

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

EDWARD L. KILLHAM

Interviewed by: Robert Martens
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Background	
Northwester and Columbia Universities	
World War II – U.S. Army in Eastern Europe	
EUR, Soviet desk	1952
Russian language training in Harvard	
London, United Kingdom	1952-1956
Consular work	
Moscow, Soviet Union	1956-1959
Consular officer	
Political officer	
Moscow Youth Festival	
Khrushchev	
Travel in USSR	
EUR, Soviet affairs	1959-1962
Dealing with Soviet diplomats in U.S.	
Treasury Department and Secretariat	
Brussels, Belgium	1963-1967
Political/military officer	
EUR, Soviet affairs	1970-1971
Naval War College	
INR Soviet bloc affairs	
CIA, State, DIA assessments	
Soviet desk	
Planning U.S. buildings in Leningrad, Moscow – problems	
Soviet defector fiasco	

NATO	1971-1974
Political director – U.S. staff	
Chairman, Senior Political Committee	
SALT Talks, Geneva	1970-1971
Vienna, Austria	1979
Russian language training	
Polish anti-Soviet attitude	
Brussels, Belgium	1979-1982
DCM	
Madrid, Spain	1982-1984
CSCE Conference	
Human Rights issues	
Neutrals and non-aligned positions	
Soviet negotiating tactics	
Naval War College	1984-1985
State Department representative	
AF	1985
Director for Central Africa	
Dealing with Mobutu	

INTERVIEW

Q: This is an interview conducted by Robert Martens of Edward Killham. Ed Killham is a long time Soviet specialist. He has service in his later career as Deputy Chief of Mission and sometime Chargé at Brussels. I believe he was also Country Director for Central Africa. We will focus primarily, however, on the Soviet period because we are trying to interview a number of people with Soviet connections through the '50s, '60s and '70s now that the great Soviet empire seems to be dissolving.

Ed, before I ask you anything, I think in your early life you were in the 99th Division in World War II on the northern outskirts of the Battle of the Bulge. Was that right?

KILLHAM: No, I was in a separate antiaircraft battalion and we were attached only briefly to the 99th Division. We were also attached to the First Division and the Fourth Armored and several others. The important thing was that I ended the war in Czechoslovakia, not far from Pilsen, as a matter of fact. It gave me an interest, therefore, in Czechoslovakia and Eastern Europe in general. We only stayed a few weeks there in

the Sudetenland and then pulled back to Germany. But in Germany my unit was assigned the duty of guarding PWs, among other chores. One of the groups of PWs that we had to guard turned out to be not Germans but Russians. This was the residue of Vlasov's Army. Gen. Vlasov was a former Soviet General who had been captured early in the war and then defected to the Germans, who helped him recruit a large number of other Soviet citizens who had been made prisoner by the German army. Vlasov's Army then served under German command against the Red Army. At the end of the war, the U.S. and U.K. Governments gave in to Soviet demands that they be returned to the USSR. At one stage I was supposed to accompany the group through Hungary into the Soviet Union and deliver them to their masters, but my participation was cancelled so I didn't have to endure what must have been an agonizing experience, which is now infamous as Operation Keelhaul. As you probably remember, a lot of the men tried to commit suicide on their way back, because they knew what they could expect from Stalin, and some succeeded in doing so.

Before then, I got a chance to meet and talk a little bit with some of the Russians. One of them was a young man who was picking up a few, not dollars, but packages of cigarettes, for metal work. He did a nice job. He made a cigarette case for me which you might like to look at, made from an old German mess kit. Really pretty good work for someone who didn't have any decent tools to work with. You can see that he put his name on the back, it is Vanya- the regular nickname for Ivan..

Q: And you kept it all this time.

KILLHAM: Yes, indeed.

Q: So that got you interested in things Eastern European at least, if not Soviet in that early period. Shall we go on from there?

KILLHAM: Yes, we might as well. About six months later I had a chance to go to the Army University in Biarritz, where I spent two very pleasant months studying, not Russian, but politics, psychology and French. But it was there that I got interested in the Foreign Service, which I knew very little about. I determined I was going to join the Foreign Service, after returning to the U.S. and finishing my college education. I did my undergraduate work at Northwestern and went on to Columbia for a Masters which I received in 1950. But I was not concerned particularly with Soviet affairs, although I took a few courses in that area..

It wasn't until I came down to Washington and started to work as a Junior Management Assistant in the Air Force Civilian Personnel Office that I started taking courses in the Russian language at George Washington. My teacher was Yelena Jakobson, a very distinguished lady in Washington's Russian language circles. She was a brilliant teacher. However, I wasn't a very good student. I was working full time at HQ USAF and had a pretty busy social life, as well. In September 1951 I married Lucy Cook, whom I had known since we were in high school.

But Mrs. Jakobson's class did get me interested in Russian again and as soon as I came into the Foreign Service I went and talked to the people in what was then the Eastern Europe Division, or EE.

Q: That was 1952, I believe.

KILLHAM: Yes, in 1952. Before I left for my first post I talked to Dave Henry and told him that I was interested in joining the Russian circle. He encouraged me and told me to do my first post as well as I could and then apply for Russian language training, which I did. I was very lucky and got accepted as a Russian language student in 1955. I then worked briefly on the Soviet Desk before starting language training at FSI and then on to Harvard for area studies. Among my teachers at Harvard was Zbigniew Brzezinski.

Q: What was your first post?

KILLHAM: London.

Q: You did consular work there I presume?

KILLHAM: Yes. I had four months in Edinburgh as well, early in 1953. That was the time of the big purges of the McCarthyite era, of course, after the change of administration. The vice consul in Edinburgh was shifted somewhere else so I went up there to take care of things. The Consul General there, Charles Derry, was an extremely nice man and it was one of the most stimulating periods that I spent in the Foreign Service. I was brand new in the Service and the feeling of active involvement in representing the U.S. in a small post was quite different from my early experience in London, which consisted mostly of signing consular invoices.

