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

# LISA PIASCIK

*Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy*
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## INTERVIEW

*Q: Today is September 20, 2016 with Lisa Piascik. So, let's start at the beginning. When and where were you born?*

PIASCIK: I was born in Wilmington, Delaware on February 10, 1957.

*Q: I'm a February baby too. Let's get some background. Let's take it on your father's side first. What do you know about the Piasciks?*

PIASCIK: My paternal grandfather came to the U.S. in the late 1890s with his father and mother. They came from the village of Montwica in eastern Poland. That area was part of Russia at the time, but my father's family were ethnic Poles. My great-grandfather came to the U.S. with his brother in 1896 and then he went back a couple of years later and retrieved his wife and my grandfather, who was about six at the time, and they emigrated in 1898 or 1899. They ended up in Cleveland, Ohio.

*Q: Do you know, on your father's side of the family, what was doing in Poland?*

PIASCIK: I assume that they were farmers. I served in Warsaw from 2004-2007 and visited Montwica. It was a beautiful, bucolic village out in the countryside surrounded by farmland and forests. I think they left for the same reasons so many Poles did during this period: land shortages, unemployment, and perhaps repression.

*Q: What did your great grandparents do when they came to the States?*

PIASCIK: That I do not know. My great-grandfather was probably a manual laborer. He and my great-grandmother did have four other children born in the U.S.

*Q: What does your father do?*

PIASCIK: My father just recently passed away but he had served in the Air Force, the Air Force Reserves and the Delaware National Guard as an airplane mechanic. He worked for a long time for IBM as a typewriter and then a copier technician. When Eastman Kodak bought out IBM's copier division, he went to work for Kodak for a few years and then took a medical retirement when he was in his late fifties. My parents divorced when I was a teenager. Both of them remarried. My father remarried a special education teacher and they moved to McAllen, Texas in 2010, after spending winters there for many years.

*Q: Do you know anything about the education of your father?*

PIASCIK: He completed high school. That was it. I was the first person in my family to go to and graduate from university.

*Q: So often that generational thing is repeated. I don't know how many times people I've interviewed… Now on your mother's side, what do you know? Where did she come from? Her family?*

PIASCIK: My mother was born in Wilmington, Delaware. Her family is a mix of Irish, English and German . I've been able to find records for her paternal grandfather dating back to the Civil War but beyond that it's a little bit of a mystery.

*Q: Where did she go to school?*

PIASCIK: She went to school in Wilmington and she graduated from high school and that was it.

*Q: Did she have a job?*

PIASCIK: She was working as a medical secretary but she left after she married my father. When I was as a teenager, she did part time clerical work at a newspaper – the Delaware State News.

*Q: Okay, well let's move to you. You were born in Wilmington but were you raised in Wilmington?*

PIASCIK: My younger sister and brother and I were born in Wilmington and our family lived in New Castle, which is just to the south of Wilmington. We moved to Dover when I was about five years old. My father was transferred because of his work so I grew up in Dover, Delaware and spent my entire childhood there until I went to college.

*Q: What was it like in Dover when you were a kid?*

PIASCIK: Well, we lived in a little development called Rodney Village, in a little ranch house. It was a typical suburban neighborhood. Dover is the capital of Delaware, and in those days it was pretty small. So it was a very small town environment.

*Q: Do you recall any books that made a significant impression on you?*

PIASCIK: I was a big reader and very interested in history. *Mary, Queen of Scots,* by Antonia Fraser made a big impression on me, as did Thomas Costain's series on the Plantagenets.

*Q: In school, let's take elementary school. How did you like school?*

PIASCIK: I did really well in school – I studied and I liked it.

*Q: I bet you were good in spelling, weren't you?*

PIASCIK: Yes, I was.

*Q: I hated your type. How about mathematics?*

PIASCIK: I was ok but it didn't come easily for me. I took one advanced math course in high school and ended up with a "C" which to me was horrible. It brought down my overall grade average.

*Q: Do you recall any teachers in elementary school that were particularly inspiring?*

PIASCIK: Yes, that would be Miss Hill, who was my fifth grade teacher. She was a wonderful teacher. She was very inspiring and encouraging and really enthusiastic about teaching.

*Q: Did you spend much time by yourself thinking about yourself as maybe the Queen of Scots or doing anything like that?*

PIASCIK: No, not as Mary, Queen of Scots, not doing anything like that. This was the time when the space program was very big and that really captured my imagination – I wanted to be an astronaut. I was really disappointed that women weren't being accepted into the astronaut program, and since I had poor eyesight that astronauts had to have perfect vision.

*Q: When you went to high school, what was high school like?*

PIASCIK: I went to Caesar Rodney High School, in Camden-Wyoming, Delaware. There were about 360 people in my class. I was one of the smart girls, and was in the National Honor Society and president of the French Club. I had a couple of friends that I had

known since elementary school that I continued to be close to. I had a normal teenage girl life -- went to football games and basketball games; hung out with my friends.

*Q: Delaware is in some respects a southern state. It had slavery there. Was there much in the way of integration?*

PIASCIK: I believe Delaware began to desegregate schools in the 50s and 60s. In my high school, there were African-American students. We also had a few Cuban-American students and one Indian-American student as well,

*Q: While you were in high school, did any causes particularly attract you? I'm thinking of civil rights; I'm thinking of unions. I'm thinking of Vietnam, that's just what I'm thinking.*

PIASCIK: I volunteered on Joe Biden's Senate campaign in 1972, and that was very exciting.

*Q: This would put you in the democratic mold?*

PIASCIK: I wasn't so much aware of the issues as I was caught up in the excitement of working on an election campaign. Biden was the youngest person elected to the Senate – he was only 29, so that created its own energy.

*Q: Where did your family fall politically?*

PIASCIK: My family wasn't overtly political, but it pretty much fell on the conservative side of things.

*Q: How about religion?*

PIASCIK: My father was Catholic and my mother was Protestant. When they married in the early 1950 fifties, she had to agree that her children would be brought up as Catholics So my sister, brother and I were brought up as Catholics.

*Q: Oh yes, I mean I was warned, I'm quite a bit older, I'm 88 now, but during the forties and all when I dated, my family was Episcopalian, not strongly Episcopalian but they said, "You don't want to date Catholic girls because they'll make your children be brought up as Catholics and somehow this was a horrible thing or something. This was the mood or the spirit of the times.*

PIASCIK: I went to catechism school and was confirmed. My father took us to church on Sundays. Mass was still in Latin at the time and I had not a clue what was going on. But I was impressed to hear my father and others in the church speak in Latin and appear to understand. However, I can't say that enjoyed church very much. I always stressed a bit about having to figure out what my sins so I could confess them.

*Q: Did you get much in the way of language training while you were in high school?*

PIASCIK: I started studying French in junior school and continued all through high school. I really enjoyed it and was good at it. My high school French teacher was somebody that I really looked up to and respected and admired, I was president of the French club my senior year and in college and we organized a little French club trip with another school to London and Paris when I was a senior. It was the first time I had been overseas.

*Q: Did your family travel around the States much?*

PIASCIK: We went on camping trips in the Middle Atlantic region; we drove to Cleveland, Ohio to visit my father's family several times. We went to Florida on a camping trip once. That was it.

*Q: Did you get a good history background would you say? American history, European history?*

PIASCIK: It was standard, what most high-schoolers at the time received. History was pretty much limited to American history and really didn't extend much beyond World War II and after that it seemed to be virgin territory.

*Q: Well was the Soviet Union sort of the big enemy out there?*

PIASCIK: Oh yes. The Soviets were our enemies in every sense – a mortal threat. We had air raid drills in case they attacked.

*Q: Duck and cover.*

PIASCIK: Right. We also had to watch films about what would happen in a nuclear explosion. We had a class how to construct a shelter for a nuclear explosion: where would it be, what would you stock it with.

*Q: Did you belong to any clubs or things of that nature in high school?*

PIASCIK: Well, the French club. I was also a member of the National Honor Society and for a short time, I was in the drama club.

*Q: How about music? Did you get involved?*

PIASCIK: I played the violin or I tried to play the violin. When I was in elementary school the instructor came around and asked who would like to play the violin? I raised my hand, along with a couple of other students. The instructor took us out in the hall and hummed a tune. We each had to hum it back to her. I was the only person she made do it twice. I probably should have figured out that I was not really musically inclined but I took lessons anyway for a couple of years. I did my best, or what I considered by best,

but I never felt that I was really understanding or feeling the music. That was frustrating, especially when I saw how some of the others really did.

*Q: You graduated when?*

PIASCIK: I graduated in 1975.

*Q: So whither*?

PIASCIK: I didn't really see myself staying in Delaware for the rest of my life. I got a partial scholarship to George Washington University in Washington, DC, so that kind of decided things.

*Q: You majored in …*

PIASCIK: International affairs.

*Q: How did you find the university? It's got to be quite a change from…*

PIASCIK: It was. Washington, DC was a big city to me, and I enjoyed being on my own. I was one of the smartest people in my high school class and even though I studied, it wasn't too hard for me. University was much more challenging,

*Q: Did you find any part of the work that you were doing at the university particularly intriguing?*

PIASCIK: I liked Middle Eastern studies a lot: the long history, the historical significance, the intriguing cultures, religions and languages. The Camp David Accords were signed when I was a university so the Arab-Israeli conflict was also very topical.

*Q: Well also George Washington really draws upon the community here which is extremely well-versed in international affairs and so you had I imagine some pretty good teachers, didn't you?*

PIASCIK: I did. It was a good experience. I enjoyed my time there a lot.

*Q: Did you get into any campus activities?*

PIASCIK: No, I didn't. What I did do was I worked. After my sophomore year I had a series of part-time jobs so that would give me some spending money.

*Q: Where did you work?*

PIASCIK: My first job was at a small publishing company on Capitol Hill. I proofread U.S. Geological Survey publications. Not the most gripping reading, but I did learn the importance of attention to detail. very rightwing. I worked there for a summer or two and

after that I had a student job at the Department of Interior Library. The library was just down the street from the university, and it was very convenient because I was able to fit in work between classes.

I did an unpaid internship with Senator Joseph Biden for a summer which was interesting. I worked on environmental and judicial issues.

After that, I had a student position in the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration, which is part of the Department of Justice.

*Q: At the Department of Justice, were you attracted maybe to becoming a lawyer?*

PIASCIK: The office I worked in dealt more with law enforcement entities at the state and local level but I did think about law as a career. I wasn't really quite sure what I wanted to do. After I graduated, I got a job working in the government relations department of a lobbying association, but I never saw it as something I would do for long. worked with a lobbying association, in the government relations department, and I knew it wasn't for me. So, I applied for law school because I wasn't quite sure what else to do and was accepted. But in the meantime, I was accepted into the Foreign Service.

*Q: Well now, wait a minute. You would have graduated in…*

PIASCIK: '79.

*Q: And had you taken the exam?*

PIASCIK: I took the Foreign Service exam while I was still at university. I passed the exam and took the oral exam during my senior year.

*Q: Do you recall what any of the questions were that you were asked?*

PIASCIK: What I remember was that I was the youngest, most inexperienced person in the group that I was with. People had been in the Peace Corps. People had worked in business, were lawyers or had what seemed to me pretty impressive experience. I was still a student and just thought there was not chance I would ever be accepted.

There was an in-box exercise, and we had to decide how to handle various situations raised by the papers in that box. There was a writing exercise and an interview with panel of people. There was also a group session in which everyone was given a project proposal. Each person had to present the proposal and then negotiate which proposals would be accepted or funded. I didn't think my proposal was very worthy so I supported other proposals. I've always wondered if my willingness to abandon my project, to not defend it no matter what, made me stand out to the examiners.

*Q: This sort of thing is one of the things that they are looking at. Seeing whether you can sort out the things and maybe back away and come back with a different angle or support somebody else.*

PIASCIK: Perhaps. Anyway, I took the orals in my senior year and graduated in June 1979. I went to work at the lobbying association soon after that, applied to law school, and had just sent off my acceptance when I got a call from the Board of Examiners saying, "Oh, we have a class next month. Would you be interested in joining?" And I said yes, because it seemed far more interesting than studying law. So I gave my notice at work, retracted my law school acceptance, and took off with a friend to visit Great Britain before starting A-100 orientation class.

*Q: And you started when?*

PIASCIK: May of 1980.

*Q: Do you recall… Did you have any idea of what you wanted to do or was this just a…*

PIASCIK: No, I didn't. I took the Foreign Service exam more for the experience than anything else. Being a diplomat and living overseas seemed very adventurous, but I wasn't really sure what that really meant. At some point I was asked if I wanted to be assigned to the consular cone, and I thought, sure why not.

*Q: What was your class like? Your A-100 class?*

PIASCIK: I was in 147$^{th}$ class under the old system. About a third of the class was women and the average age was about 32. I was the second youngest person in the class. The oldest person was in her early fifties. She had been the spouse of a foreign service officer.

*Q: How did you find the instruction?*

PIASCIK: It was good. More than anything else, I began to realize that what was more important than the romance of being diplomat was the idea of public service and representing the U.S. government and people and our values and culture

*Q: As you went through this, did you pick up any ideas of what you wanted to do?*

PIASCIK: Well, I was still really interested in the Middle East so I wanted to go to a Middle Eastern country and I had some Arabic language classes in university so I was looking for something that would put me in the Middle East and would give me additional language training.

