was an unexpected vacancy. Here again Lady Luck smiled on me. There were many problems in East Berlin; not only the problems of opening up a new post, but problems personality-wise. I really enjoyed my three years plus in Finland.

Eugenie Anderson had been my first political chief of mission in Bulgaria; in Helsinki, I had two. The first one was John Krehbiel, who had been Nixon's insurance man Southern California. After Nixon resigned in the summer of 1974 and Ford became President, John Krehbiel became vulnerable. One of Jerry Ford's golfing partners, Mark Austad, was named to replace Nixon's insurance agent as Ambassador in Helsinki.

Q: Were you there long with Krehbiel? Was he a satisfactory ambassador?

HOUSTON: Yes, we had roughly six months together. Fortunately, the bad news for Ambassador Krehbiel reached him when I was in Majorca on vacation. Thus my face was not associated with bringing him this bad news. Ambassador Krehbiel was a delightful man. His attitude was, "Boys, if you need my help in anything, let me know. I will be glad to do anything I can."

Q: But don't bother me with details?

HOUSTON: He was content to leave most facets of the running of the embassy to the professionals.

Q: Would you go see the Foreign Minister?

HOUSTON: Maybe not the Foreign Minister, but I would certainly go in to see the Director General of the Foreign Ministry. The Finns did not want to put the ambassador on the spot, they would deal with us in other ways. Mark Austad, now deceased, did not have this relaxed approach. He was very much public relations minded. He was a very much hands-on sort of person, particularly in so far as our USIS people were concerned. He even got to the point of creating a new U.S. foreign policy towards Finland, irrespective of anyone else in the embassy or Department of State. He determined that the United States should buy a Finnish-made ice breaker in order to cement commercial relations between the United States and Finland. In conducting this battle to get the U.S. to buy a Finnish icebreaker, he made an enemy of the U.S. Coast Guard. He did have certain allies in the Congressional delegations of the Great Lakes states, because this icebreaker was designed to keep the Great Lakes open in the winter time. This had never been done. Ambassador Austad was always able to get front page headlines in the Finnish papers by announcing how progress towards the U.S. purchase of an icebreaker in Finland to keep the Great Lakes open.

Q: It was the Coast Guard that would have to buy this?

HOUSTON: The purchase would come out of the Coast Guard budget, and the Coast Guard would have to operate it. However, the Coast Guard did not want it.

Q: Did they have any icebreakers?

HOUSTON: Nobody thought it made economic sense to keep the Great Lakes open in the winter time. It was cheaper to have a lot of ore movers to move the ore during all the non-ice months and stack the ore on the southern shore near the steel plants than it would be to break ice all winter. In the current budget, the Coast Guard is having another icebreaker foisted upon them, at the request of Senator Stevens of Alaska, this time for use in Alaska. Again they are resisting. The Coast Guard resistance then was two- fold: one, they did not want the job of keeping the Great Lakes open. Two, if they were going to be given the job, they wanted to have an icebreaker built in the United States. In any case, the icebreaker campaign illustrated some of the problems the professionals in the embassy in Helsinki had with Ambassador Austad. He was a strong personality, very much hands-on, with his own ideas of what should be done with U.S.-Finnish relations, and feeling no compunctions about making his own policy.

Q: Did Austad speak Finnish?

HOUSTON: No. He really wanted the embassy in Norway because he was of Norwegian descent, he had been a Mormon missionary in Norway and spoke Norwegian. Later, he

did get to be named ambassador to Norway. However, the person who was in Norway at the time Nixon resigned had good credentials whereas Krehbiel as the insurance agent for Nixon was vulnerable. Even though he wanted to be in Norway, Mark Austad was a very hands-on ambassador in Finland. He cultivated very good public relations. He is, perhaps, one of the very best known American ambassadors to Finland in modern times. He got to be a buddy of President Kekkonen. He arranged for President Kekkonen to come to the embassy for a sauna with members of the staff. I had a sauna with President Kekkonen; once you have a sauna with a Finn, you really have a friend.