Anyway, I was accepted for Russian language training in 1955. After I working briefly in EE for Walter Stoessel and 10 months of language training, I went off to Harvard. Luckily, I was the only one in my group of six who had had a significant amount of experience as a consular office so I was sent immediately to Moscow. I arrived in 1957 where I met you.

Q: Yes, I had arrived a year earlier.

KILLHAM: And we shared your residence, Spaso House, for a couple of weeks.

Q: Yes, that is right.

KILLHAM: I moved out of there to a flat, very unusually not into one of the Embassy quarters, but a small flat on Khoklovskiy pereulok, which I shared with Dave Mark and John Baker for several months, until Lucy and John's wife arrived. I then moved into a flat in the Embassy Chancery, where our apartment was right upstairs from my office. I was the consular officer there for a full year.

Q: You were a consular officer the first year?

KILLHAM: Yes, that is right.

Q: Then you got into the political section?

KILLHAM: Yes, internal political. We used to tell Washington that our apartment was only a stone's throw from the street and it was, literally. We got lots of rocks thrown through our windows on several occasions. It was a very stimulating period for political officers although from many points of view the consular experience was even more interesting. It was just the beginning of "The Thaw" and things were loosening up a bit. We issued practically the first immigrant visas in Moscow since the war, I believe. The work didn't do my Russian any good because the people who came in were very old Lithuanian ladies who were going off to their relatives in the United States. They didn't speak any Russian. But it was interesting even so.

Even more exciting was the fact that this was the summer of the Moscow Youth Festival. As consular officer I was very heavily involved in that. At the end of the festival, the Chinese government invited a large group of American participants in Moscow to go to China at its expense. A number of them were not able to see why this was annoying their own government considerably, or perhaps didn't care, and they took advantage of the offer. I had to meet them at the railroad station on their return, chide them somewhat, and inspect their passports. I got a lot of coverage over this. It was the first time I made the front page of the New York Times, with a large picture. But the episode went fairly well. No crockery was irretrievably broken.

It was a very stimulating period because Khrushchev was really getting into the swing of things. He liked to come to the American Embassy, as you know, to American receptions. I met him there, along with a lot of other Soviet luminaries.

Q: Incidentally, the years previously that I was there, there was practically no contact with the top people. Once I had shaken hands with Khrushchev at the British Embassy, but relations with us were still bad. When you arrived it was just the time that the exchange program first came in and they opened up to tourists. So there was a certain turning point then.

KILLHAM: It was a turning point in other ways too, because when I was on the train to Moscow, coming in from Helsinki, Khrushchev got rid of the anti-party group.

Q: Oh yes.

KILLHAM: He purged his critics pretty well, which allowed him to move more freely than before. That was part of the loosening up.

Q: Yes. One of the things that I think is particularly interesting, and I have brought this up with some of your colleagues as well, is the degree to which one could get at real Russian people in this period. Most of this contact came from travel. People were much more ready to speak out in the provinces. In Moscow they tended to know that Big Brother was watching them all the time. Elsewhere they were possibly somewhat more naive and spoke to us. I know you had some interesting trips. I recall one was to the Baltic States. I think you were the first one in there because the Baltic States had been a closed area since World War II up until whenever that was--1957 or '58. You and someone else, I remember, went out and had quite an interesting trip. Maybe you could talk about that a bit.

KILLHAM: Yes. As a matter of fact we weren't the first, we were shortly after the first. Dave Mark visited Riga, Latvia a few weeks before us and got to know the Intourist guide there, Johnny Westmanis, who was very agreeable and very Latvian and quite outspoken about Latvia's unhappy history. When Dick Harmstone and I got to Riga he was our guide also. Westmanis was later evidently pressured into denouncing Dave Mark as a spy, which was part of the Soviet case against Dave and he was expelled. The account was written up in innumerable Soviet volumes describing the evil ways of Western spies in the Soviet Union.

But Dick and I had a number of remarkable contacts. You are right that it was easier to talk to people outside Moscow. It was even easier, at least at that stage, if you were not trying to speak to Russians. We had much greater success in the minority areas, such as the Baltics.

The first night we were there Dick and I wandered downtown, where they had what was reputed to be the only the night club in the USSR, which was on the top floor of the department store. We wandered around the department store a little bit. Dick, fortunately, was quite tall so he was noticeable. We struck up a conversation with a couple of other tall young men who turned out to be the nucleus of the Latvian basketball team. We got very close, indeed, with them. We had some friendly conversation and they asked us to get together the following night, which we did. They took us on a train to the famous white sands beach outside of Riga -- this was in January. We went walking with them--about four or five of them and two of us--along the snow-covered beach, closely pursued by a group of obvious KGB tails. We were discussing all sorts of sensitive things--politics, international affairs, the evils of the Soviet system, etc. Our friends knew the immediate area very well and knew the train schedule well also so, at one crucial moment, they said, "We all run now." So we all ran like hell and caught the train just as it was leaving the station in the direction of Riga, leaving the KGB watchers behind us. It probably annoyed our KGB tails enormously.

They took us then to a restaurant, also on the coast, and we ate some of the local specialties and again talked, with more than a few toasts along the way. At one stage, in a very touching episode, one of them who was studying English--he couldn't speak it but he could read it-- pulled out a book containing the American Declaration of Independence

and proceeded to read it to us in English. It was really a remarkable scene. Then they bundled us off back to Riga.

We didn't see them again, but the following night we struck up a conversation with a young Latvian musician--only half Latvian, I believe his father was Russian--who had another chap with him. We invited them to come to the night club with us and our guide, Johnny Westmanis, which made both of them rather nervous. But the young musician, an aspiring composer, invited us back to meet his folks. That was the first time I had gotten inside a Soviet apartment. They were quite well fixed. We talked with the parents and had a very pleasant evening. We got some feeling for some of the tensions but also for some of the elements that were bringing the Latvians and the local Russians together.