*Q: So what happened?*

PIASCIK: There were a couple of Middle Eastern posts that were offered to us: Beirut, Kuwait City, Jeddah and perhaps Riyadh. Beirut was at the top of my list and I was really happy to get it. And I got six months of Arabic language training as well.

*Q: So you went to Beirut. What did the family think about that?*

PIASCIK: Oh they thought I was crazy. My family never really quite understood why I even wanted to join the foreign service. Go overseas? Live in foreign countries? You won't know anyone! When will we see you?

*Q: What was your job in Beirut?*

PIASCIK: I was assigned as a consular officer. I spent my first couple of months in the non0immigrant visa section, then did a six month rotation in the political section, then returned to the consular section as the immigrant visa and American citizen services officer.

I arrived in February of 1981. There was another guy on the same flight in. There were armed men on the tarmac and in the terminal, and as we drove into the embassy, we passed heavily damaged buildings. I know it sounds naïve, but that was the point that I realized the Lebanon was a dangerous place.

The deputy of the consular section invited me and the other junior officer in the consular section out to dinner that night and provided a little tour of West Beirut afterwards. He was quite dramatic in describing what would happen if we went into certain areas. We drove near the dividing line between East and West Beirut, the Christian and the Muslim sections he said, "See that. You can't go there. That's death."

*Q: You know, a young man.*

PIASCIK: Right. I was the only female officer in the section, so I think there was some posturing going on.

So I was assigned to the non-immigrant visa (NIV) section for my first six months and then after that I went for six months into the political section. Ryan Crocker was the political counselor so I worked with him. He was great and I learned a lot from him. I followed and reported on constitutional issues, parliamentary issues. There's a large Armenian presence in Lebanon and I followed Armenian issues, including a militant group called the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA).

*Q: ASALA. They were going around assassinating Turkish diplomats.*

PIASCIK: Right. ASALA was founded in Beirut during the civil war and trained there although they carried out assassinations in Europe and Turkey.

*Q: Now who was the chief of the consular section?*

PIASCIK: Jim Huffman was the chief when I arrived. Then David Matthews – he curtailed after a couple of months. I did not work with him as I was in the political section for most if not all of his time in Beirut.

There was a gap in the consul general position. When the Israelis invaded Lebanon in June 1982, the junior officer who was acting CG was no leave, so I ended up as the acting CG, and then became the sole consular officer when the other junior officer was evacuated. I remained the acting CG until the new CG, Diane Dillard arrived.

*Q: So you were there with Diane Dillard?*

PIASCIK: Yeah, she arrived after we returned to West Beirut. During the Israeli invasion in 1982, we had moved out of Beirut. I established a mini-consular section in Jounieh, a town that is about ten miles north of Beirut. The mayor had graciously granted an office to the Canadians and us. We moved back to West Beirut in late September or early October 1982, and I think Diane came in in October of '82.

*Q: Were you there… What was happening? I mean what were you experiencing outside of the norm?*

PIASCIK: Almost everything about Beirut was outside of the norm. Several months after I arrived, the Syrians put surface to air missiles in the Bekaa Valley and things became very tense. Would the Israelis take out the missile sites? The French Ambassador was assassinated.

Israel invaded Lebanon on June 6, 1982. A day or two before that, a couple of us from the embassy drove out to Baalbek in the Bekaa Valley to see the Roman ruins. And when we got back, I think it was that same night, the Israelis began invading. The pretext was retaliation against a Palestinian attempt to assassinate the Israeli ambassador in London – he was badly wounded. I lived right next door to the defense attaché and his wife and I remember looking at maps of Lebanon with them to track Israeli movements north. They just kept coming north and reached the outskirts of southern Beirut. Families and non-essential personnel were evacuated under very tense circumstances. Finally, the DCM, Robert Barrett, said, I remember the DCM saying, "Well, we're leaving the embassy. We're evacuating." I was ready to leave: "Okay, I'm ready to go." And he said, "You're not leaving. We're just going over to East Beirut. "Okay."

What that meant was that a couple of us worked in the embassy during the day, and then spending the night at the ambassador's residence in Yarze, in the hills to the east of Beirut. I slept on a cot in the maids' quarters. There were a lot of air raids in Beirut and after a couple of days, we left Beirut completely. That final day, we left the embassy at night. The ambassador's driver, Mohammed al-Kurdi, was very nervous because of the checkpoints, which set us all on edge because he was someone who normally put on a very tough face.

Before I left, I had destroyed and shredded a lot of material and smashed the visa plates to the Burroughs visa machine. I also destroyed Social Security checks that we were holding for beneficiaries to pick up. This was something I very much regretted afterwards. Once we returned to Beirut and resumed operations, it took a long time for the Social Security Administration to reissue those checks, so a lot of people were inconvenienced.

I only spent a few days at the ambassador's residence. The mayor of Jounieh had offered us space in the town hall there so we were able to set up emergency operations. Just about every one of our local employees wanted to work, but we could only accommodate a few and others had trouble passing through checkpoints. The ones that were in nearly every day were Yola al-Hashim, Kamal Nahhas, and Bedros Anserian from the NIV section, and Joseph Karam from American services. They were all great. John Reid, the public affairs officer, was with us for a little while. We shared the office space with some of the Canadian consular staff and it was a collegial relationship. The town hall people were very nice to us, didn't charge us for using the office space. They also sent around Turkish coffee every few hours for us.

We did emergency visa and American services. I had brought with me a visa hand stamp, and the Bureau of Consular Affairs sent me very early versions of visa foils – they were little stickers – to provide a little more security to the handstamps. The bureau let us do emergency and student visas. We also evacuated Americans on Navy ships. In those days, there was no email. The only way I could communicate with Consular Affairs was by going to the ambassador's residence so the evacuation was really on the fly compared to how it is done now.

So I worked in Jounieh during the mornings and in mid-afternoon would drive to the ambassador's residence. The admin people were looking for other places to house us, and made arrangements with a research institute owned by Amine Gemayel, who later became the president of Lebanon. It was called Beit-al-Mustakbal, the House of the Future. It was a research institute, brand new. I had a small room with a bathroom, and it was tight but comfortable. The admin people, Marine Security Guards, communicators and I were all living there. There was a common area where we would all gather.

For the most part, I felt pretty safe. But bombing raids were pretty common and were nerve-racking. We could see Beirut being bombed by Israeli jets from the ambassador's residence. It was hard for the Lebanese who were at the residence to watch this and wonder how their families were.

The Multi-National Force arrived and Palestinians were evacuated in later August, and we began to make plans to go back to Beirut. I was able to go into my apartment at one point. It faced the Mediterranean Sea from a hill. I was shocked when I walked into the apartment, The window were all blow out, debris everywhere, and there was a small shell sticking out of the wall. But it hadn't been looted. There was no way I could live there until the apartment was repaired, so the plan was to move into a hotel.

However, Bashir Gemayel, who was the Maronite Christian leader of the Lebanese Forces militia and had been elected president of Lebanon in late August, was killed in a bombing. The Israelis moved into West Beirut and then Lebanese militias conducted the Sabra and Shatila massacre of Palestinians in revenge for the killing of Bashir. This delayed our return.

*Q: What was the feeling, your feeling and others at the embassy towards the Israelis at this point?*

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PIASCIK: Mutual feelings of dislike and distrust

*Q: How about the local employees? They must have been terrified.*

PIASCIK: They were. They were always worried – what was happening to their families, their homes, could they get home…

*Q: Did you have any contact with Bob Dillon?*

PIASCIK: Yes. He was the ambassador. I really liked him. Before the invasion, he met with the junior officers several times, and he came across as approachable. He told us once that his first ambassador had suggested that maybe he was not cut out for the Foreign Service. But that he had persevered and been successful. His wife, Sue, was very warm and friendly.

*Q: Bob is at my retirement home. I see him fairly frequently. I did an oral history with him and he said that when he first arrived the Lebanese, of course, the society really welcomed you and made you feel that you were really something. All this adulation and all but I'd come home to my wife and kids and they pretty quickly put me in my place.*

PIASCIK: Right. Even vice consuls were treated with great respect because we had the power to issue or refuse visas. We didn't move in the same social circles as the ambassador, but it was not uncommon to be approached when we were just out and about. "Oh, you issued me a visa" Or maybe they recognized us because we had reused their visa application.

*Q: I interviewed Diane Dillard. And actually Diane worked for me in Athens. I was consul-general. Were you there when the embassy was blown up?*

PIASCIK: Yes, I was.

*Q: All right, do you want to tell about that?*

PIASCIK: Yes. I'd been running the consular section for a couple of months before she arrived. I think I did a good job, but I had no experience managing anyone and was very

inexperienced. I liked working with her because she was the most professional consular officer I had ever worked with. I learned a lot from her. She wanted to reorganize the consular section and cross train the staff. Some of them were resistant to this – you know how different it can be to break people out of what they are comfortable doing. I wanted to be supportive of what she was trying to do and worked hard to get them to see her side. It was a long haul. I think she appreciated my efforts.

April 18, 1983 was the day the embassy was bombed. It was a cool and rainy day. At lunch I went out to pick up some photos I had had framed. When I returned, I stopped in the cafeteria to get something to eat and then went to my Arabic language class at 1:00pm A new consular office, Philo Dibble, was arriving later that day, and Diane asked if I would go out to his apartment to make sure it was properly set up. I planned to do that after my Arabic language class, which was at 1:00pm.I had an Arabic language class at 1:00 p.m. I had a one-on-one class with Paulette Hammouche, the instructor. Just after I sat down and we started talking, I heard this rolling boom and was pushed forward in the chair. I looked out the window and saw white smoke. I had no idea what happened. Neither of us were hurt. Paulette tried to call the Marine Security Guard at Post One but there was no answer. So we both left the room and went out into the hall down the staircase and it was obvious something bad had happened in the building. It was very smoky in the building and it was dark and there was a lot of debris. We also began encountering people coming out of their offices and some of them were badly injured.

As we approached the ground floor, you could see that there was nothing there and we were not going to be able to exit through the entrance. We went around to a back door and through a gate. I saw a young Lebanese Armenian woman named Myrna, who was friendly with many of us in the consular section. She was a volunteer with the Lebanese Red Cross, and she helped us out. We then made our way to the front of the embassy and we could see that there had been some sort of catastrophic event. The entire central front area of the embassy had been destroyed and you could see the floors hanging off in layers.

I found Diane or she found me. She was with Christine Crocker, who was the economic section secretary. Diane had been at home for lunch and had come running back. The DCM, Bob Pugh, had asked her to try to account for people, so she enlisted Christine and me to help. We knew people were being taken to hospitals; we heard people were being taken to French multinational force military facility. So we commandeered a vehicle from the Marines – the multinational force, not the security guards – and set off through a lot of traffic to the French base. Well, no one had been brought there, so we set off for American University Hospital.

We went into the morgue to try to identify bodies. It was the first time I had seem dead people and it was hard to tell who they were. They didn't even look as if they had ever been alive. They were covered with dust and had waxy appearance. I didn't recognize anyone. We eventually ended up going back to the embassy and reporting to Bob Pugh what we had found.

My office in the consular section was right above the entrance of the embassy. It was completely obliterated. When I went up to my language lesson, I had put my purse in the safe in my office. So I didn't have keys either to my car or my apartment. I don't remember how I got home that night but since I didn't have the keys to the apartment, I had to climb over the defense attaché's balcony to get into my apartment through my balcony door. We lived on the third floor. The defense attaché held my arm as I clambered around the wall which divided his balcony from mine – his wife was terrified I was going to fall. But this was how I got into my apartment.

I was just exhausted, but called my mother, who, of course, was very upset. But she had been called by the State Department earlier so she knew I was ok.

Over the next couple of days, I went back to the embassy and was not really quite sure what to do, so I just watched the efforts that were being made to locate survivors and bodies. I'm sure I was in a state of shock or something. All I could do was just look at that building and wonder what happened. A number of our consular employees were killed or seriously injured. Two of the killed were Yola al-Hashim and Kamal Nahhas, who had been with me in our temporary office in Jounieh during the Israeli invasion. I don't think their bodies were ever found. Yola had started working at about the time I arrived in Beirut, and she was about my age. We did find Yola's purse in the wreckage and I'll never forget the look on her family's face when we turned it over to them. One of Ambassador Dillon's bodyguards, Cesar Bathiard, had been with the vehicle at the front of the embassy and I think only his foot or shoe was ever found. There was another young woman in our NIV section named Louise al-Rassi. She had substantial facial injuries and needed plastic surgery. So it was really a horrific experience.

*Q: Was there anything in your previous life or training or anything that got you through this?*

PIASCIK: No! I was 26 years old!

*Q: But you didn't get into hysterics. I mean you went about your job.*

PIASCIK: No. I went about my job as best I could, but we were all so stressed. Diane decided we needed to start offering consular services as soon as possible, which was good in that it gave us something to focus on. Once a lot of debris had been cleared away, we were able to make limited forays into the building to retrieve things. The American services unit was more or less ok, since it was located in one of the wings, and we were able to get some files and things from NIV. There was virtually nothing intact left from immigrant visa services. I remember walking through American services, then consul general's office and her secretary's office. My office would have been next but there was nothing there – it had just disappeared. We were able to retrieve some papers, or pieces of paper. Diane had everyone trying to reconstitute files from these papers and when applicants came in, we asked to bring in everything they had to help us build their cases.