The really big thing that happened in Helsinki, the one time in my career when I can say I was on the spot when history was being made, was the Final Act of Helsinki in July and August 1975. President Ford and Henry Kissinger came for the United States. Mark Austad really thought for a while he was going to have the President as his house guest at the Residence. He was told to arrange a presidential suite at the best hotel in town for Kissinger. As it turned out, of course, the White House staff told the ambassador to move into a hotel. Kissinger got the presidential suite, and the ambassador got sort of an ordinary room. The embassy thereafter had two plaques. One was a plaque out in front which said that, "In this room in 1949, the first talks were held between the United States and the Soviet Union as part of SALT." Austad put up another plaque, in the dining room where President Ford had met with the leaders bilaterally, Brezhnev, Tito and other people. Ambassador Austad's plaque there read: "Mark Austad, Ambassador. This is the room where President Ford met his counterparts at the CSCE Summit." The next ambassador, Roz Ridgway, felt that such a plaque was unprofessional. She didn't mind having a room identified as the place where talks were held for SALT, but she did not think that Austad, who did not live there at the time or really have anything to do with CSCE, should have his name associated with the Helsinki Final Act.

I can recall going to Finlandia Hall for this Final Act. I was standing in the corridor once when I saw Todor Zhivkov just standing there, not doing anything. So I approached him, I stuck out my hand and started to talk to him in Bulgarian. He was chatting with me, asking how I knew Bulgarian, but I could see his eyes were somewhere else. He was sort of in mid-sentence when the auditorium door opened and Leonard Brezhnev came out. I was dead from then on. Zhivkov had apparently arranged to meet Brezhnev for a corridor conversation. Others attending were Pierre Trudeau, Marshal Tito. This is one time when I really felt I was present when history was being made.

Q: There was a substantial support function for our embassy and consulates in the Soviet Union, wasn't there? Did that create any problems or was it a fairly routine administrative matter?

HOUSTON: Helsinki support for the USSR posts worked normally, fairly easily. We did have, I think, one person, in our mail room working on Moscow and Leningrad APO mail; he was on the Moscow budget. The rest of our people working on this support project were not covered, I think, by Moscow's budget. The support work was done mostly by trusted Finnish personnel. It really was not a big burden. Since my time,

support has become much more of a burdensome matter. Because of construction projects in the Soviet Union, many more bulky things have been shipped through Finland. The latest plan to reconstruct the embassy in Moscow, using large components fabricated in the United States, that is going to be a very important task. Embassy Moscow, for morale reasons as much as anything, would send non-professional couriers out once a week, and pay their expenses to bring back the mail.

Q: The old courier system.

HOUSTON: The old courier system. It perhaps could have been done in some other fashion, but all people in Moscow appreciated the chance to spend a few days in the freedom of Finland.

Q: Were there any particular personality things? Anybody PNGed as you remember, out of Moscow?

HOUSTON: I can't recall any such thing. The Finnish border was pretty well guarded. Every now and then someone might make it across. Unofficially, I understood that if a Finnish border guard would catch somebody escaping from the Soviet Union, they would expel them as fast as they could to Sweden without saying a word. The Finns really did not want to send people back to the Soviet Union.

Q: There is a bit of a transportation problem.

HOUSTON: The Finns are very efficient. I am sure that if they have a policy, they will find a way to accomplish it. One of the interesting things about Soviet-Finnish relations is that the Finns don't want to forget the territory formerly part of Finland which they had to cede to the Soviet Union after the Winter War, in Karelia principally. In almost any Finnish cemetery you will find a marker put up in memory of those graves left behind in Karelia. When the Finns had to evacuate, they had to leave their dead behind. This stone is found in every Finnish cemetery, so that those who left dead behind in Karelia they can come and leave flowers at this particular stone. There are various organizations for Finnish provinces who have celebrations, but no celebration is quite like the Karelian celebration. There an effort is made to preserve the Karelian culture, which may have some slight nuances that general Finnish culture does not have. I have been to meetings of people from Karelia, or whose fathers or mothers came from Karelia. Participants wear old Karelian costumes, do Karelian dances, and sing Karelian songs. There is even a Karelian beer. Finns do like their beer and other liquor. Karelian beer came out bearing a label of crossed swords. One Soviet ambassador to Finland was foolish to say something about this. He said this label was not very good of the Finns, who claiming good relations with the Soviet Union, yet had a beer called Karelian beer bearing very militaristic symbols on it. I am told that within a few months after the Soviet ambassador made that remark, the producers could not keep up the demand for Karelian beer; many Finns wanted to drink the beer just to show the Soviet ambassador what they thought of his remark.