Another occasion where I had some experience dealing with non-Russians was also a lot more vibrant than you usually get. Vlad Toumanoff and I went down to Georgia as sort of a reward for going through Stalino and the industrial towns around it, a collection of the worst polluted areas I have ever seen.

We were on our way to Tbilisi but the plane had to make an emergency landing in Kutaisi, a pretty scrofulous town, where something I ate disagreed with me mightily. Eventually, however, we made our way to Tbilisi, a very charming city, and met up with group of young Georgians. They sitting around drinking wine and eating some kind of long-stemmed grass, both of which seemed to be local specialties. We spent quite a bit of time with them and had a lively and very friendly conversation. But when we encountered a couple of them the next day they, of course, walked right by us with eyes straight ahead. After what was no doubt a routine interview with the local KGB, they wouldn't even look at us and obviously wouldn't talk to us. This was a fairly typical experience when traveling around the countryside.

In Tbilisi, we also encountered a fellow about our age, middle '30s, who was a Georgian Jew who had only one leg. I forget now how he lost his leg, I think it was an industrial accident. But he was profoundly anti-Soviet and anti-Russian. We had a number of conversations with him and at one stage, after perhaps more vodka than any of us should have had, he suggested that we go back to the hotel at which we were staying and continue our discussion. We felt that would be very dangerous for him, but he said, "Don't worry about it. The dezhurnaya (floor monitor) on your floor is my mistress." So he came back with us to the hotel and we sat at one of those alcove tables they seemed to have in all Soviet hotels, and which was about 30 feet from the reputed mistress. She couldn't hear, I believed, but was a little concerned because he was asking for all sorts of dangerous things. He wanted us to airdrop weapons so that he and his friends could lead the rebellion against the Russians, for example. We said that that was not really what we were there for. I began to get nervous and started to drum with my fingers on the table, thinking this would help break up the sound, if somebody was taping the conversation. Vlad Toumanoff soon picked it up and then the Georgian did too and so we were all drumming. Finally, it got so loud that we had to shout at each other in order to be heard. It was rather a hilarious scene. I hope he didn't suffer too much from his contact with us.

Those were the two most interesting trips I made, although Lucy and I managed to travel together to Leningrad and Central Asia later on.

Q: Any other observations on that tour in Moscow?

KILLHAM: Well, it was my first foreign language tour. It was a little difficult from that point of view, and of course Russian is a difficult language. But I think I learned a tremendous amount from it. I was ready to go back, but not very soon. I would have liked to go back in five or six years.

Q: Where did you go after your Moscow tour?

KILLHAM: I came back to the Office of Eastern European Affairs, working mostly on Soviet affairs. I was Dick Davies' Deputy in EE Public Affairs. We were very active. In fact, I had to hurry back to the Department because Khrushchev was coming--his famous visit in 1959 to Washington, California and places in between. So the two of us were working the telephones 12 hours a day, to keep the journalists informed and educated in the right directions. It was a fascinating time. Later, Dick went off and traveled with the group.

Q: Pic Littell was with you part of the time, wasn't he?

KILLHAM: No. But I knew him of course, both from Moscow and afterwards.

Q: I was dealing with exchanges at that time and that is why I asked. You continued to stay in Soviet affairs?

KILLHAM: Yes. For the next year I worked on bilateral affairs with Bob Owens. It was a fairly routine job, but interesting from my point of view. I was terribly enmeshed in anything Soviet. We had to deal with travel restrictions. It was a good practice at the time to put somebody who was recently back from Moscow into keeping a line on our Soviet colleagues. He could be counted on to be fairly stringent about it even though we had to beat off all the well meaning Americans who wanted to invited some nice Soviet diplomat they'd met to their home or lecture hall. We would explain, of course, that restricting their access to Americans was the only means available to us to expand our contacts in the Soviet Union, but most people were not impressed with this argument.

Q: Those were the days when we were trying to solicit reciprocity on the Soviet side so it was important to keep things tough, not only for your own sake, but to get some leverage on the other side.

KILLHAM: Yes, to loosen it up and impose travel restrictions on them similar to those our people were facing in Moscow. You couldn't really get any leverage with the Soviets but you tried to make some effort in that direction.

Q: Anything particularly that comes out of that period that you would like to comment on, or would you like to go on?

KILLHAM: No, I think we should go on. Late in 1961, I moved to the Treasury Department for two years. The reason I bring this up is because I was recruited by some of the Moscow mafia--Ted Eliot was over there. He had been a special assistant to Douglas Dillon when Dillon was Under Secretary of State and, as the new Treasury Secretary, he brought Ted with him to to serve as his special assistant.

Q: Dillon had become Secretary of the Treasury by that time...

KILLHAM: Yes, in the new Kennedy Administration. Ted later brought Bill Turpin , a close friend of ours, over to Treasury to be the deputy director of the Executive Secretariat, which was a new office they had set up.

Q: He had been the economic officer in Moscow when we were there.

KILLHAM: Yes, but he had been my predecessor as consular officer so he had worked only about half his tour in economics. In time, Bill got promoted to be director of the Secretariat and he brought me over to be his deputy. After some time Ted moved out and Bill became the special assistant while I became director of the Secretariat.

Having the three of us there was sometimes advantageous because we could sit around and speak Russian to one another. In effect, we had our own private code which no one around Treasury could understand.

Q: As I recall, this was because State had had a Secretariat which was novel to the Executive Branch of government. Dillon had been impressed by this and wanted to establish the same system, which I presume is still there in Treasury.

KILLHAM: It has been discontinued a couple of times and brought back a couple of times. It was a much more modest system because the Treasury was so much different from State, where coordination is of primary importance. Most of the Treasury Bureaus don't have anything to do with one another. It was just a question of funneling the paper in the right direction since you didn't have to get everyone's clearance on things.