We began setting up office in an apartment. It was an empty apartment in a building. I think Diane lived in that apartment building. It was just down from the embassy on the Corniche. We opened without really having very much at all in the way of furniture and equipment. Plywood interview booths were being constructed as we were trying to interview and it was really noisy. I got very upset one day. I was just really frustrated trying to interview people under these horrible conditions where you had to shout to make yourself heard. I was the verge of tears and Diane said, "Take a break, go outside." I went out to the Corniche and was looking at the Mediterranean and she came out after a little bit and said, "Don't worry; everything is okay. I know how difficult this is. Just take a break whenever you want." I had been feeling a little numb and disconnected after the explosion and this was the first time I felt I was just losing it.

*Q: Did you have recurring nightmares? I mean all the things that you… I mean we have, probably have an overelaborate response when something awful happens for the people but I think none of that was particularly in place.*

PIASCIK: No, no, none of that. I thought about what had happened a lot and everyone who had been killed – I couldn't get them out of my mind. And I couldn't stop thinking about how devastated their families were. State Department sent out psychiatrists afterwards and they insisted that people take leave. My tour was ending in June anyway, so there was really no sense for me to take leave and then come back. I suppose I could have just left early and not come back, but it never occurred to me and no one ever suggested it. We were also short staffed and Diane was trying to get TDY help, and I didn't want to leave the section in a bad way.

My onward assignment was in Sanaa, Yemen Arab Republic, and someone from the Near Eastern Bureau said, "Look, if you'd like to go somewhere else, fine." I said, "No, I'm okay with going to Yemen.".

*Q: How about the Lebanese employees? Were any of them resentful about the fact that we had brought this on them?*

PIASCIK: Not that I'm aware of. Certainly not in the consular section. Many just wanted to get back to work as soon as possible.

*Q: But before you go off to Yemen, what were you doing? Did you take leave?*

PIASCIK: Yes, I did. I left in June and went back and had a home leave and consultations. So I spent time with my family. My father and stepmother took me camping for a few days.

*Q: Were you, I hope this isn't the wrong term, but did sort of the medical side or something come and talk to you at all.*

PIASCIK: A psychiatrist came to Beirut. I talked to him, but it wasn't mandatory. Once I left Beirut, that was it. Nobody followed up. Nobody got in touch.

*Q: And you went to Yemen.*

PIASCIK: Yes, I went to Yemen.

*Q: And you were in Yemen from when to when?*

PIASCIK: I was in Yemen from 1983 to 1985. It was North Yemen back then. I was the sole consular officer there and had two local employees.

PIASCIK: When I arrived, the ambassador was David Zweifel. William Rugh replaced him.

*Q: I think I interviewed Rugh.*

PIASCIK: Very nice man. You know in those days consular work was not anything that caught the attention of the ambassador or DCM.

*Q: Well I'm a career consular officer. You don't want these guys mucking around with the stuff you know what to do and they don't. They just want people to feel happy and we in the consular business don't make people happy.*

PIASCIK: Right. Ambassador Rugh's wife, Andrea, is an anthropologist and she was very interested in culture and family relationships. There was a community of Americans of Yemeni origin living in Ibb Province, out in the mountains, and I travelled there a number of times to verify family relationships for immigration purposes or at the request of the Social Security Administration. It was a very remote area. Andrea asked to come with me once because she was interested in seeing how people lived.

Ambassador Rugh was very concerned for her safety and basically told me to look out for her. She was very capable and a delightful person. I learned a lot from her. She dressed in a modified Yemeni style, in pants with a long skirt over it, and brought along photos of her children. This was an instant icebreaker and she was very good at connecting with people, especially since we relied on random people in the villages we visited to host us in their houses.

*Q: Where was the capital at this point?*

PIASCIK: It was Sanaa. North Yemen and South Yemen were separate countries at his point.

*Q: What was Sanaa like?*

PIASCIK: It was small, compact and a little run down. The tallest buildings were the three international hotels: Ramada, Sheraton and Taj. The old city was very picturesque

with traditional buildings with geometrical white-washed embellishments around windows and doors, around the windows and doors and colored glass fan windows.

It was a police state. Ali Abdullah Saleh was the president so he kept a tight grip on things. They watched us. I know I was followed home when I visited friends at a housing compound. The government made it difficult to meet Yemenis, especially socially, but there were some opportunities, especially with families that had been educated in the U.S. or Europe or American or European women who had married Yemenis. I was approached on the street several times by girls or young women who were just fascinated to meet a Western woman. Some Yemeni men also were members of the Hash House Harriers. The Hash House Harriers is a tradition established in Malaysia right before World War II. The idea was to promote running and social activities, and became known as "a drinking club with a running problem." In Sanaa, there would be a run every Monday, around four p.m. The course was set up in a different location each week, with false trails and so on to more or less keep the group together. Whoever set the trail would prepare dinner for the group afterwards.

Yemeni social life, at least for men, revolved around qat chews. Qat are the leaves of a shrub and are a mild stimulant. Hours are spent chewing leaves. I was invited to a couple of qat chews with some of the embassy men. I think it was a novelty for the Yemeni men to have a Western woman present. Everyone was always very polite to me, but the leaves were pretty nasty.

Tt was pretty easy to travel around North Yemeni. We'd go camping on the Red Sea, or for picnics in the surround mountains, or visit the

I was the sole consular officer, and I really learned so much about consular work there. In Beirut, the local staff was very experienced, but my two local employees in Sanaa were relatively new, so I spent a lot of time reading the Foreign Affairs Manual. The consular section was in building right next to the wall surrounding the embassy compound. The section had actually been a Turkish bath. There was a separate waiting room for women, and there were round, thick pieces of glass in the domed ceiling. The interior walls were basically mud and straw covered by plaster. I found this out during a crisis management exercise when some of the players used hammers on the walls of our safe haven area and pieces of the wall started falling apart

*Q: Yemenis travel a lot. I mean I always think of Yemenis in Youngstown, Ohio and Poughkeepsie, New York. Anyway, one of my second consular tour was in Dhahran and we had a lot of Yemenis there and they were going back and forth.*

PIASCIK: Yemen was a very poor country and it exported its men and depended on the remittances they sent back. There was a community of Yemeni-Americans living in the mountains in Ibb province, a very remote area. One person we dealt with frequently had been an elevator operator in San Francisco. When he returned to live in Yemen, he brought with him some generators and made a nice living for himself supplying electricity to a couple of nearby villages.

It was an adventure to visit these areas. The villages were just not on any map, so we'd basically have to pick up a guide once we were in the general vicinity. The Social Security Administration several times requested me to verify if beneficiaries were present or alive. I took with me once a junior officer from the U.S. Information Agency who was doing a rotation in my section. This was Adnan Siddiqi. We picked up an armed escort – Yemenis were very attached to their weapons. The road was unbelievable. Lots of hairpin turns, steep, big drop-offs, ruts. We arrived in the village and everyone came rushing out to see what was going on. The village elder located the person we were looking for, and one of the things I asked him was what his last address in the U.S. He said, "Newark, Delaware." Adnan and I burst out laughing since I am from Delaware. It's a small state with a very small population and here we were in this tiny, remote village and there is someone from Delaware there.

*Q: Were there problems with tribal feuds or anything like that? I mean in areas we couldn't go to?*

PIASCIK: I don't recall that there were areas we couldn't go to, but the government and tribes competed for power. Some tribes saw a strong government as a threat to their influence and economic well-being, and had no interest in a strong government.

*Q: Any interesting consular stories?*

PIASCIK: We were notified by the U.S. Navy that a group of people sailing through the Red Sea had reported an American couple had run their boat aground and needed assistance. We were able to find out that they were in a very remote area somewhere south of Hodeida, which is the main Yemeni city on the Red Sea. The defense attaché told me he knew people in the Yemeni Navy who could help, so we set off for Hodeida to meet with these people, locate the Americans and help them.

Once we arrived, it became clear that he didn't know anyone in the Yemeni Navy but he saw it as a good opportunity to meet them. No one in the Navy was willing to lift a finger, so we ended up going to the Yemeni intelligence service, the Mukhabarat. We had the coordinates for where the yacht was, and we all went out to this beach where the yacht was grounded and was all off road. We got stuck in the sand several times and had to dig the vehicles out. When we arrived, the yacht seemed to be in good condition. The husband had left for Hodeida and left his wife with the boat, under the protection of the local tribal sheikh. The sheikh had left with the husband, and his wife was in charge. The American wife was perfectly fine, although not happy to be stranded in the middle of nowhere. The sheikh's wife was real character, but it was clear she was taking good care that nothing happened to the American or the boat.

We did locate the husband and worked with him to locate someone who could get that yacht off the beach. The Navy probably had the equipment but weren't willing to do anything. We eventually found someone who had his own salvage and construction company and after many weeks he was able to bring in equipment. The Americans had

had enough of yachting by this point and just arranged to have the boat loaded aboard a ship, ending their round-the-world trip.

There was a very tragic incident involving the wife of a Fulbright scholar. She was taken very ill quite suddenly and was taken to an American hospital in Sa'adah, which was several hours to the north of Sanaa. Nothing could be done and she died. We brought her body back to Sanaa to prepare it for return to the U.S. This was not something the hospital morgue usually did so it was quite an operation. There were also difficulties at the airport because the security forces there decided they wanted to inspect the interior of the coffin. We got them to back down but it took a while. It was very stressful as we all knew this lady quite well.

*Q: Did you run into any problems with South Yemen. It was communist, wasn't it?*

PIASCIK: Yes, it was communist. We didn't have diplomatic relations with South Yemen. However, we did have some social security beneficiaries in there, so we sent checks to the British vice-consul Aden for distribution.

*Q: Well, I think this is a good place to stop for today.*

*Q: Today is the 23rd of September, 2016 with Lisa Piascik.* W*hen we left you, you had left Yemen and you now are doing what?*

PIASCIK: I am in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs as a staff assistant.

*Q: Okay, and this was from when to when?*

PIASCIK: I started in January 1986 after completing mid-level officer training. Margaret Scobey was the other staff assistant. The staff assistant position was for one year, but I stayed for only nine months before taking another job in the bureau. Dick Murphy was the assistant secretary. Arnie Raphel was the PDAS.

*Q: What did staff assistants do in those days?*

PIASCIK: We managed the paper flow in the bureau. We received taskings from the seventh floor conveyed by the deputy executive secretary and assigned action, same thing with taskings from the NEA front office. We made sure NEA papers – briefing memos and action memos, for example – were correctly formatted and cleared. We distributed cables from the field for the front office principals and others in the bureau. Everything was papers so we spent a lot of time making copies. And we ensured high-interest and late-breaking items were briefed to the appropriate people. One of the staff assistants would travel with the assistant secretary to make sure he had what he needed. I got to go on Vice President Bush's trip to the Middle East, to Israel and Jerusalem…

*Q: How did that go?*

PIASCIK: It went well. I actually went on the plane that transported the vice president's limousine; it was pretty bare bones. On the ground, I made sure the assistant secretary was included in meetings he needed to be in and had the paper he needed. Afterwards, the assistant secretary went to Egypt, so I helped to arranged that.

*Q: How did Vice President Bush strike you at the time?*

PIASCIK: Well, I wasn't in contact with him I dealt with the staff.

*Q: When you were back in Washington sitting in on these meetings, the Near Eastern Bureau probably was the busiest of all the bureaus, wasn't it?*

PIASCIK: Yes, there always was something happening with the Arab-Israeli peace process and at that point NEA comprised South Asia as well, so it was always busy.

*Q: Well then did you have a feeling of pressure, gotta get this done, I mean was there a lot of pressure?*

PIASCIK: Yeah, a lot of papers that the bureau did ended up eventually at the White House so there was a lot of pressure to get things done right and in a correct format.

*Q: This was still… Were computers…*

PIASCIK: Oh, no. This was before computers.

*Q: I was going to say, before computers, so if there was a typo, you had to do it all over again.*

PIASCIK: We'd route it back to the originating desk to do that.

*Q: You did that for about what, six months?*

PIASCIK: I did that for about nine months and then I went to the Iran desk. The Iran desk officer had left and there was a vacancy, so I went there in Sept. post early for some reason; I don't know why, but they had an opening and so I went to the Iran desk. I was Iran desk officer. In those days, it was NEA/NGA, Northern Gulf Affairs. The office consisted of an office director who was Peter Burleigh, deputy office director who was Michael Metrinko, me as the Iran desk officer. Greg Barry was the Iraq desk officer and an OMS and that was it.

*Q: And this was when?*

PIASCIK: This was from September 1986 to Spring 1988.