Q: What is your forecast and what is the situation in Karelia now? Is there a large Finnish population there? Is there an independence movement?

HOUSTON: No, I don't think there is much prospect of Karelia rejoining Finland. The Finns are part of a language group to which many different small groups in the Soviet Union belong. If anything, the Finns feel most kinship with the Estonians, who are very, very closely related linguistically and culturally. I think the Finns realize that the big power, Soviet Union, needs Karelia for the protection of Leningrad. There is not much irredentism in Finland, but the fate of Estonia is very much on Finnish minds at the moment. My experience in Finland was, I think, good preparation for my next assignment, which was Moscow.

When Roz Ridgway came to Helsinki in September, 1977, she had her own choice as DCM. I stayed on for about two weeks, saw her present her credentials and make a few calls. Then Sam Fry came in as my replacement and I left. I joined the Board of Examiners for the Foreign Service. The assignment arose because when Personnel knew of Roz's plans for a new DCM, they began casting about for a place where I could go. I had seen a notice that the Consul General in Thessaloniki was leaving. I called Washington Personnel and said, "I have been in Bulgaria, I know a bit about Thessaloniki, what about naming me CG in Thessaloniki?" Well it turned out that someone had already been tapped for that job, Dan Zachary. He was a Greek speaker, and I wasn't. He was then head of the economic cone on the Board of the Foreign Service Examiners so I sort of fell into his vacancy. I took his place on the Board while he went off to Thessaloniki.

BEX was an interesting assignment. Of course, a BEX assignment does not lead anywhere. So while I was doing examinations, I was looking for a place I could go. I did not want to retire just yet. The thought occurred to me that I could dust off my previous scientific credentials, my time in Soviet-American exchanges, scientific exchanges, and perhaps become the next Science Counselor in Moscow. There was considerable resistance on the part of the Soviet desk to my idea. The Soviet experts do not like to see counselor-level jobs go to persons who have not put in time at a lower level. However, with OES [Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Science] beating down every non-science candidate that EUR threw up, I was able to get this job. I took six months Russian language training, from January to June 1979. Thanks to my previous Slavic exposure, I got up to an evaluated 3 in Russian before going out. I made a sentimental journey, which I recommend to everyone going to the USSR. I flew to Stockholm and took a ferry to Helsinki overnight. If you can travel in June-July, the ferry ride is absolutely lovely. I then went by train from Helsinki to Moscow. I had a very pleasant lunch with Ambassador Ridgway and her DCM, Sam Fry, in Helsinki on my way through.

I took over as Science Counselor in Moscow in July, 1979. But five months after I arrived, the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. President Carter, as one method of retaliating, decided to stop all high level contacts under the exchange programs. The programs were

the principle *raison d'etre*, the principle source of activity for the science office in Moscow. We found ourselves with not much to do. The fall-off in exchange activity made it possible for me to engage in more reporting on scientific topics. I also carved out a niche for myself reporting on Soviet-Scandinavian relations, because of my service in Helsinki. I probably stepped on the people in the political section a bit. The Science Section was also given the job of controlling the embassy travel program. Travel is an important part of a mission in a Communist country, particularly in the Soviet Union where so much territory is off limits. You keep trying to get into places where people have not been into before just to see what is going on there. The travel program is normally run out of the political section. Since they had plenty to do in 1980, and we didn't, we took over the travel program. This made us become more involved in the political aspects of U.S.-Soviet relations.