Q: And from there, where did you go?

KILLHAM: I went to Brussels to be Political-Military officer.

Q: I see. First time at Brussels?

KILLHAM: That's right. A fascinating time. As Pol-Mil officer, I had the great or ill fortune to serve under two Ambassadors, both of whom thought they had invented the

political/military function--Douglas MacArthur and Ridgway Knight. So I got a lot of close supervision--most of it helpful, but at times it made my life very complicated.

I tried to keep up my interests in communist affairs by doing a lot of reporting on the fight in the Belgian Communist Party between the Soviet-aligned and the Chinese-aligned factions.

Q: This was when?

KILLHAM: In the mid 1960s.

Q: When the Sino-Soviet conflict was really heating up.

KILLHAM: We had good contacts in the intelligence community in Brussels and with the Taiwanese. The ROC Naval Attaché happened to be a Dutchman who somehow had acquired Chinese nationality and he and I got together from time to time. And, of course, I kept in touch with the people at the Soviet Embassy, too, as much as I could.

Q: And then from there?

KILLHAM: Then I went to the Naval War College as a student for a year. And from there I came into INR to replace you as head of Soviet Bloc, Political.

Q: We kept following each other around.

KILLHAM: INR was fascinating and I think the most intellectually stimulating job I ever had in the Foreign Service. You got your fingers into virtually everything the Soviets were active in, and they were active everywhere.

Q: You were there right after the invasion of Czechoslovakia?

KILLHAM: I came in about a week before, so that was my welcome. It was a very intense time for everybody. I had a very good staff, including a number of very capable officers, both Foreign Service and State Department Civil Service. I also did a lot of writing myself, a fair amount of analysis.

Q: Did you concentrate on anything particular since you had this large staff?

KILLHAM: No, I sort of looked for targets of opportunity, especially if no one else was concentrating on it. As a matter of fact Ken Kerst, who was my boss, told me I was the first to come up with the Peking, Moscow, Washington triangle idea. I don't know about that but I did a very long analysis of the triangle in conjunction with Kurt Kamen, who at that time was dealing with Chinese affairs. He later went to Moscow and made a considerable career in the Soviet area.

Q: I remember when I was in that job I also had the function on the side of representing the Department in the Interagency Watch Committee where one trotted over to the Pentagon once a week on a regular basis every Wednesday and occasionally called in at anytime during a crisis because the function of that group was to be an early warning of a major crisis. The Department of State always sent a Soviet specialist, although at least in my period I would say that 90 percent of the activity was East Asian, mainly the Vietnam war and to some extent China. Were you involved in that?

KILLHAM: No. As part of the reorganization when you were transferred, Bob Baraz left the office and went into the front office taking that function with him. But I did go fairly often to NIE drafting sessions at the Agency.

Q: That was the National Intelligence Estimates.

KILLHAM: Yes. They included some very interesting and important assessments of Soviet activities in Egypt.

Q: My impression was that the CIA was the chairman of all these task forces on the estimates and was able to guide it, but when the subject was very much political and not military, one did have a considerable voice from the standpoint of INR and could greatly influence some results.

KILLHAM: My own impression was that when you got into really important military questions, CIA and the State Department tended to be on the opposite side from DIA. Perhaps because the judgments we were making in the NIE had budgetary and strategic implications for each of the Services. They were, of course, determined to fight for their interpretation of what was happening and how great the danger was. That occasionally made for strained relationships, but it was a fascinating experience to go through.

Q: Any particular observations otherwise of your period in INR?

KILLHAM: No. I thought the people were top flight. At least the people I worked with. I enjoyed it tremendously.

Q: Was Sonnenfeldt still there?

KILLHAM: Hal was there for the first four or five months.

Q: Then he went over to the NSC staff to be Kissinger's man on Soviet affairs.

KILLHAM: Then Irv Tobin came in. He was an FSO who had been DCM in Belgrade.

Q: And then from there where did you go?

KILLHAM: I went back to Soviet Affairs. Spike Dubs, who was director of SOV, recruited me to come in and handle the bilateral office. It was pretty active at the time. We had a lot of problems. For example, there were a couple of American Air Force officers who had wandered off course when they took off from their bases in Turkey and wound up in the Soviet Union. We had to extricate them with the least possible embarrassment.

Q: Any particular observations of that situation?

KILLHAM: Just that it seemed to be clear from the first day that it was obviously a gaff on the part of our military colleagues. The Soviets were naturally intent on extracting as much embarrassment for us as they could out of it. But they didn't really intend to take serious action. This was just fun and games--they were going to make us pay for it in propaganda terms.

Q: Before you go on I might say for the listener that the Office of Soviet Affairs had two major branches -- Multilateral Affairs (Soviet relations with the rest of the world) and Bilateral Affairs, of which you were the head. What other things were you dealing with?

KILLHAM: We were busy setting up the Consulate in Leningrad as well as working on the initial planning for the new Embassy in Moscow. As far as the Embassy in Moscow was concerned, we were convinced that under no circumstances could the Soviets be allowed to play any role, whatever, in its construction. We were going to insist that it be done entirely by either American or neutral construction workers. Unfortunately, that position eroded over time and we all know the cost of that.

We were also involved in the initial exchange about establishing our Consulate in Leningrad and the Soviet Consulate in San Francisco. The Soviets did get a prize spot in San Francisco overlooking the Presidio, which worried some people a good deal. However, it didn't worry the Navy enough to overcome their zeal to get their people into Leningrad. In the end, the U.S. Government decided to pay the price of having the Soviets overlooking the Presidio. That is how it turned out.

Q: To go back to the Embassy chancery, was this erosion of the insistence of an all American or at least an all non-Soviet work force due to the difficulty of negotiation or more to financial considerations?