*Q: Well, of course, we didn't have relations with Iran but how did this work?*

PIASCIK: News about Irangate or the Iran-Contra Affair broke about the time that I started, so I spent a lot of time dealing with the fallout from that. Iran-Contra started as an arms for American hostages in Lebanon and then morphed into a program to provide arms to support so-called moderate Iranian factions. I represented the bureau of the interagency Iran Working Group, which dealt with a plethora of Congressional and Independent Counsel requests for briefings, document review and search. I also worked to reinvigorate our efforts to deny arms resupply to Iran, which became very sensitive after the Irangate revelations. On my part, this involved coordination with functional and regional bureaus, and drafting beating-up demarches to governments that were permitting or encourages arms sales to Iran.

I also served as the Department's point person for the issue of U.S. trade policy and relations with Iran, which was another sensitive issue because of Iranian support for terrorism, and in particular hostage-takers. Iran was the country everyone loved to hate, for good reason, but we wanted to maintain some small openings that would allow us to rebuild a relationship when the time was right. You can imagine that there were widely divergent and strongly held views on this, as well as difficult legal issues.

I followed the Iran-Iraq war, Iranian foreign relations and internal developments and carried out other usual country officer responsibilities – drafting press guidance, conducting briefings, preparing memos and demarches. And I also backed up the Iraq desk officer whenever he was out.

*Q: Well, after this particular time, what did you do?*

PIASCIK: I went to Damascus, Syria where I was the consular chief.

*Q: You were there for how long?*

PIASCIK: Two years from August 1988 to August 1990.

*Q: What was the situation in Syria at the time?*

PIASCIK: Hafez Al-Assad was the president at the time. He presided over a police state, but it was calm, Edward Djerejian was the ambassador and he felt his priority was to see where it was possible to improve the bilateral relationship. It was not easy given Syrian support for terrorism. Of course, Syria was a key to Iran's ability to supply Hezbollah in Lebanon. A couple of months after I arrived, Pan Am 103 was blown up over Lockerbie. Ambassador Djerejian held a country team meeting and said that if the Syrians were involved in this, he'd be on a plane out of the country.

*Q: Well what were you doing consular-wise?*

PIASCIK: We had a full-service consular section. There were only two full time consular officers, and one or two part time ones. Consular services at our embassy in Beirut were

either very limited or not available, so we took on Lebanese applicants as well for the full range of services. It was a busy post.

This was before there were appointment systems for non-immigrant visas so we'd have long lines of applicants lining up at midnight. Syrian government guards would charge applicants for a place in the line and enterprising visa expediters would patrol the lines to offer their services, for a fee. It was a mess, and we worked very hard to organize the line ourselves. Visas were a part of nearly every conversation any embassy person ever had, and Syrians could be very persistent. The Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission John Craig were very supportive in enforcing the visa referral system.

Immigrant visas were pretty straightforward, but American services were complex. I used to deal regularly with some of the wives of American hostages in Lebanon, and at least one of those hostages came through Damascus after being released. Most Americans were also Syrian citizens and the Syrian government did not recognize their American citizenship so this brought up a number of difficulties in child custody, welfare and whereabouts and jailed Americans.

*Q: People in jail. Was it drugs or what was it?*

PIASCIK: They were in prison for supposed political offenses, for currency violations, for crimes of various sorts. I had a good relationship with the Syrian director of consular services and he was helpful in getting us access to some of our prisoners. The director of the prison near Damascus, however, never could understand why the lady consul and her female consular assistant would want to come to the prison. He clearly felt it was not a place for women, but I believe we did get across that we were concerned with the welfare of our citizens.

*Q: Well what was your staff like? The Syrian staff?*

PIASCIK: They were great. We had a fairly even mix of men and women and while most were Muslim, we did have a few Christians. On the face of things, they worked well together, but it wasn't hard to see the tensions underneath. The Syrian intelligence services expected the staff to report on the Americans as well as each other, so they tended to treat each other warily. There was also a social split. We had a few employees who came from prominent or distinguished families, and perceived slights on both sides were magnified. One of our male employees had to be fired for malfeasance. Despite all this, we managed to maintain good relationships. We would do lunches as a group, and several of them invited me to their homes and had no hesitation in coming to my apartment. I was invited to a performance by a Lebanese singer and took the staff along with me, which they all really enjoyed.

*Q: How about social life there?*

PIASCIK: There was a very active international community. Despite the oppressive government, Syrians were for the most part eager to deal with us both officially and more

informally. The director of consular services, for instance, invited me and my American services local employee to his house for dinner parties. I had Syrian friends I met at aerobics classes. It was very easy to travel and the shopping was great.

*Q: How about travel?*

PIASCIK: Travel was pretty easy. We could travel just about anywhere in Syria. Just about every period in history was represented in Syria. There were hardly any tourists so you could visit archeological sites, castles and ruins and there would be no one there.

One of the political officers, Kathy Allegrone and I, took a trip to the far northeastern area of Syria. I had some visa work to do out there and it had been a while since anyone from the political section had been there. We just took an embassy car and drove ourselves. In addition to the work aspect, we saw a number of sites along the way, and took a detour along the Euphrates River almost down to the point where it crosses into Iraq, stopping at a couple of archeological sites along the way. We stayed a couple of days in Hasakah, which is in the very northeastern corner of Syria, and were hosted by a contact of our public affairs section, who gave up his bedroom for us. We returned to Damascus via Aleppo so saw quite a bit of the country on that single trip. It was a real adventure: we had tire problems twice and had to drive through a sandstorm.

*Q: What about your visa applicants? Were they mostly legitimate?*

PIASCIK: No, most of them weren't. We had a high refusal rate. Syria was a poor country and most of our applicants were young men with limited ties and prospects. Among the Lebanese applicants, a lot had previous visas and viewed American visas as an insurance policy allowing them to temporarily leave Lebanon when things got tough, but they were still hard to adjudicate. Everyone knew who the consular officers were and we were regularly recognized by applicants both in Damascus and in out of the way places.

*Q: Were you involved… I mean, was the problem with quote "Jewish-wives" still around?*

PIASCIK: Yeah, it was there.

*Q: Why don't you explain about that?*

PIASCIK: Well, the Jewish wife problem was that the Jewish population had fallen so low, and that for a variety of reasons, there were many more women than men and the women had difficulty finding a partner. At the time, there were three centers for the Syrian Jewish population. The largest was in Damascus, but it was only a couple of thousand people. There was a smaller community in Aleppo and a tiny community in Hasakah, in the northeast. That community was so small it didn't have a butcher, and had to depend on the one from Aleppo to visit.

The Jewish community was regarded with some degree of suspicion by the Syrian government, and lived with all kinds of restrictions on what they could do. One of the things they couldn't do was travel or emigrate. The Syrians would impose payments of bonds and not allow all members of a family to travel in order to impel return to Syria. At the same time, the government would hold out the Jews as proof that different groups of people could live together in peace.
We had a fair amount of contact with the Jewish community. One of the political officers and I were invited to visit the synagogue in Damascus – it dated back to medieval times, I think, and had very old Torah scrolls. There was at least one family still fashioning inlaid metal goods – I remember watching one of their girls hammering copper and silver wires into a brass plate. And there was a family that had a store where they sold all sorts of things – carpets, brass and copper, embroidery. I bought a lot of carpets from them and used to visit them nearly every Sunday. I even was invited to their house, which was in the old city. I also knew one young one young man who had gone to the United States and had gotten refugee status. He told me he returned to Damascus because he could only find work as a stevedore and that was much too hard. His father had a fabric store and he felt it was much easier to work there than in the U.S.

*Q: Did Jordan intrude on matters at all?*

PIASCIK: In terms of the Jewish population?

*Q: Yeah.*

PIASCIK: Not that I am aware of.

*Q: By the way, did we have an exchange program with Syria? Were we sending leaders to the states to visit and that sort of thing?*

PIASCIK: I suppose so. I don't remember that being a significant issue as far as visas were concerned.

*Q: How did you find some of the atmosphere of the embassy?*

PIASCIK: It was a good embassy. Ambassador Djerejian took all the country team with him when he presented his credentials to President Al-Assad and really took the time to make sure that country team meetings were meaningful to everyone. That is, the meetings weren't just extensions of conversations he was having with individual country team members. He really wanted everyone to understand what our priorities and goals and he was concerned with the well-being of the entire community. I felt he and the deputy chief of mission, John Craig, were very supportive me personally and professionally. Everyone was interested in visas and tried to use every lever they could, but the Ambassador and John were very supportive of having a strong visa referral program. I had a good relationship with an archbishop, and he told me early on that he had asked Ambassador Djerejian why a woman was occupying such an important position as chief of the consular section, and he said the Ambassador had replied that only the best U.S.

diplomats could take on that job and he had full confidence in me. It was a fairly easy drive down to Amman. I used to do that quite often.

*Q: You left there when?*

PIASCIK: I left on August 1, 1990, which of course, was the same day Iraq invaded Kuwait.

*Q: That was pretty safe.*

PIASCIK: At the end of July, the Ambassador had talked in country team meetings about Iraqi troops and equipment massing on the Kuwaiti border, and although everyone was on high alert, no one expected that they would actually invade since negotiations were ongoing. I left of August 1 and had a rest stop in Frankfurt, and that next morning found out that the Iraqis had launched an assault. It was a shock.

*Q: So what did you do?*

PIASCIK: So I went back to Washington. I went to the old Citizen Consular Services division, CCS, in Consular Affairs. It handled non-emergency and routine consular services, such as nationality, judicial services, adoptions. I was the deputy director of CCS and also the chief of the unit that handled Europe, During the first few months I was there, I spent a lot of time representing the bureau of the task force that was established after the Iraqi invasion. I also went to Baghdad in December, 1990. The consular officer in Baghdad had been evacuated, and I went to help support the evacuation of American citizens from Iraq as well those who were in Kuwait.

*Q: I've interviewed Joe Wilson.*

PIASCIK: Yes, he was the chargé d'affaires at the time. I was there for a couple of weeks. I didn't see anything of the city except for the embassy, the apartment where I stayed and the airport. One of the real difficulties in evacuating Americans was that the Iraqi Government wouldn't let dual national children leave. Their American mothers could leave, but not the kids, even when the Iraqi fathers wanted them to. There were also some Americans who were being held as human shields.

*Q: Well did you feel, you know the bombing in Beirut and all this, must have been a pretty tense time in the embassy, wasn't it?*

PIASCIK: Yes. It was clear that we were moving towards military action, and the embassy would be closing. One of the Iraqi consular employees, who was Christian, commented wistfully to me that we were lucky in being able to leave, and that she and her family would not. She and others were just very worried about what would happen to them.

*Q: A good staff, though?*

PIASCIK: Definitely.

*Q: Did you get any feel about the difference between the Iraqis and the Syrians?*

PIASCIK: I wasn't there long enough to really be able to say

*Q: How did your Arabic go?*

PIASCIK: That was one of the reasons why I was asked to go because I had Middle Eastern experience and I had Arabic. The Iraqi dialect wasn't too different from Syrian dialect so I was able to understand people fairly easily and they understood me.

*Q: How did you get out of Iraq?*

PIASCIK: I flew out left when our remaining embassy staff in Kuwait, along with other Americans, left. They were brought out on a plane and when they landed in Baghdad, private Americans from Iraq and I got on the plane.

*Q: And then what?*

PIASCIK: We stopped in Frankfurt to change planes. I believe medical personnel from our military had the chance to check and chat with the evacuees. And then I went back to Washington and after that I continued to do a little bit on the task force but then I went into my regular job in CCS.

*Q: And again this job was?*

PIASCIK: It was the deputy director of the Citizen Consular Services office and the European unit chief. CCS handled citizenship matters, such as acquisition and loss of nationality; notarial services, judicial services. This was before the children's issues office was established, so we also did children's issues, such as abductions and non-visa related adoption issues as well. Romanian adoptions were a big thing for the office.

*Q: I was going to say the Romanian adoptions was mayhem.*

PIASCIK: Yes, it was a crazy, crazy time.

*Q: Talk about the Romanian adoptions.*

PIASCIK: After the Ceausescu era, there were a lot of news stories about how terrible Romanian orphanages were. Ceausescu had encouraged or forced women to have many children, and families just didn't have the wherewithal to support large families, so children were abandoned in, or place temporarily in, orphanages and they were just terrible places. Children were neglected, suffered abuse and had all kinds of issues. M any Americans, and others, wanted to adopt Romanian orphans. They acted out of the

best of intentions, but there were no established, clear procedures in Romania, so there were a lot of complications. It wasn't clear whether children were actually orphans, whether all Romanian and U.S. requirements had been met for the children to qualify for visas. There was evidence of baby-selling. In addition, some of these children had severe physical or mental problems, which wasn't apparent until after families had gone pretty far along with the process. This led to a number of instances where American families wanted to back out of the adoption and locate another child. It was very chaotic and people were just desperate to find an adoptable child. People got very impatient when there were delays or hold-ups.

*Q: And you left there when?*

PIASCIK: I left CCS in the summer of 1992 and I went to our consulate in Cebu, Philippines as the principal officer.

*Q: While you were in Washington and Syria and all, did the breakup of the Soviet Union affect you? I mean your work at all?*

PIASCIK: No. No.

*Q: I guess Syria must have… I been they depended pretty heavily…*

PIASCIK: Excuse me?

*Q: Syria depended pretty heavily on Soviet support.*

PIASCIK: Yes, Russia had military interests, the Soviet Union had military interests in Syria, supported the regime.