Q: Did you have plenty of funding for internal travel?

HOUSTON: You never have enough money, but we had sufficient so that we could spend some of it on lower priority targets, or on travel by people who were not heads of sections. We could have spent more, surely, but Soviet secrecy not funding was the big problem. Our getting involved in the travel program was merely shifting the workload within the embassy, keeping track of travel, and planning it. Before things got too bad after Afghanistan, I did make one trip with one of our touring science delegations. This was a delegation of people investigating Soviet practices in restoring strip-mined land. We went to out-of-the-way places like the Siberian coal basins, Kemerovo, Karaganda, which also had a coal mining operation, and Alma Ata, a charming town in the Central Asian republic of Kazakhstan.

Q: These are very expensive tourist trips.

HOUSTON: Traveling with this delegation exposed me to a typical Soviet attempt to drink visitors under the table. I was not drunk under the table, not because I am a good drinker, but because I had sense enough to go to bed early. The head Soviet host claimed that he had an appointment and left before the drinking got serious. So I used the same excuse and left. The next morning we had a difficult time arousing one particular expert from the Bureau of Mines, who had stayed at the party until the bitter end. The Soviet practice is this: they outnumber you, as each person proposes a toast, the Soviets only drink to American toasts, not theirs. Also their liquor is drunk, vodka. I don't know why we don't do a better job briefing our exchange people so that they don't get caught the way one or two of our group did.

Q: I learned that during World War II with Soviet purchasing missions.

HOUSTON: One of the first celebrations in Moscow after I arrived came when Ambassador Toon dug the first spade of dirt for the new chancery in Moscow. Since then, our construction of a new chancery has turned out to be a disastrous project. We will have to demolish the new chancery at great expense and start again. Andrey Gromyko gave

Toon a farewell luncheon. V.V.Kuznetzov received the credentials of our new ambassador, ex-IBM board chairman Tom Watson, in November 1979. Gromyko gave Watson a farewell luncheon early in 1981. I attended all these functions.

Q: How was Watson as ambassador?

HOUSTON: Watson is a man who has had great interest in the Soviet Union since the mid-30s. He is the man who also thought that if you spend 30 years in the Foreign Service, you probably knew a great deal about diplomacy. So he relied heavily on the advice of his staff, although he wanted to overcome what he thought was an overdone anti-communism and skepticism of the Soviet Union on the part of the professionals. He basically considered his mission, the reason why he sought the job and took it, was to improve Soviet-U.S. relations sufficiently so that there never would be a nuclear exchange between the two countries. I must say the Soviets very badly timed their invasion of Afghanistan. Instead of profiting from the departure of hard-line Mac Toon and the presence of a guy willing to give them the benefit of the doubt, they went into Afghanistan. There was nothing Watson could do to carry out his own desires at the time. I think Afghanistan was a very great disappointment to Ambassador Watson, his desire to head off the nuclear confrontation. He could do nothing, because of circumstances. Later, I think he was the first foreigner to get permission to fly a private airplane across Siberia. He had been a pilot on a mission which flew from Alaska across Siberia to Moscow to open the Al-Sib route. The route was used to fly aircraft to the Russian front from Great Falls Montana through Alaska and across Siberia. He had been co-pilot of a plane flying back to the United States from this mission to Moscow. The plane just barely made it back to the town of Yakutsk in winter time when engine trouble developed. He was stuck in Yakutsk for ten days in 1942 while they tried to fix the aircraft. I know this story well. One of the things Watson wanted to do as ambassador was to go back to Yakutsk with his wife to show her what that area was like. He and his wife were good enough to ask my wife and me to accompany them on this trip. This was the first time I had been on an ambassadorial trip, getting all the extra attention that goes with that. Watson tried to meet some of the people whom he had known in 1942 in Yakutsk, particularly the General who had been in charge of the Soviet airlift at the time. There was still enough Soviet suspicion that they did not produce that man. Watson did see a museum director whom he had known 38 years before.

Q: Had IBM maintained an office in Moscow as they had in a number of Eastern European countries during the cold war?