KILLHAM: It may have had something to do with financial considerations. I think it was more a case of the general erosion in the American stance on such matters. Ambassador Dobrynin was very effective, as we all know, at working on his counterparts at the top levels of the US government. Over time, he managed to persuade them that the Soviets could do much of the construction in Moscow and that there wouldn't be any great security problem. I was not involved with the matter at the time, but that is my impression.

Q: In general, I have always felt that the Soviet Desk was composed of officers who had served in the Soviet Union and tended to be very strong on defending reciprocity and assuring that the Soviets did not have great opportunities for security breaches. However, there would be great pressures from senior people who were impressed by the Dobrynins of this world.

We might go into a discussion of that ship case if you would like?

KILLHAM: Yes, that was easily the most dramatic thing that happened while I was in that particular office.

Early one afternoon I got a telephone call from the Coast Guard saying that they had somebody who had indicated a desire to defect. He was on a Soviet ship where a meeting was taking place between some American Fisheries officials and their Soviet counterparts. The meeting was taking place in U.S. waters and the Coast Guard cutter Vigilant was lying along side. The interpreter then working for the Fisheries office was Alexis Obolensky, who is now a senior interpreter for the State Department. The message from the Coast Guard cutter to Boston headquarters, which was relayed to Washington, said that there was an 80 percent chance that this individual on the Soviet ship was going to try to defect. He had communicated this intention in a cryptic note written in very broken English. This communication included some phrases that were hard to understand: "He was going to go up down onto the American ship." The Coast Guard felt that this could mean that he was going to jump into the water. Apparently, he had a very brief interchange with one of the Americans, observing that the water was not all that cold today. (There was some visiting back and forth going on between the two ships as part of the peace and friendship atmosphere.)

Coast Guard Captain Dahlgren, who was their head of intelligence, called up and talked to me. He said they had this message and a request for advice from Boston. "If this man did jump overboard, what degree and extent of force could be used in order to recover him before the Soviets did?"

I told him that this was a complicated legal question and it would probably take several hours to get a definitive reading on it, by which time he would either have jumped or not have jumped. I noted that the Coast Guard had had a lot of experience at fishing people out of the water and they ought to be able to beat the Russians to the man if he did jump in the water, and they could go ahead and do it. However, they shouldn't encourage him to jump. There was the possibility that this was a provocation. At that stage of the Cold War, we were always worried that the Soviets were going to stage a "provocatsia" involving a phony defector and make us look bad. So I mentioned that to him.

I concluded by saying that if he did jump or defect, to let us know and tell us the circumstances and we would give them a fuller answer on what to do then.

Several hours went by and the Coast Guard Captain called me back at 4:00 p.m.. He said that nothing further had been heard from the ship and that it was already getting dark--this was November 22. The Coast Guard office closed at 4:00 but if anything happened the duty officer would get in touch with us.

So I briefed Ed Mainland, who was one of the officers in SOV at the time, about what had happened. Spike Dubs was still unavailable. He had been in meetings all day, I think. Around 6:00 we still hadn't heard anything so it seemed conclusive that nothing more would be happening on the matter. Ed Mainland and I left around 7:00, which was what we usually did.

A couple of hours later a duty officer for the State Department got a message from the Coast Guard. It said that the man on the ship, I don't think they even mentioned the nationality of the ship, in Boston had returned to his ship. The Department duty officer didn't understand it but he wrote it down and took it up to his superior who remembered that there had been a little flap earlier. He called Ed Mainland who asked what precisely the Coast Guard had said and got the message that "the man had returned" or "had been returned."

In any case it wasn't until a couple of hours later that Ed started to worry about this and called first the State Department duty officer and then the Coast Guard duty officer trying to find out what had happened. Again, he got essentially the same answer that the man had returned - it was over, the case was closed.

It wasn't until the next morning that the egg really hit the fan. The Fisheries people were on the phone, of course, and word started to leak out to the press about this terrible dereliction of duty and terrible injustice, which it certainly was, returning the man. As further word came in it got worse and worse. He had been beaten up by the Soviets who had taken him back.

Admiral Ellis, the Coast Guard Commander in Boston, had apparently been adamant. He wouldn't ask at any stage for advice from the State Department. Alexis Obolensky had been pleading with the Coast Guard people to get back to the State Department to find out, once he had defected, what should be done. The Coast Guard never told us that Kudirka had slipped aboard the Vigilant and hidden himself there.

Q: The Kudirka case which was the case of a Soviet seaman who was trying to defect and got brought aboard a Coast Guard vessel and then was sent back to the Soviet vessel by force. It received a lot of attention in the press at the time and was also the subject of a movie, I believe.

KILLHAM: A television movie.

Q: In any case, let's go on where you left off. We were at the point of describing the Coast Guard Admiral not calling the Department of State.

KILLHAM: Well, he had his own views on this. I gather he came from the old Coast Guard school and felt that an absconding crewman was returned to the master's vessel with no questions asked. That seemed to be what was behind it. I testified at his court martial, along with a number of other people. He was allowed to retire. It became clear during the court martial that he had been quite definite about his position. He wouldn't tell the State Department that the guy had actually defected. One of the messages from his Boston Headquarters headquarters to the Vigilant said that if he jumped into the water they should make every effort to let the Soviets recover him, which is directly contrary to what I had told them.

It was a cause célèbre. There was a major investigation of the whole thing, ending in the court martial. Ellis and his second in command were allowed to retire. The Captain of the Vigilant was issued a letter of reprimand, which I think was rather harsh because he just did what the Admiral insisted he do.

Q: Was Kudirka actually beaten up on the American vessel as shown in the movie?

KILLHAM: They beat him up somewhat. He was very reluctant to return and they beat him to move him along. The Americans had to stand by and watch this being done. So there was great indignation in the nation, including in the White House. Quite aside from the humanitarian aspects of it, Henry Kissinger in the NSC was concerned that it would signal the Soviets that we were blinking on issues. It seemed to suggest that when controversy came up we would bow to Soviet wishes. So the NSC was intent on demonstrating that this was not the case. This was to be seen as an isolated case and had been a mistake, etc.