*Q: So off to Cebu. Talk a little bit about how Cebu fit? I mean, what was happening there?*

PIASCIK: Cebu was the only remaining U.S. consulate in the Philippines. We previously had a consulate in Davao, which is in the southern part of Mindanao but it had been closed so Cebu was the last remaining consulate in the Philippines and our consular area was the entire southern half of the Philippines – Visayas and Mindanao and the Sulu Islands, so it was quite a large area. At the time the consulate was staffed with me, a US Information Service (USIS) officer, a consular officer, an administrative officer and an economic officer, as well as 15 or so local employees. The American library and USIS people were in a different building when I arrived. There were a number of honorary consuls there, but we were the only diplomatic presence. Cebu city prided itself on being the oldest city in the country, and its first capital. Magellan landed in Cebu and began baptizing the local population. Economic development really began to take off during the time I was there.

*Q: There was a significant revolt there…*

PIASCIK: Communist insurgents had operated throughout most of the Philippines, but were not much of a factor during my time there. In many parts of western Mindanao and in the Sulu Archipelago, Muslim separatists were becoming more active. Some had gotten experience in Afghanistan, fighting against the Russians. They were active on the outskirts of Zamboanga, in the entire area around Cotabato City and throughout the Sulu Islands. Travel to these areas was difficult, but not impossible. I went to Cotabato City several times, usually with the defense attachés, who also offered me a ride on their plane. But the Filipinos would insist on providing security, which was a Marine intelligence officer who always wanted to sit in on my meetings and I had to push back on that. I managed to go to Sulu once, with one of the Manila political officers. We stayed at the governor's house in Jolo, and were with the Filipino Marines at all times.

*Q: Well this is Marcos still?*

PIASCIK: Fidel Ramos was the president.

*Q: One looks at the Philippines and Indonesia and I mean these are such huge… They cover such huge areas and how the government can do anything there is incredible.*

PIASCIK: Well they often can't.

*Q: Well how did you find your job? Were you mainly concerned about consular work or reporting?*

PIASCIK: I did a lot of representation and reporting. I worked closely with the American Chamber of Commerce, which was quite active. I traveled a lot. There were a fair number of American citizens in the consular section so I did a lot of outreach to them. There were some American manufacturers and business people, especially in the economic free zone in Cebu; and Del Monte and Heinz had pineapple operations in Mindanao. In addition there were longstanding missionary communities in Mindanao; and retired military people who had married Filipinas in the Visayas.

As a result of budget cuts and consolidation, we moved visa services to Manila about halfway through my assignment there, and after that I spent some time on facilitating appointments for my contacts and for those American businesses that wanted to send employees to the U.S, for various reasons. I did receive a full time reporting officer, which was really helpful.

*Q: How did you travel?*

PIASCIK: I usually went by plane. My driver would take our four-wheel drive vehicle on ferries a couple of days ahead of my travel. I cultivated good relations with the defense attaché, who had a C-12. They always let me know when they were travelling in my consular district and offered to give me a ride. It was very convenient as flights in and out of some areas was very limited. They were more than willing to stop in Cebu to pick me

up because there was a Filipino air base there and it gave them an excuse to meet people there. A couple of times, the Filipinos invited me to travel with them on military helicopters.

*Q: Was there much in the way in representational work? I mean we fought major battles in Mindanao and all and did you get involved in reflections on those?*

PIASCIK: Oh, yes. I was always being invited to events. To have the American consul attend or take part lent prestige to both the event and organizer. There were honorary consuls in Cebu but they were pretty much only in Cebu. Throughout the Visayas, I was usually the only foreign diplomat present. The biggest event was the annual commemoration of General MacArthur's landing in Leyte during World War II. We usually had people from the embassy there as well. And we organized our own events as well, usually revolving around a USAID project, a public diplomacy or commercial event. The U.S. Navy started having ships make port calls when I was there so that was also a representational opportunity.

*Q: Why was the consulate located in Cebu?*

PIASCIK: Cebu was important both historically and culturally. There was also an economic free zone there, and it was relatively safe. During the budget cuts in mid-90s, it was identified for closure. We managed to keep it open until just after I left. It was unfortunate because just after we left, other countries started opening consulates there. So we went from being the only country with a consulate to the one without a consulate. I did recruit a very able consular agent, however. That was John Domingo, who had been head of the American Chamber of Commerce. He was there for quite some time and retired last year. And of course, we had to let our staff go, which was sad. One did stay on to help out the consular agent.

*Q: Did you get involved in immigration? Particularly of nurses to the United States?*

PIASCIK: No. The consulate did process non-immigrant visas but I usually stayed away from that. Once it was decided that visas would be transferred to Manila, we had a huge rush of people coming to apply during the final weeks and I did help out with interviews. After that, I limited myself to helping my contacts get appointments in Manila, which could be very trying.

*Q: Who was the ambassador?*

PIASCIK: Richard Solomon arrived about two months after I arrived. He was a political appointment and left a couple of months after President Clinton assumed office. Don Westmore came in chargé d'Affaires for about six months. John Negroponte came after that.

*Q: Did the Southern Philippines have its… How did it stand in the broad political context of the Philippines? Was it sort of a traditional South versus the North?*

PIASCIK: Well, it's a big island and very diverse, so it is hard to generalize. Anyway, the larger cities were on the coast: Zamboanga and Cagayan de Oro in the north; General Santos and Davao in the south, and Cotabato in the west. They each had their own character but there was a bit of Wild West in each. The rest of the island was pretty rural.

*Q: Where did you go next?*

PIASCIK: I went to the National War College from 1995-1996.

*Q: Talk about your experiences there.*

PIASCIK: I really enjoyed it. I had a great time there. The students were all first-rate we had a number of prominent people who came and spoke to us. I really enjoyed the give and take in the classes.

My most memorable experience there was from my elective courses, I took a year-long course in campaign planning, combat campaign planning. The instructors were very anxious to get civilians into this course because they really wanted to incorporate political, economic and information tools into the planning. For the first semester, we did table top exercises. One involved a Russian invasion of Kaliningrad and the other a Middle East conflict. In both instances, I played the role of political advisor. In the spring semester, the scenario was a conflict involving China and North Korea. We played the Chinese and ICAF (Industrial College of the Armed Forces) played the North Koreans. Other senior military schools took on the parts of various U.S. military services. We had a great deal of latitude in organizing the scenario and it ended with a big exercise in Alabama at Maxwell Air Base. I played the Chinese J-2, or head of intelligence. It was fun. The U.S. military is just so huge that once it gets its forces moving to the area of operations, it just overpowers everything else, but we got credit for taking action that the other side either didn't anticipate or had trouble responding to. For instance, we infected Taiwan with the flu, we diverted U.S. tax refunds to Chinese banks, and set off a nuclear bomb and blamed it on the Americans. We'd make political speeches on U.S. stations. The other service schools were just not sure what we were doing.

*Q: Well it also gave you a feel about the tools that you had because I'm told that at the beginning of these war games usually the State Department people usually come with solutions, well we'll have to come in militarily and the military says, we have to do diplomacy. Each one vastly overestimating the ability of their other half, their ability to do things.*

PIASCIK: One of the hottest topics during that year was exit strategies, and military operations other than war, and it was during that discussion that that type of expectation was most evident.

*Q: What was your impression of the military officers?*

PIASCIK: They were really high-caliber. The Marines especially were really, really smart.

*Q: I've heard this. People who get to the top of Marines or tagged to be the top are really exceptional.*

PIASCIK: They were impressive and really stood out for their intellect and readiness to think outside the box.

*Q: Well for one thing being a rather small corps, having air, sea and land experience played well with them. Well, now my usual question.*

PIASCIK: Where did I go next? I went to Baku, Azerbaijan as the DCM there. I went there in 1997 just as the ambassador, Rich Kauzlarich, was leaving. A new ambassador hadn't been nominated yet. I was chosen by S/NIS, the new independent state bureau, I think who really went to bat for me was the head of office of Caucasian Affairs, Steve Young, who'd I known from my Iran desk days. He'd been working on the China desk and we had worked on sanctions issues together. He was really very supportive and that I already had a principal officer tour under my belt was.

Rich Kauzlarich was incredibly helpful in the two weeks we had together. He made sure I knew all his contacts and was fully briefed on internal embassy issues as well as those pertinent to our relationship with Azerbaijan. I was chargé d'affaires for about four months until, Stan Escudero, the new ambassador arrived. There was a lot going on. The Azeri president, Heydar Aliyev, had just been in the United States before I went out so he was very interested in building up his relationship with the United States as a way to counterbalance that with Russia. He had been a very high-level official in the Soviet government but he wanted to carve out as much room to maneuver as he could. And of course, solidify his own position.

There had been a war with Armenia where Armenia had occupied about 20% of Azerbaijan. People from these areas were displaced from their homes and living elsewhere in the country. The U.S., along with France and Russia, were the co-chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group, which sought to resolve this conflict. We were prohibited from providing assistance to the Azerbaijani government, but had a lot of humanitarian aid to assist the displaced people. Finally, just about every major oil company was in the country looking for oil, primarily in the Caspian. So there was a lot going on. We had a number of congressional delegations visit and the secretary of energy came too when I was chargé.

*Q: What was the language?*

PIASCIK: The government had declared that Azerbaijani was the official language of the country. It's a Turkish dialect. But Russian was very widely spoken as most educated people had been taught in Russian. Russian was the language of the oil industry. I studied Azeri for 10 months at FSI, and most of officers did as well. Most of the others had either

studied Russian or knew it from serving in the former Soviet Union. Now, the plan in Azerbaijan was that the language would be with the Latin alphabet, as it had been at one point in the early 20th century. Before that, Azerbaijani used the Arabic alphabet. After Azerbaijan was absorbed into the Soviet Union, the language used the Cyrillic alphabet. Anyway, at FSI we studied the Cyrillic alphabet, although by that time, Azeri newspapers were using the Latin alphabet for headlines, and Cyrillic for the body. So it was a little confusing.

All that aside, the Azeris loved that American diplomats spoke their language. Very few other diplomats did, so we got a lot of credit. At a ceremony to commemorate the opening of an off-shore oil field, the French Ambassador had memorized a speech in Azeri and the moment he started speaking, the audience went crazy, clapping and whistling. It was quite an accomplishment, as the other countries represented in that consortium has sent high level officials – our secretary of energy came – but the French Ambassador just captured their hearts.

*Q: You must have been caught in the middle between Armenians and Azeris didn't you?*

PIASCIK: Well, there weren't many Armenians left in Azerbaijan.

*Q: So they weren't… it wasn't a major factor.*

PIASCIK: No, no. But we did have the Minsk Group co-chairs in quite a bit, but they never really got very far. Azerbaijan wanted its territory back, and the Armenians claimed most of it – especially Nagorno-Karabakh – was an integral part of the Armenia. The active hostilities had basically come to an end several years before, so they were in a stalemated period.

*Q: The Armenian lobby in the United States is extremely powerful and did you get a feel of that?*

PIASCIK: Oh yes. Because of the Armenian lobby, there were restrictions on provision of foreign assistance to the Azerbaijani government. We had some humanitarian programs going on to assist the internally displaced people but nothing on a government level. This was a huge issue. The American oil companies used to complain about it all the time because not only the state oil industry but business in general was set up on a Russian model, and the lack of assistance prohibited them from really learning and adopting Western practices, for example accounting methods.

*Q: I've been told people back then were seeing reports that the oil fields were a real mess because under the Soviets, they didn't really clean up after themselves.*

PIASCIK: Azerbaijan has a very long history of oil production. Originally, it was just oil and I think gas which appeared on the surface or very close to the surface. The earliest wells in the 1800s were just gushers, which of course, was very destructive to the land. It wasn't just the Soviets or the Russians who were involved in oil extraction so there is

plenty of blame to go around for how polluted and horrible some areas became once the wells were depleted.

*Q: Did you feel that in relations with the Azeris you had one hand tied behind your back?*

PIASCIK: To a certain extent, yes. Mainly because of the prohibition on foreign assistance to the government. The Azeris were aware how strong the Armenian lobby in the U.S. was and that we did provide lots of assistance to Armenia. However, the Azeris were quite anxious to have a good relationship with us.

*Q: The Armenian government is renowned for being corrupt. How about the whole area there?*

PIASCIK: These are governments and societies which are big patronage networks

*Q: So they are basically smugglers.*

PIASCIK: Positions within the government would be sold. Customs, immigration, police, those positions would be sold. I think even in the military itself so then those who had paid would want to recoup their money and make a profit, either by selling lowing ranking positions or collecting money, and of course expecting bribes from the public.

*Q: Was there any progress on human rights and democratization?*

PIASCIK: Not really. The Azeris were pretty intolerant of dissent. There was a presidential election during the time that I was there and President Aliyev had said at one point, Shevardnadze won with the presidency of Georgia with 86% of the vote, that sounds like a good number. Of course, some of the opposition forces could be hot-headed and their own worst enemies.

*Q: Who was your ambassador?*

PIASCIK: Stan Escudero. He came in about four months after I arrived.

*Q: What was his background?*

PIASCIK: He had served in Iran before the Iranian Revolution. He had been ambassador in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as well.