HOUSTON: IBM had representation in Moscow when we were there, but I am not sure about its history. There had been an IBM in Bulgaria for years, and one in Hungary. I noticed the IBM office in Moscow got very busy when Watson was there. When Olive Watson's IBM typewriter broke, the IBM people in Moscow wanted to give her a brand new one, the latest. She insisted that they repair hers. They had to fly a guy in from the IBM factory, I guess, to fix the old machine, but they did just that.

Q: You talked about doing scientific reporting, how did you do that, weren't you forbidden to talk to people?

HOUSTON: No, I was not forbidden. The higher level people from the Government agencies back here were not allowed to contact my people over there. The embassy was never enjoined, even at the counselor level, from going out and talking to anybody they could find who were willing to talk to us.

Q: What sort of things were you able to report on?

HOUSTON: I must admit that most of my reporting came from reading the scientific literature we received at the Embassy, as well as from round-table meetings of science counselors once a month. I picked up at these meetings what other countries were doing in the science field who had not cut back because of Afghanistan. Also there were ongoing U.S. projects. One in particular gave us entry into a science research institute in Moscow, namely our cooperation with the Magneto Hydro-dynamics Institute. The Soviets in science think nothing of investing $50 million to build a full scale plant, whereas we are aghast at spending so much on experimental projects. We prefer to test things on computers, then try it on a small scale, and gradually work up before we invest in a large way. The Soviets, on the other hand, lack some of our refined, delicate instruments. So we found a happy marriage of Soviet willingness to build a full scale plant to test the theory of magneto-hydro dynamic electric generation, and our ability to supply components that they could not build. This cooperation gave us unusual access into the particular institute doing this work. Even though high level cooperation was cut off, we could still go to that institute and find out what they were doing.

Another example of reporting I did from Moscow: one summer while in Finland, my wife and I spent a week near the Norwegian and Soviet borders at the Sub-Arctic Research Station of the University of Turku. Our stay was primarily a vacation, but I did look into various scientific activities under way. One thing I did was visit the seismic station there. That station had two seismic detectors, one Soviet and one American in keeping with the Finnish policy of neutrality. Readings from the detectors were regularly sent to Moscow and Washington respectively. Of course, the U.S. detector was much more sensitive than the Soviet one, and the location close to the Soviet border was more important to the U.S. than to the USSR. In any case, the Finn tending the detectors told me that they had been picking up for some time signals indicating some sort of drilling activity across the Soviet border. This all came back to me when I read in Moscow a brief account of a Soviet project to drill the world's deepest hole in the hard granites of the Kola Peninsula. I reported to Washington my suspicion that signals the seismic station in Kevo, Finland had been picking up for years came from the Soviet drilling project on the Kola Peninsula.

Science and politics are very closely related in the Soviet Union. The USSR Academy of Sciences plays a very important role in the USSR political system. The Academy is automatically entitled to several seats in the Soviet parliament. The President of the

Academy of Sciences was always a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The supervision of the Academy of Sciences, which covers not just the hard sciences as we know them, but also includes fields like Party ideology and history. The Senior Party Secretary, Suslov in my time, would supervise the Academy of Sciences, so there was a lot of politics in the Academy. Andre Sakharov was a member of the Academy of Sciences. He was very political, so there was a lot of interaction of politics and science in the Soviet Academy. We had to be careful in dealing with the Academy of Sciences not to tread too much on what the people in the political section were doing. The political section maintained contact with Sakharov, for example.

Q: We have our own bureaucracy. You must have had a reasonably collegial atmosphere in the Embassy?