There was quite a thorough investigation, which reminds me that there were some fairly ludicrous parts to it. We were working like dogs, of course, all of us in Soviet Affairs, trying to pull the facts together and present our case to the State Department and, then, the State Department case to the White House and its investigators.

Bill Macomber at the time was Deputy Under Secretary for Management. He convoked all of us who were concerned one Sunday afternoon. We were discussing strategy and going into the situation at great length. Tempers were quite high on occasion. At one point Macomber denounced me for trying to protect Ed Mainland, but making it more general and said, "I am sick and tired of these guys all protecting one another." It was rather an excruciating experience because the Redskins were playing at the time and Macomber had the TV on. He kept watching the game, erupting from time to time as he reacted to individual plays while we were trying to argue this case, which was pretty much life and death for me and a couple of the other guys. It was a bizarre scene.

Q: What happened to the Soviet seaman? I have a faint feeling that he finally got to the States years later.

KILLHAM: Yes. We found out that his name was Simas Kurdirka. Later, to our astonishment, we discovered that his mother had been an American, who had gone with her parents to Lithuania at some stage. Since his mother had been an American citizen, and because he was illegitimate, there was no doubt about the fact that he was an American citizen. It took several years to work it out but eventually our government was able to get him out of the USSR. He has appeared occasionally on television in New York and when last I heard he was working as a janitor in New York.

Shortly afterwards, Dick Davies summoned the Soviet DCM, who may have been Chargé at the time, and insisted that this had been a terrible mistake and we wanted Kudirka back. I was present at the interview and, of course, he gave us a very snotty laugh, saying in effect, "Don't be ridiculous." This gentleman, Yuli Vorontsov, was very successful in the Soviet Foreign Service. He became a Deputy Foreign Minister and Ambassador to Paris and was the man who negotiated the end to their presence in Afghanistan. He is now their Ambassador to the United Nations. He is, let me tell you, one tough cookie. A Soviet diplomat of the old school!

Q: Is there anything else of significance in that period?

KILLHAM: I think the most significant thing from my point of view was the tremendous press interest. I had hundreds of Lithuanian-Americans parading around outside the State Department demanding my head and several rather prominent journalists were also calling for it. We managed to put that off for quite a while. But after three or four months when the furor still hadn't subsided and every little thing that happened critics would say, "See - that is another indication of the thinking in the State Department. These guys are all soft on communism and cozy with the Soviets, etc." I was offered a position in Copenhagen and thought I would be well advised to accept it, which I did.

I enjoyed Copenhagen very much and had a very stimulating time there for three years. We had a couple of general elections, a NATO Ministerial Meeting, and the Danish referendum on joining the European Community, a very contentious issue. After that, I got back, at least partly, into Soviet affairs when I went to NATO as the Political Director, on the International Staff. I chaired not only the NATO Political Committee, but the NATO Senior Political Committee as well, most of the time, especially when it dealt with guidance for the Allied delegations at the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions talks. MBFR covered, of course, conventional arms reductions with the Soviet bloc.

Q: This was when?

KILLHAM: This was 1974. A large part of our work on the regular political committee was drafting guidance for the CSCE negotiations in Geneva. Also we did a lot of analytical studies. I didn't draft them myself, but I worked on them. I didn't chair the meetings of area experts. I believe they still have meetings twice a year during which experts from various countries do a survey of what is happening in the Soviet Union. That was one of the activities under my supervision.

Q: Do you have any particular observations on MBFR or CSCE from your involvement with them?

KILLHAM: Well, I get much more involved later on and maybe I will save it for later. After three years at NATO, I went off to the U.S. SALT delegation. I had been working a bit on SALT in Brussels and was particularly keen on getting back to it one way or another. So I leapt at the posting to Geneva. The position was Special Assistant for Soviet Affairs to the Chief of Delegation.

Q: By now you must be pretty senior in the Foreign Service?

KILLHAM: By that time I was an (old) class 2.

Q: Let's see, today that level would equate to the Senior Foreign Service.

KILLHAM: I worked with Paul Warnke, who was formally the Head of Delegation but wasn't there very much because he was also Head of ACDA at the time. Ralph Earle was actually the working head of the delegation. We had a fascinating year working with the Soviets trying to reach an agreement on strategic arms, which we finally did, but not until after I had left. By that time I had gone on to be the ACDA representative at MBFR, in Vienna. However, I had the pleasure of attending the ceremony during which Brezhnev and Jimmy Carter actually signed the SALT Agreement in Vienna. I worked on the arrangements for the signing, shepherding Congressmen and so forth.

Q: This was SALT II.

KILLHAM: Yes, that's right.

I worked on the MBFR Delegation in Vienna with Jock Dean who was the head of the delegation.

Q: This is in Vienna. MBFR stands for...?

KILLHAM: Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions--conventional arms. These talks again were multilateral, which I always enjoyed. We got to know our colleagues from the Eastern side very well. Not the Soviets so much, but the Eastern Europeans. I persuaded the Department to let me have a month's refresher in Russian before I went to Vienna. This may sound funny as you would think I would be studying German. But I reasoned that Russian was the lingua franca in the Soviet Bloc and I could use it in Vienna. And I did. I had lots of interesting conversations, whether on questions of tactics in the negotiations or just in general. I got to know especially well some Czechs, Poles, etc., all of whom spoke fluent Russian.

Q: Yes. I visited MBFR FROM Romania when it first began. This was shortly before I left. The Romanians had their own agenda, of course, and were kind of trying to undercut the Soviets in some ways on that. The MBFR negotiations were trying to get us to support a position that would not see the Soviets sort of supervising control over the Eastern Bloc. They didn't want to be supervised by the Russians, they said. I remember talking to some people there about that. I don't think you were there yet.