*Q: Well Turkmenistan, that's where they had this ruler was sort of a megalomaniac?*

PIASCIK: Exactly – Niyazov. A real strongman sort.

*Q: How about your ruler?*

PIASCIK: Compared to Niyazov, Heydar Aliyev quite low-key. He had long been prominent in Azerbaijan and became very powerful and rich. He was appointed to the Soviet Politburo and the Council of Ministers in the 1980s but ran afoul of Gorbachev and retired to Azerbaijan. Aliyev managed to establish a powerbase in Nakhchivan province, where he was from, and after the Soviet Union fell apart, he used that eventually become president in 1993. He managed to hold on to power and consolidate his position, despite or maybe because of a coup attempt in 1995.

His son, Ilham, was head of the state oil company, and became president after Aliyev died in 2003.

I had a fair amount of dealings with Aliyev. We had good access to him when we had visitors or the Minsk Group came through, or if the ambassador needed to see him. He really wanted to cultivate a good relationship with the U.S. That doesn't mean he was forthcoming with what we wanted. He dressed well, but not ostentatiously, listened carefully, asked questions, and was generally reserved but polite.

He did have the room that was outfitted like a cave with fake rocks, where he would take guests for drinks after dinner. It was a little weird. I don't remember that he drank very much at all – he would say that tea was the national drink.

*Q: How did you find dealing with the officials there?*

PIASCIK: We had good access in general and could speak frankly. They could be tough. They didn't like that we cultivated relations with the opposition.

*Q: How about the oil community? How did you find dealing with them?*

PIASCIK: We had good access to the state oil company. That said, I think they kept us at a bit at arm's length because of their ties to the Russian oil apparatus. These ties had existed for years. On the other hand, they were very conscious not to be co-opted by the Russians. We met with the representatives of the American oil companies once a week. It was a good relationship. The big issue became how Azeri oil would be transported out of the country. We, and the Turks, were really pushing the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, which would move oil to Turkey and thence to Western markets. The Russians didn't like this at all because they wanted to use their already existing pipelines, which of course would maintain and grow their influence.

*Q: When you were there, what happened with that?*

PIASCIK: Well, there were always talks of one sort or another going on. The oil companies were a little unsure about the costs. The pipeline bypass Armenia altogether and go through Georgia. The Armenians were worried that this would isolate them, but the Georgians were very keen on it, as it would strengthen their independence. And, of course, the Turks were very keen. But there were a lot of questions over financing, whether the pipeline could be secured, and what the environmental impact would be.

*Q: How stands it now?*

PIASCIK: It's been in operation since about 2005.

*Q: Other than the Armenian factor, were there equivalent parties or opposition or anything like that?*

PIASCIK: Yes, there was an active opposition. Many leaders had been jailed at one point or another, some for long periods of time. They were constantly harassed by the government. Unfortunately, there were disagreements among many of the parties and leaders, so they often had problems uniting and presenting a common front.

*Q: Well, could we do anything for the people there? Schools or aid or anything like that or was it all…*

PIASCIK: A lot our assistance was geared toward the internally displaced people and was structured as humanitarian assistance. A lot of them ended up in old public buildings, such as schools or old government buildings. Many had been abandoned or were decrepit and were just not good space for people and families. We provided assistance to furnish them. We had a number of public health, schooling and job training programs as well. You know, a lot of these people had been farmers and shepherds and they really just wanted to go back home. So it was really hard for them. Even for job training, the country had trouble absorbing them in anything but a more traditional role.

We also did a lot in preparation for elections. We worked with NGOs and with the international community on voter education and monitoring programs . We did work some with the electoral authority to insure that elections were free and fair, transparent. There were some problems there.

*Q: You told me about the 86 per cent.*

PIASCIK: Yes, exactly.

*Q: How did you find the NGOs. I was in Kyrgyzstan for USIA at one point and the place was flooded with all these young people full of good intentions on all sorts of things. Did you have a lot of that?*

PIASCIK: Same thing. Most of our assistance was programmed through American or international NGOs, for example, Save the Children and Mercy Corps. We did make some grants on democratization and civil society to Azeri NGOs. They were very inexperienced, but most meant well.

*Q: Now was Islam the religion there?*

PIASCIK: Yes. Most Azeris are Muslim and of those, most are Shi'a. But most people were not very observant. It was really more of an ethnic identity than a religious belief. we did know that the Iranians were quite active. Most Azeris are Shi'a. The Iranians undertook a number of activities on a variety of fronts.

*Q: Were you concerned about terrorism?*

PIASCIK: We were concerned, yes. The bombings of our embassies in East Africa took place while I was in Baku, so we were very concerned.

*Q: Did we have much of a leader exchange program or anything like that?*

PIASCIK: Yes, we did. The usual programs – education, democracy, civil society.

*Q: Did you find the oil industry, our oil industry, fairly sophisticated in what they could and couldn't do? I would imagine they had been around for a while.*

PIASCIK: Yes, they were all major companies and had been around for a long time. Very experience.

*Q: What was the role of women?*

PIASCIK: Limited. A lot of women worked but there were very few that were prominent.

*Q: Did they have trade?*

PIASCIK: The Azeris? Yes, mainly oil.

*Q: How about agriculture?*

PIASCIK: Mainly cash crops – grapes, cotton, vegetables.

*Q: Did they look towards Moscow? Was that sort of still the central place to go?*

PIASCIK: There were a lot of Azeris living in Russia. A lot of Azeris saw it as an easy place to work and sell things. Most Azeris had been educated in Russian and Azerbaijan had been part of the Soviet Union so there were cultural and other ties. On the other hand, I think a lot of Azeris were just as happy to be independent.

*Q: Was there Russian military stationed there?*

PIASCIK: There were some Russian military forces at a radar station in Gabala. That was it.

*Q: How about travel?*

PIASCIK: We were able to travel pretty easily to those areas under Azerbaijani control. I made a big circuit of the country when I first arrived to look at USAID projects and make a few calls. Expats often travelled to Lahij, a mountain village where people still did a lot of traditional brass and copper work. It was only safely accessible in the summer, really. The road was just basically clinging the side of the mountain. I was friendly with the British ambassador and his wife so we made a couple of picnics to old ruined castles and other picturesque sites. One time, we went with a couple of people from British Petroleum. On the way back, one of the guys from BP managed to run up this very steep embankment and the car ended up on its side. Fortunately, no one was hurt, and we somehow managed to right the car using the ambassador's Land Rover. I later found out that the driver of the BP vehicle had traveled with his wife in the north of the country, and tried to cross a raging river. They got stuck in the middle of the river and came very close to being swept away and managed to get out. The vehicle remained in the middle of the river and the story was the locals used it for target practice.

*Q: Where did you go after Baku?*

PIASCIK: I went back to Washington, to the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. I was the Director of the INR Current Intelligence Staff or Watch. The INR Watch was to monitor all sorts of intelligence and to make sure that it was passed on to the appropriate Department principals and bureaus. We were also a liaison after hours with the intelligence community. We sat just beneath the Operations Center and one of our watch officers was co-located with the larger Department Watch. I was there from August 1999 to August 2001.

*Q: It must have been fascinating.*

PIASCIK: It was really, really interesting. INR had a lot of very experienced analysts who were respected throughout the intelligence community. They had historical perspectives that were unmatched,

*Q: I can't get in to too much detail but you were there during the time we were concerned about intelligence not getting to the right people and all that. People were holding things or not?*

PIASCIK: No, that wasn't really a concern. The big concern in INR during that time, I think, was strictly internal to INR and that was the disappearance of a laptop computer. On a larger scale, the never ending issue of how close the Iranians were to obtaining a nuclear weapon. But my office dealt with current intelligence and late breaking events. We generally did not get involved with analysis or intelligence estimates.

*Q: Where were you when the attack on the World Trade Center towers took place?*

PIASCIK: I was in the Bureau of Consular Affairs' Visa Office. I left INR in August of 2001 and I moved to the Visa Office, as Director of Public and Diplomatic Liaison. On the morning of September 11, I was in a computer security course at Main State. At the

end of the course, we were waiting for the instructor to sign our certificates and someone came in and said that a plane had flown into the Pentagon. I thought it was joke. No one knew what to think. After I got my certificate, I walked over to Colombia Plaza, where the Visa Office was located. Everyone was leaving Main State and Colombia Plaza. Once I arrived in our office suite, I learned about the attacks on the World Trade Center. Most people had left the office but those of still there were in a conference room with a television, and we watched both of the towers come down. I stayed with a couple of other people just in case we were needed, just monitoring what was going on. But I left about two or three in the afternoon to go home.

After 9/11, everyone started looking for who was responsible for letting these people into the country. Mary wanted our databases checked right away, so once we got the names of the terrorists, we were able to determine that there weren't any lookouts posted on any of them, and that they all appeared to be straightforward cases. But of course, someone had to be held accountable. There was a feeling that it was the fault of consular officers who were more concerned with being nice to people and handing out visas than in the security of our country. A lot of fingers were pointed at Mary for this alleged mindset. She had to appear before Congress to testify and I was asked to draft her testimony. I worked with a couple of other people, primarily Martha Sardinas, who ran the unit that dealt with our database and information exchanges with other agencies. The statement laid out what our national security posture on visas was, what we had done to promote use of databases and getting lookouts into them to make the visa process more secure, especially after the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993. The statement was well received and it really helped to turn the conversation from consular officers being responsible to why information from other agencies hadn't been in the system. The database is only as good as the information in it. That testimony became a foundational document for Consular Affairs for months afterward and was recycled into talking points and briefings for the White House, Congress, other elements of the Department and the government. It didn't completely quell the finger-pointing at us, but at least we had a factual basis to fight back.

*Q: Of all the government people, Mary Ryan was the only person, and I'm not sure, she lost her job. Everybody ran for cover and she was left as sort of the designated fall person.*

PIASCIK: Yes. There were a number of really vicious press articles that Mary was responsible because she had introduced this culture of customer services in which accommodation of the customer became more important than out national security. It just wasn't true, but that idea gained a lot of traction. In the end, it just was unrealistic to expect that she could stay on and could manage change. Mary was the highest ranking career officer, I think. A career ambassador who had many years of honorable service to our country, and it was sad to have to end her career like that.

*Q: No, but as a matter of fact, many of us are quite resentful of the fact that of all the people involved they pick on the poor consular officer as the person who is responsible when it really had nothing to do with it. It had to do with intelligence people not sharing their intelligence.*

PIASCIK: That view was vindicated when the 9/11 Commission published their report and outlined this. But the view that CA was completely blameless never really went away. We were really concerned that the State Department was going to lose the visa function all together, that it would be given to the newly formed Department of Homeland Security. There were people in our government who felt that visa adjudication was first and foremost a law enforcement issue and that the State Department just couldn't be trusted to do that properly as we would always view it as just another foreign policy tool.

*Q: What else did you do in the Visa Office?*

PIASCIK: My office, the Office of Public and Diplomatic Liaison had two units. Diplomatic Liaison revalidated visas for foreign diplomats assigned to the U.S. and for non-immigrants on petition-based work visas. This meant they didn't have to leave the country to renew their visas. The unit didn't interview, it just worked off of the visa applications. It processed about 60,000 applications a year. There was also an Authentications Office attached to it, where the public could come in to have their U.S. documents authenticated for use overseas.

The other unit was the Public Liaison Unit. It was in part a call center where people called in inquire about the status of visa applications or for visa information procedures. People also wrote or emailed in and we answered all of that to the extent we could. After 9/11, additional inter-agency namecheck procedures were instituted and this ended up, among other things, delaying issuance of fiancée visas to Chinese and Russian women who were engaged to marry American men. The delays were very extended and often took months to complete. These American men were quite determined that their fiancées be issued as soon as possible and would ceaselessly call embassies, consulates, our office, the FBI, the White House, their senators and congressman and anyone else they could to hurry these cases along. None of it did any good but it was quite a challenge.

*Q: Well, what was the problem? Frankly, communist affiliation was no longer particularly dangerous.*

PIASCIK: The FBI wanted to do these additional checks. One of the problems for the Chinese in particular was that the universe of Chinese names is limited so there was a greater chance of a hit coming up that would have to be resolved. But they didn't really have the resources to do this efficiently and with everything else they had, I don't think fiancées were anywhere near the top of their priority list. Eventually, the FBI agreed to do these on a post-visa issuance basis, which helped. As far as I know, none of these fiancées ever had a visa denied or a hit resolved against them.

*Q: Well having served running the consular section in Korea, we came up with Kim or Park or Lee and that took care of about three-fourths of your population.*

PIASCIK: Yeah, exactly. I think it was something similar in China too where you had this limited universe of surnames.

*Q: I'm just wondering why… I mean I don't see any particular relation to 9/11 and to China and Russia.*

PIASCIK: Well, it wasn't additional checks for Chinese and Russians in particular. It was additional scrutiny that was being given to virtually all visa classes. So they got caught up in this.

Another fallout from 9/11 was what kind of namechecks to do on advanced science visa applicants. The concern was that these people could apply what they learned in the U.S. to benefit their own countries in ways that might work to our detriment. We are talking about dual-use technologies. At the direction of the White House, an interagency panel was set up – IPASS, or the Interagency Panel on Advanced Science Studies – to determine what kind of namechecks needed to be performed on this universe of people. I was one of the co-chairs; an attorney from the Department of Justice was the other co-chairs, and the members were from federal law-enforcement and intelligence agencies, as well as representatives from agencies and national institutes with science and education elements.