HOUSTON: We had all those things which at the time of the Sergeant Lonetree trial were portrayed as bad. We knew a KGB colonel worked in the Embassy personal services section. We had New Years dances or Marine Balls at which Marines or the ambassador would have his arms around the head KGB representative at the Embassy. The relations of Russian and Americans at the Embassy were all very collegial. Perhaps inexperienced Marines thought we did not care about security. One time at Spaso House I remember in particular dancing with this KGB colonel, to the American song "Rah, Rah, Rasputin, Lover of the Russian Queen", a very popular piece among the Russians at the time. [Laughter]

I viewed my assignment to Moscow as pretty much the end of my career. I think that I had gotten into trouble in Finland by failing to ride herd on Ambassador Austad. I felt I was not going to get any more good assignments. So when I came home from Moscow, I went again to the Board of Examiners for a brief period. I retired early in 1982 when the senior officer cap [the cap in salaries for government workers which meant a higher pension calculation, based on the last three years of salary] was raised. I thought I was very smart waiting that out. I eased the shock of my retirement by taking a part time job in the Freedom of Information work in the Department.

Q: It must be interesting in a lot of ways, one you are using your skill. Would you like to describe what you are doing?

HOUSTON: The job had its roots in the passage of the first Freedom of Information Act in 1974. The Act laid obligations on government agencies to release information unless it fell into certain categories. The burden of proof was placed on the government to show why information cannot be released. At first the Department tried to discharge these responsibilities by saddling the bureaus with this task. This meant asking people who are competing for promotions and trying to run relations with foreign countries also to engage in this other type of work. That is not a congenial mix for most. Nobody wins a promotion by releasing information, and you could very well run into problems with your country by releasing that information. Furthermore, you could get the Department's

lawyers into lots of lawsuits by capriciously denying information that had to be released under the law, as it is being interpreted.

In 1979 the Department decided to set up an operation using retired Foreign Service officers who were not bucking for promotion, who had the time to consider requests free of the pressure of current events, who furthermore would be around long enough to become experts. A great body of law exists that you have to take into account in doing this work. When I retired early in 1982, the Department was still building up the cadre of retired FSOs to do FOIA work. An FSO had to be endorsed by various bureaus, there still being a vestige of bureau control over the centralized operation. I guess each bureau has to give up a certain amount of money each year for FOIA activities. I got the endorsement of European Affairs, and OES [Bureau of Oceans, Environment and Science]. When a case comes in, and it is decided which bureau the case belongs to, a reviewer gets the case who has the endorsement from the particular bureau concerned. Over time I have become a leading retired Soviet FOIA expert, even though I was in Moscow only as Science Counselor and only for two years. I guess other Soviet hands have found more lucrative ways than I have of putting their skills to work after retirement. FOIA work is a way of avoiding cutting the final umbilical cord that ties you to the State Department, plus one does come across some very interesting cases from time to time.

Q: It keeps you abreast of history and to some degree, current affairs.

HOUSTON: It really has posed before my eyes the problem of what to do about publications like Foreign Relations of the United States which ostensibly reflect everything important that has happened in U.S. relations in a particular year. I know of some countries and years when the major things that happened involved covert action. You cannot release covert action information at all. How can we talk about what really happened, where covert action was involved?

Q: It will be another generation at least and by that time records may be gone, and the memory will certainly. You are still doing some of the declassification?

HOUSTON: Yes.

Q: This has been most interesting. You now have a son in the Foreign Service so you have left an impression one generation down. Do you have any reflections on whether it is still a good career, what changes ought to be made in the professional Foreign Service?

HOUSTON: There have been several phases in the Foreign Service. One, the phase I came in under, was the Rogers Act. Here people might go for seventeen years without home leave, be forgotten in Tahiti for that period of time, go native. At this time, there were some real horror stories. I think that clearly was unfortunate. Maybe shortly after the 1946 Act was passed was the best time. The Act brought benefits, and the problems had not arisen. Now, we have security problems, a fortress mentality. The practice of

negotiating assignments is a far cry from the idea of the Foreign Service being a service. I am not sure we are representing our country best when we worry so much about whether a particular assignment is good for our careers instead of whether the job we are doing is good for our country. So I have some questions about the Foreign Service as it is today. As far as my son is concerned, he joined the Foreign Service on his own; I did not recommend it to him.

Q: At least I apparently did not set a good enough example because neither of my sons were taken to entering into the Foreign Service. Thank you very much Bob.

End of interview