KILLHAM: No, I don't remember anything like that. There were lots of sort of grace notes to the discussions. We were meeting with these fellows all the time. Nearly all of them were obviously "liberals" who would like to come out of the closet, or anti-Soviets who would like to come out of the closet, but couldn't afford to do so.

At one time the Polish Ambassador, Strulak, who had not much of a sense of humor, but seemed to be a very decent chap was present at a reception. I remember this was when the new Pope, John Paul, was elected. We all rushed over to congratulate Strulak on this. He was very embarrassed but still wearing a big smile. Later, he invited all of the delegations to a filming of a Polish film--"Man of Marble." It was a very good film and profoundly anti-Soviet and anti-Russian. As a matter of fact, the entire Soviet delegation got up and walked out in the middle of it. That was one of the most memorable vignettes of my stay in Vienna.

But I was only there a year or so. Then I went to Brussels, where I was DCM for three years.

Q: Before going on to the Brussels experience, MBFR seemed to go on interminably, years and years and years. The initial hopes for it was more or less dashed, killed during the Gorbachev era. Do you have any comments to make about that?

KILLHAM: Well, it was still fairly interesting. The end of my stay there was in December 1979. That was after the Soviets had broken off negotiations on SALT and other bilateral items because they were furious over Allied implementation of INF--Intermediate range missiles in Europe. But it was clear that they intended to focus a fair amount of attention on MBFR, simply as a fall back. And it looked at that point as though we might be able to get some kind of worthwhile agreement there. However, that petered out too. Eventually the Soviets got back on board with bilateral disarmament talks, such as START and the INF negotiations. Again it was the question of right timing. The situation just simply wasn't ripe before the Gorbachev changes. It was useful, I thought, to keep in touch in MBFR. This was aggressive patrolling, in military terms. We were certainly very close to a lot of people on the Eastern side and we got to know both their official and personal positions.

Incidentally, one of my former colleagues, antagonists, or whatever you want to call it, was on the Polish delegation. Adam Rotfeld's personal history was a remarkable one. Born a Jew, he never knew about his ancestry until after the war, when the Catholic couple who raised him told him about it. I was at Stockholm last year and went out to

SIPRI to have a chat and who was there but my Polish friend, Rotfeld, who is now working for SIPRI. He is also working with John Moroz' group, in New York.

Q: Oh, yes. I have worked for them too. Well, why don't we go on to your period in Brussels. This was what year?

KILLHAM: This was from December 1979 to the autumn of 1982.

Q: You were Deputy Chief of Mission. Who was the Ambassador?

KILLHAM: At first it was Mrs. Anne Cox Chambers, who had been appointed by President Carter. She left immediately after the 1980 elections, departing early in January the following year. We didn't get a new ambassador until June or July, so I was Chargé for five or six months.

Q: That is always interesting.

KILLHAM: Yes, it was fascinating. The new ambassador was Charles Price II, with whom I worked for about a year. Shortly after I left he went on to be Ambassador in London.

Q: What was his background?

KILLHAM: He was a businessman. He was into a number of different things...insurance and banking. His family had owned a couple of companies and he moved in to manage them. He was a good manager.

Q: I would have thought so if he went on to London.

KILLHAM: Yes. He was very close to the President. As a matter of fact his wife, who was a very outspoken lady on occasion, commented several times that he, Charlie, knew Ron a lot better than this guy who was in London. She wanted London and eventually got it. She generally got what she wanted.

I went from there to Madrid to serve as Max Kampelman's deputy on the U.S. Delegation at the CSCE conference, that is, the second half of the Madrid CSCE meeting.

Q: Any observations about your tour in Brussels as DCM, which obviously was a big job?

KILLHAM: The most important thing we were doing during the time I was there was trying to get the Belgians into line on the INF missiles. They were waffling to some extent. I was confident that eventually they would do it, but there were a lot of difficulties. To be fair, however, the government did have genuine political problems.

Q: Was my namesake, Martens, already Prime Minister?

KILLHAM: Well, he was the once and future Prime Minister frequently. He is caretaker now and I am not sure whether this is the eighth or ninth time. But he is a very decent guy, very capable. I got to know him very well indeed, especially when I was Chargé, but even before then because we would get these rockets in the middle of the night from Washington, which had heard that the Belgians were backing out again. I would have to chase down the Prime Minister, which I did repeatedly. His assurances usually were that they hadn't made a decision yet, but not to worry about it too much. Somehow they would work it all out. He was a very capable politician.

Aside from running the Embassy, INF was my particular charge. Fortunately, I had a very good staff. It was a big job from the management point of view because the Embassy supplied administrative support for the other two missions--NATO and the European Communities. So we have an enormous administrative structure there, which is part of the Embassy.

That was my third time in Brussels and by that time I was pretty well up on Belgium's complicated linguistic affairs. But I did manage, I think, to stay out of the political section's hair as much as I could, except for the missiles.

Q: Then you went with Max Kampelman at the CSCE?

KILLHAM: Yes, to Madrid. We had very intense, sometimes stormy, but in the end productive relations with the Soviet delegation there. The Soviet Ambassador wasn't too impressive, but they had a very vigorous DCM, Sergi Kondrashev, who was clearly proud of the fact that he was a KGB General (although he never said so out loud). He ran the Soviet Delegation and all the Eastern European delegations. We had various caucuses--the NATO caucus, the European Community caucus, and the Warsaw Pact caucus. Kondrashev reminded me of the quarterback on a professional football team which didn't have a huddle, but had all the players lined up facing the quarterback while he called out the instructions. That was the way he did it in the corridors. The Eastern Europeans would meet in the corner and he would lay down the law. He was a very capable guy. I think he has now retired, but he was active for several years after that.

Q: Do you want to mention some of the issues of the CSCE?