It was like herding cats. The scientists and educators all wanted to keep a fairly free flow of scientific exchanges and the law-enforcement and intelligence agencies wanted to do additional checks. After a lot of back and forth, we were able to narrow down the class of people concerned to post-doctoral research and work in a number of clearly defined field. We also set up the framework for how the namechecks and clearances would be done. I think everyone was happy.

*Q: Lisa, where did you go next?*

PIASCIK: I went to Warsaw as the consul general. I wanted to go overseas again and I knew Warsaw was at that point a very busy non-immigrant visa post. It was also a regional post for immigrant visa processing. It did all of the Baltics, Belarus and Ukraine so it had quite a significant workload.

*Q: How about the Baltic republics? Were they in there?*

PIASCIK: Yes, we processed their immigrant and diversity lottery visas. We began to transfer responsibility for those visas back to those embassies once they had the staffing and infrastructure to do so. But we continued to do immigrant visas for Belarus and Ukraine.

*Q: How about your language?*

PIASCIK: I studied Polish for 10 months at FSI.

*Q: Polish is a Serbian… The Serbians and Bulgarians considered Czech and Polish, particularly Polish, is considered harder.*

PIASCIK: Polish is a Slavic language. It's complicated and it's hard and there are a lot of grammatical rules but it's a very regular language. If you can grasp the grammar rules, you can predict how to manipulate the language. It's unlike French, which is supposedly easier, but which has exceptions to every rule, sometimes it has multiple exceptions to every rule. This means you have to memorize a lot. I don't mean to say that Polish is easy, but it is very predictable if you understand the grammar.

*Q: Did you, by any chance, pick up any feelings about Poland from your teachers?*

PIASCIK: Most of the language teachers were older and had come out of communist Poland so they had plenty of stories of their experiences as young people and very strong feelings about that era. They were very proud that their country was making a transition to democracy. I arrived just after Poland became a member of the European Union so this was a huge change. Poles could travel freely to other countries and work in other countries in Europe.

*Q: A Polish plumber could go to England.*

PIASCIK: Yes.

*Q: This became an issue later.*

PIASCIK: At one point the Polish ambassador to Ireland, who had been head of the foreign ministry's consular affairs division, told me that a very high percentage of the population of Ireland at this time, 2008-2009, was Polish. I believe he said close to 20%. Certainly, many of the Poles left for the more developed countries in the EU were plumbers or skilled craftsmen and they had good reputations not only for their technical skills but for their productivity and work ethic. And there stories that many Poles went for office jobs and were able to move up into professional positions.

Many of those who went to the United Kingdom would work during the week and then come back home for the weekend to study or visit their families. At this time, low cost airlines made this very easy.

These new opportunities for lawful employment in the EU meant that the U.S. as a work destination was less attractive, and as a result of this and economic growth in Poland, our non-immigrant visa refusal rate began to drop. And the NIV workload began to drop as well. For example, we had a pretty significant summer work and travel (SWT) program workload, under which Polish students could travel to the U.S. and work during their summer vacations. The workload dropped from about 20,000 per year to a fraction of that because it was cheaper for students to work in the EU rather than have to pay the administrative costs of getting into the SWT program, tickets to and from the U.S. and living costs in the U.S.

This was also a time when Poland was fixated on getting into the visa waiver program. We could never quite get below the 10% refusal rate which was the ceiling for admission into the program. The biggest challenge was that the southeastern area of Poland was heavily agricultural and economically depressed, and it was something of a thing for farmers to want to go to the U.S. in the off-season to work.

*Q: What was the situation in Poland when you got there? The political situation?*

PIASCIK: Poles for the most part were pretty hopeful as the country had made a successful transition to a democratic government. It had become a member of the EU and NATO and was very pro-Western. They were hopeful also that the economy would improve. Poland was seen as a very important partner for us, and had been really supportive of the U.S. on a number of foreign policy priorities, including in Iraq. On the other hand, there were significant segments of people who felt bypassed by all the changes that were occurring and were a little nostalgic for the old days. Some people were also socially conservative and felt that the rapid changes were threatening to Polish identity, culture and values.

*Q: Let's talk about the embassy. Who was the ambassador and how did the consular section fit in to the embassy?*

PIASCIK: Victor Ashe was the ambassador. He came to Poland as a political appointee under the Bush Administration in 2004, but stayed for some time after President Obama was elected in 2008. He had been mayor of Knoxville, Tennessee for 16 years. We first me when I was still in language training and he focused right away on the NIV refusal rate, which was about 25% at the time, because he had what a sensitive issue it was. I am not sure he was initially pleased with my response, but we developed a very good relationship and got on quite well.

*Q: Well as chief of the consular section, you are consul general there. Did you run across the problem that the political section and the ambassador or others, you know they had contacts and all and we were turning down their relatives and friends' visas?*

PIASCIK: Of course, it came up. It is just part of the landscape, as it is in a number of questions. It was not really a problem, however. No one in the embassy ever tried to inappropriately pressure me or anyone else in the consular section. They usually just wanted to know what they could tell their contacts. The ambassador was always clear that he wanted to do the right thing, and that usually meant that I would get in touch with the ambassador's contacts to convey information, and they were usually satisfied that the consul general had eyes on the case, even if the answer was no. Of course, we had our referral system as well, and tracked that pretty closely, but we didn't have any abuse of it.

*Q: Tell about the referral system. What was this?*

PIASCIK: Well the referral system establishes procedures whereby embassy officers can recommend visa issuance or an expedited appointment for certain applicants. The applicant would not have to go through normal channels to get an appointment, In both cases, the referring person has to establish it is in the U.S. national interest to do so. For example, the applicant is a prominent person, is an important contact, or perhaps is someone whose travel serves some sort of benefit to us. The point is that people can't get special treatment just because they are friendly with someone in the embassy know someone there.

There were two types of referrals. "A" referrals were for important contacts who were personally known to the referring officer and were specific recommendations for visa issuance. The referring officer had to state why it was in our interests for that person to be issued a visa. "B" referrals weren't recommendations for visa issuance and the referrer did not have to know the applicant. They were just requests for expedited appointments. But the referrer still had to define the interest in doing that. In both "A" and "B" referrals, the referring officer's agency or section head had to sign off as well. And both the referring officers and the bosses would have to undergo briefings before we would accept referrals from them.

*Q: Well, it helped you by screening out people who wanted to take care of their barber.*

PIASCIK: Exactly. You know, it is very hard for people to say no when asked for help, but the referral basis gave them a way to say there was no way to interfere or intervene in the process.

*Q: What about the problems like an American man coming over sort of shopping for brides?*

PIASCIK: Not in Poland.

*Q: How about young ladies going to visit their uncle?*

PIASCIK: There were a lot of people who wanted to visit their relatives, and there was a tendency to work while there. One of the vice consuls termed it "job tourism" and wrote an excellent cable with facts to back it up. These folks would not normally overstay their visas so it could sometimes be challenging to adjudicate their cases. For instance, a young person goes to visit relatives for three or four months every summer. They come back on time so in one sense they've established their bona fides. However, unless that person or their relatives are pretty well off, is it realistic that someone would be able to travel there and just hang out and spend money doing whatever for that period of time? Or were they picking up money working as babysitters, housecleaners or on construction projects.

I mentioned earlier the summer work and travel program. These were J visas – exchange visitor visas whereby students would work at various sorts of jobs at kiosks in national parks or at food places at beaches for a couple of months and then get an additional month to travel around. They usually had to pay a fee to the program sponsors which

covered various administrative costs, so that ate into whatever they managed to earn. Kids who had been on these programs would come back the next year and apply for tourist visas to spend their summer vacations in the U.S. Again, that they had abided by the terms of their exchange visas was strongly in their favor, but few really had the economic wherewithal to convince the consular officer that they could afford to just be a tourist for three to four months.

We also had cases of Polish mothers who want to go for the birth of their grandchild and the vice consuls would want to refuse them because they'd be nannies. We really worked with the officers to think this through: do you really think this woman is going to be paid or replace a U.S. nanny. Isn't it normal for such a person to want to help out their son and daughter for a couple of months? Why do you think this is illegal work? Let's be humane about this.

*Q: Well this brings us to the point that the consul general, you often end up with new officers coming in and they tend to run almost too tight one, or too liberal and they can't say no. And the others, the law says this. How did you deal with treating these officers?*

PIASCIK: Well, I was very lucky because I had fabulous midlevel managers and we all worked closely together to make sure there was continual communication and discussions and strong training. In addition, we had a good mix of vice consuls in that we had a good balance between brand new people and more experienced ones, and the experienced ones were very helpful in helping to mentor their colleagues. We always wanted to develop a consensus so that everything else being equal, everyone had the same general approach. And talking about this was usually successful. I've found this to be the case no matter where I was.

Honestly, two of the biggest issues everywhere revolve around two things: making sure people issue full validity visas as the rule rather than the exception, and discouraging them from requiring documents rather than relying on the interviews. In the case of visa validity, even though general policy is to issue full validity visas, inexperienced officers who are not quite sure about a case often want to issue a limited visa. If you have doubts about a case that are that serious, you should refuse it, because a person can overstay illegally or work illegally on a one-entry, three-month visa. If you think the person is ok, just issue the full validity visa. At some point, that visa is going to expire and they are going to have to reapply, and you will be able to find out one way or another if they did not abide by the terms of the visa. In the case of documents, well, any document you ask for can be provided or manufactured, but it doesn't prove that person's intent. A good interviewer should be able to assess that and the applicant's eligibility by how he or she replies to a couple of relevant questions. If an applicant wants to attend a business conference in the U.S., you can determine if he or she is legitimate by how well they respond to questions about the conference, what they hope to accomplish and so on much better than simply looking at an invitation.

*Q: How did the officers fit within the embassy? Was there much contact between say the political section?*

PIASCIK: Well, we had two rotational positions, so the officers in those positions spent a year in the consular section and one year in the economic section or as the ambassador's staff assistant. In addition, we made opportunities available for officers to do reporting with the political section, to take part in public speaking or public diplomacy events, to help out with VIP visits and so on. However, there was a feeling, especially during the summer when we were really busy, where officers felt that political and economic officers were roaming about the embassy taking long lunches while they were stuck interviewing people all day.

*Q: How did you find the staff? The Polish staff?*

PIASCIK: They were great. They were really good. We had some very senior people who had been around forever and were really good and some of them retired when I was there but they had taken the time to train the people who became their replacements. In fact, we had so much confidence in them that we sent a number of them to help out with the evacuation of American citizens from Lebanon in 2006 when the Israelis invaded the country. We sent both American and local staff to Cyprus and Turkey to assist. They found it very rewarding.

I think it was frustrating for some of the younger local staff whose ability to move forward was going to be blocked by people above them, some of whom were going to be around for a long time. Our staff was very heavily female, and the younger men felt this way in particular. Not to say that the women weren't ambitious, but it general that career advancement seemed to weigh less heavily on them than it did on the men.

*Q: How about American citizens that wanted their aunt or their cousin or something to come over. Did you have problems?*

PIASCIK: We'd always have instances where Americans would be visiting Poland and want to come in and make representations for visas on behalf of their relatives who had been refused. This was in the days before appointments were generally required for Americans, so they would show up in the American services unit (ACS), which was physically separate from the NIV unit, and the ACS staff would have to patiently explain to them why their relatives didn't get their visas. They could be very persistent. There was one case I remember involving a couple from the Krakow consular district. This couple, an older man and woman, had made a number of visits to the U.S., and each time spent considerable time there each year, without overstaying. After a few years, U.S. immigration officers at the port of entry had denied them entry because they thought they were spending so much time in the U.S. that they were really residing there. And I think the couple had told them they were doing odd jobs and working for relatives. The couple made several applications in Krakow almost immediately after and were refused each time. One of these relatives began calling Krakow and then actually came to Krakow. The principal officer and consular chief had met with her and talked to her to explain why her relatives did not qualify for visas.

So then she began calling me and I told her the same story and then she wrote a letter to, to Ambassador Ashe, who said, "I would like to meet this woman" because she had asked for an appointment with him. I said, "Ambassador, don't do it because the relatives are just not qualified for visas. We've given her plenty of time. She's had a chance to tell her story. It is just going to be taking up your time and there is not anything you can really do for her."

"Well, she's an American citizen and she has the right to talk to me." Okay. So we set up the appointment. I attended the meeting and she went through the history from her point of view, that her relatives just liked being with the relatives in the U.S. The ambassador responds briefly, and I filled in the details. She repeats her story, we repeat ours. This goes on and on. Finally, the ambassador politely said, "Ma'am, Ms. Piascik has done her best to explain the situation and why your relatives just aren't eligible for visas. Now, I've spent an hour with you and I never spent an hour with anyone." It was true. Normally his meetings were 15 minutes and that was it. The woman wasn't satisfied but did accept that she had had her time with the ambassador. And the ambassador understood why I had recommended that he not meet with her.