KILLHAM: As usual the main fight was over human rights. Max Kampelman was very forceful and outspoken in that area, and very effective. We were also working on the mandate for the follow-on talks which took place in Stockholm.

This became the Conference on Confidence and Security Building Measures in Europe. As a matter of fact I served on the preparatory delegation for that in Helsinki, for three weeks. Jim Goodby was first in charge and then Bob Barry took over.

Again the intricacies of about multilateral relationships have always intrigued me. CSCE, of course, has 35 countries, or did have, as opposed to the nearly 15 or 16 NATO countries.

We finally reached agreement with the Soviets in the middle of the summer and then the Maltese decided they were going to stonewall because they wanted some things placed in the final communique and nobody else would go along with them. So we were stuck there for another couple of months.

Q: I remember vaguely that the press was concentrating on that for some brief time.

KILLHAM: It was pretty ridiculous but it was fairly typical of Maltese practice. In fact, long before it happened, a lot of the old hands of the CSCE were predicting that there would be a Malta week. But we had a Malta three months at the end of the negotiation. By that time the Soviets and the Americans were working closely together in trying to put an end to it. The Soviet Delegation was headed by a deputy foreign minister, Kovalev, who didn't impress me very much. However, before the Soviet Union fell apart, he was apparently well reputed in Moscow.

Q: Do you have any comments on the European neutrals and how they interacted with the negotiations? I suppose there was no unity in neutralism and each had their own agenda. That would be the Swedes and the Finns, the Yugoslavs, the Swiss, the Austrians, etc.

KILLHAM: We had what was called the neutral and non-aligned group, or NNA. We worked closely with all of them. And as I told you before we started, I have just finished a book on the Nordic countries. The Nordics were, of course, very prominent and very helpful in Madrid, and again in Helsinki working towards the Stockholm conference. Basically what would happen...this happens at every CSCE meeting...the West puts forward certain proposals and the East puts forward their proposals. Then we would argue about them at the top of our voice for several months. Later, the NNA (neutral and non-aligned) would get together for a few days and draft a compromise document which they would bring forward. An NNA representative would probably chair the subsequent informal meetings, during which all sides would try to work out common language for the final act.

Q: So a lot of the positions of both the NATO countries, the US in particular, on the one side and the Soviets and the Warsaw Pact on the other, were for show at the beginning. To show a strong position for political purposes with the understanding that the neutrals and non-aligns would have to come in and kind of temper things.

KILLHAM: I am sure you know as well as I do that the Soviet standard negotiating line is, "when in doubt bully", and above all don't give up anything until absolutely the last minute. This is what makes the negotiations so long and unpleasant. But the NNAs were

extremely effective in getting together, working something out, and bringing it back to the plenary session.

It was a fascinating thing and I think we came up with a good document in Madrid. Not only on the human rights side, but everything else, wrapping up a lot of loose ends that we were very eager to tie down. It even set up the conference in Stockholm. So it was a useful exercise.

Q: Where did you go from there?

KILLHAM: From there I went to the Naval War College as the State Department's representative for two years. I replaced Nat Davis, an old friend and colleague who had managed to stick it out for six years. I taught a lecture course, with a colleague, on Soviet affairs and another one on disarmament. But the Naval War College curriculum is built essentially around seminar sessions. There was a senior group and a junior one. I learned a lot from my colleagues. It was a very satisfactory experience.

Q: You were there until 1985, I believe?

KILLHAM: Yes, I left in 1985 to go back to Washington. Although we loved Newport, we wanted to get back to a big city so we came back to Washington. The Department was looking for someone familiar with Zaire, and who spoke French, to handle Central African Affairs. So I spent two years as Country Director for Central Africa. This was a considerable departure from my usual beat for me, but my Brussels experience stood me in good stead because of Belgium's involvement there.

Q: That was quite far from the Soviet line, but you did have an interesting time, I guess in one country at least, Mobutu's Zaire.

KILLHAM: We had more than that. We had the war in Chad too. I was recruited to deal with Zaire because of all my time in Brussels. But I spent more time on Chad, helping Jim Bishop run a rather large war. The Chadians were doing all the fighting but we were supplying and advising them. The French were in there too. It was a very intimate tricorned arrangement.

Q: Were our relations with the Chadians very good?

KILLHAM: Very good. There were some misunderstandings, but by and large we got along very well.

Q: What about Zaire? Are there any particular observations you would like to mention?

KILLHAM: Things were not going well and Mobutu was very difficult to deal with. I sympathized greatly with our Ambassador out there, Brandon Grove, who had to deal with Mobutu, who was short tempered. He was an excellent diplomat. Mobutu could be a

prize pain in the neck. Everybody knew that he had made off with a good deal of money. On the other hand, this didn't seem to bother either the Africans themselves or the old African hands very much because that is what a "chef" normally does. He takes off the cream and parcels out what is left to all of his friends. There were some really egregious examples of that. But Mobutu did serve for a long time, over twenty years, and kept that country together when we were worrying about it falling apart. Also, as one of my colleagues observed, Mobutu didn't kill many people, he preferred to buy them out. Zaire borders on nine other African countries and is made up of at least 100 different tribes and many languages. I don't think anyone else could have held it together.

Now we are less concerned and he has gone overboard pretty much. I would think that he can't hang on much longer.

Zaire is a key country in Africa, but there are other places where you can get copper. So it never was all that important for us as a source for raw materials. Its usefulness came from being one of the few islands of stability in that area.

Q: There were a lot of sort of half nationalist, half Marxist regimes like the one in Congo, Brazzaville, and the Angola situation was deteriorating.

KILLHAM: Well, that was ongoing too. So it was important for Washington to try to keep whatever stability there was in Africa.

Q: Well, I think we got pretty far. Do you have any wrap up observations?

KILLHAM: No. It was nice to talk to you about it. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed the career.

Q: Thank you very much.

KILLHAM: Always glad to talk about it.

End of interview