I mentioned immigrant visas earlier. We were also a regional immigrant visa processing post so we processed immigrant visas for our embassies in the three Baltic state, Belarus and Ukraine. The Baltics and Belarus were no particular problem but fraud for diversity visa applicants from Ukraine was rampant. Now this is where a program set up by Congress to favor countries with low historical rates of immigration and applicants entered via a lottery each year. Criminal elements in Ukraine had managed to insert themselves either by submission of applications for the lottery, or through coopting or pressuring the winners to take on fake spouses. We spent a lot of time and resources trying to determine whether marriages were legitimate through interviews and case analysis and worked closely with our embassy in Kyiv to do on the ground investigations. It was a pretty big problem.

*Q: How about protection and welfare? Americans getting into trouble?*

PIASCIK: At that point most of the people coming to Poland were people who had Polish ancestry or family so they were able to integrate fairly well. We had problems with a few really sticky child custody cases where the Polish mother would bring the child back against or without the American father's wishes or knowledge. Poland was a signatory to The Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction so these children should have been returned to their place of habitual residency in the United States so that custody could be decided where the child lived. But the Poles were very reluctant to be seen as ripping a child from the arms of a Polish mother and sending them to the U.S. where she might lose custody of the child. We even had trouble locating the children as the police and judicial authorities would say they couldn't be found and had just disappeared, which we suspected was just not the case.

Other than that, we had no real problematic ACS cases except a very unfortunate murder case that also took up a lot of time.

*Q: What was that?*

PIASCIK: A young American man had come to Poland to be with his girlfriend. He was trying to buy a used car and in the course of that, was murdered in a very brutal manner. I think he just managed to meet through no fault of his own some real bad actors. The Polish police and prosecutors were very cooperative and we worked closely with the young man's father. He came to Poland on several occasions to follow up, and it was just incredibly sad for him, to have lost his only son in such a senseless way.

*Q: What was life like?*

PIASCIK: I loved it. The roads were challenging but it was easy to travel around and the train system was quite good. There are a lot of interesting things to see and Poland is an absolutely lovely country. Mountains in the South, lakes and fields in the Northeast. Castles. Plenty of culture. Easy to travel around. Inexpensive place to live. Americans were well-regarded. Food is good. Beer is great. I really enjoyed it. It was a very nice quality of life.

*Q: Did you get to Ukraine at all?*

PIASCIK: No, I did not.

*Q: And how about Belarus?*

PIASCIK: No. The Belarussians restricted the number of our diplomats there and there may even have been restrictions of travelling there. I don't recall that anyone from the Warsaw embassy ever went there.

*Q: Did you have any presidential visits or anything like that while you were there?*

PIASCIK: Condoleezza Rice, who was Secretary of State, came. Vice President Dick Cheney visited for the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The consulate general in Krakow had the lead, but I went down to fill in for one of the control officers in the advance planning for it. Warsaw did send down a number of officers to assist since the Krakow consulate general was small. What I remember is that we made it very clear to the vice president's office that it would be very cold and perhaps snowy and most of the ceremonies would be outside, so the vice president needed to be dressed properly for the weather. I am not sure exactly what happened but the vice president attended wearing hiking boots or snow boots and a down jacket. The other VIPs, who included heads of state, were all dressed very formally in dress coats. It was a little embarrassing.

*Q: When you left there… But first, was there much cooperation or was there any need for cooperation with your section with some of the other embassies' consular sections? British? French? Germans?*

PIASCIK: Once Poland became a member of EU, Poles didn't need visas to travel to other EU member countries, so after that we dealt with very few EU member countries on visas. Our primary partners were the Canadians. The Canadian embassy was only a couple of blocks from ours, and we had a really good relationship. The Canadians experienced a rather significant scandal when it was discovered that a local employee of very long standing, who had the ability to adjudicate visa applications, had been involved in selling visas along with another family member who also worked in that embassy.

*Q: So you were there from when to when?*

PIASCIK: I was in Poland from the summer of 2004 to the summer of 2007.

*Q: Okay, 2007 whither?*

PIASCIK: Nigeria. I went to Embassy Abuja as the deputy chief of mission (DCM). I had done two consular tours in a row and wanted to do something else so started looking at DCM positions. I had never served in Africa and wanted the opportunity. I bid on the Abuja position but never thought I'd have a serious chance since it was a major embassy and I had neither Africa experience or any contacts in Bureau of African Affairs (AF). However, my previous experience as a DCM in Baku and principal officer in Cebu were helpful. I know Maura Harty, who was the CA assistant secretary, really went to bat for me as well. As was the case when I bid on the Baku assignment, the ambassador was getting reading to leave and a replacement hadn't been announced, so I dealt with the AF Front Office and Executive Bureau.

So I went to Nigeria. I was the chargé d'affaires for my first three or four months.

*Q: Okay, well let's talk about Nigeria. What was the state of Nigeria when you went?*

PIASCIK: Well, Nigeria was the most populous sub-Saharan country and had a significantly played an important role in regional affairs, especially in resolving conflicts. The country had taken a leading role in peace-keeping operations, for example, in Liberia. It was also the seat of ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States. It also was an oil producer; in 2007, it was one of the major suppliers of oil to the United States. Now, the oil wealth helped to generate a lot of economic activity, but corruption was a serious problem and most people saw no benefit from it.

The northern half of the country was largely Muslim. Social economic indicators were particularly bad there. Life expectancy was low, child survival rates were horrible. Nigeria was one of four countries were polio was still endemic. Desertification was forcing semi-nomadic herders into cities and villages which was causing strife with settled populations.

In the south, there was an ongoing insurgency in the Niger Delta area, where the oil facilities were. That area was environmentally devastated, partly because of poor practices by the oil companies and partly because people would tap into the pipelines.

People who had traditionally made their living from agriculture or fishing could no longer do so as the land and waters were in such bad shape.

President Yar'Adua, who had only assumed office a few months before I arrived, was not a healthy man. The presidency tried to keep his failing health under wraps, but it was clear he was just not in a position to take an active role and he spent a lot of time out of the country for medical treatment. As a result, Nigeria's role as a regional leader started to diminish, and anti-corruption efforts more or less fell apart.

The country was set up on a federal system but the individual states have limited fundraising abilities so they're dependent on budget revenues from the central government. Those funds didn't always make their way to local levels efficiently and there was no transparency in what happened to those funds once they did make it to local coffers.

U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) was established during this period and the Nigerians were just really, really concerned that we were going to press them to put AFRICOM headquarters in Nigeria and they did not want American troops in Nigeria at all. So even though there was no plan to put anything in Nigeria, they were really adamant about coming out and saying this was never going to happen.

*Q: Was it anti-Americanism? Was it threatening the military's rice bowl? What was it?*

PIASCIK: Part of it had to do with Nigeria's own colonial history, so there was great sensitivity to having foreign forces which could impinge on its sovereignty

But our military relationship with the Nigerians wasn't always easy. The U.S. military was really anxious to increase military cooperation with Nigeria because of its size and importance, but the Nigerians often held us at arm's length. They were very suspicious of us, and questioned our motives. They were also very sensitive to perceived slights or condescension.

*Q: Well, the Nigerian troops had somewhat of a mixed reputation. They were a little more disciplined but at the same time, corrupt as hell.*

PIASCIK: Exactly.

*Q: What about the embassy there? Who was your ambassador and what was the embassy like?*

PIASCIK: Robin Renee Sanders came in as ambassador in December 2007. She was an Africa hand and had been ambassador in Congo, Brazzaville.

The embassy was located in Abuja. The chancery was new and we had only moved into it a year or so before I arrived. It was nice building but it hadn't been completed. Half of the third floor was absolutely unfinished. The construction firm which had been hired to

build the embassy faced a lot of problems with timely receipt of materials and there were a of lot of delays. To be honest, some of this was not their fault as Lagos Port is notorious not only for how long it can take to get a ship to dock and then unloaded, but then also getting shipments through Nigerian Customs. Cost overruns had led to elimination of the cafeteria, so we had basically set up a small cafeteria in shipping containers. We were also trying to build an annex and a Marine Security Guard House on the compound and that two suffered many delays.

USAID was located in the former chancery. It was horrible. There was a pressing need to relocate them and of course, the plan was to put them in the annex but by the time construction started, USAID had outgrown the space available. The Centers for Disease Control also needed substantial work. Building issues took up a lot of my time as DCM.

We had a consulate general in Lagos, and it was large. Some agencies had chosen to stay in Lagos rather than move to Abuja but as Abuja came into its own as the capital, some of these agencies wanted to establish offices in Abuja and spend time in both places, which was just not realistic. But there was limited room for them in Abuja in any case. I think it was shortsighted on their part to want to stay in Lagos. The consulate general building was old and needed work; the consular section in particular had terrible facilities – the worst I've seen. The public diplomacy section, which was in another location, needed to be moved as it couldn't be properly secured. There were plans to renovate the consulate general building and that started after I left. In addition, U.S. government owned housing was in pretty bad shape. We spent a lot of time getting funding to renovate apartments and the consul general's residence.

You know, Nigeria has always been a hard-to-staff post. As a result, there was a long history of staffing gaps and assignments of people who were not experienced or had the grade of the position they were filling. I was there at a good time however, and we had really experienced section chiefs and deputies in both Abuja and Lagos and it made a difference. The one section where that was not so true perhaps were the management sections. For example, or management counselor was an information management officer and our senior GSO was a civil service excursionist. However, they were really fine officers and did excellent jobs. They were just disadvantaged because they didn't have deep wells of experience they could draw on. It just took them a little longer to research proper courses of action.

Overall, we were really lucky to have the staff that we did. Nigeria was a stressful post, but I did enjoy nearly everyone I worked with in both Abuja and Lagos.

*Q: I would think people involved in consular operations and financial operations would have a problem because the Nigerians have a reputation of being very canny in money manipulation.*

PIASCIK: Oh yes. We did have a very experienced financial management officer and he really worked to get additional people in his office to increase oversight. On the consular side, there were a lot of scams. Nigerians called the most common them 419 scams after a

code of Nigerian law. These were the internet scams where people were contacted by someone claiming to be a Nigerian prince of the widow of a previous president would write, "I have four million dollars in a bank account and I need your help to get it out; but I need you to send money for me to do this, and I will pay you a million dollars for your trouble …"

*Q: I'm still waiting for that.*

PIASCIK: There would be other variations as well "You know your father is traveling and he's had an accident and he's in the hospital and we need $5,000 to pay the hospital bill to release him." You'd be surprised at how many people fell for these things.

We had a big problem with the Nigerian foreign ministry because they'd submit diplomatic notes for "A" visas for just about anyone. Now these are visas for people who are going to the U.S. as diplomats or on official government business. We had to look at them all very closely, and constantly called the foreign ministry out when they sent over bad cases. The foreign minister's daughter had given birth in a hospital in the U.S. We found out she hadn't paid her hospital bill so made her pay before we'd give her another visa. This sort of thing happened quite a bit and these people were rich people. It drove the consular officers crazy. They wanted to refuse these women when they came back it, but they all agreed it was better all-around to have the ladies pay their bills.

The real center of consular operations was in Lagos. The consular chief had left under a cloud before I arrived and the deputy was double hatted. She certainly had her hands full. However, when she left, we were lucky to get a consular chief and a deputy, and having both of those positions filled made a huge difference. They did a fabulous job putting the section in order and making sure rules and regulations were followed, and in eventually working with the smaller consular section in Abuja to make operations consistent countrywide.

*Q: How did you and the ambassador, both being women, relate to the Nigerian government where women…*

PIASCIK: But there's more. The principal officer in Lagos was also a woman – this was Donna Blair. None of us had a problem dealing with the Nigerian country. Nigeria had a number of women serving in high level positions, as ministers with substantive portfolios, so it wasn't unusual. However, we did get a lot of mileage out of the fact that the three most senior positions in our mission were filled by women. There were a couple of press articles to the effect that Nigeria should follow the example set by the U.S. mission in ensuring that more women were given opportunities.

*Q: How did Nigeria deal with its borders within the African context? Did you get involved?*

PIASCIK: Well, the northern border was a concern. On both sides of the border, many people who knew anything about the area called in "ungoverned" region. The Nigerians

really objected to that term. But in reality, government controls were very weak and there was a concern that extremist groups were just moving throughout the desert areas there, conducting training, moving arms and so on. This was in the early days of Boko Haram.

*Q: Explain what Boko Haram is.*

PIASCIK: Boko Haram is a full-blown anti-Western, anti-government, anti-establishment terrorist group. They were responsible for the kidnapping of 200 or girls from a school in Chibok in Northern Nigeria. When I was in Nigeria, they were really just a bothersome group more than anything else, but it was widely recognized that they could easily benefit from contacts with groups like AQIM (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) which were active in Niger and Mauretania.

We did have a program run through the U.S. military called the Trans-Sahel Counter-Terrorism Program (TSCTP). The idea was to conduct training in North Africa and the Sahel countries on counter-terrorism, civil-military relations, as well as information programs and some limited assistance to disadvantaged communities.

*Q: Did the French have a position in that area?*

PIASCIK: Not so much in Nigeria. Nigeria had been a former British colony so the British were more influential.

*Q: Were the Nigerians involved in any peacekeeping operations?*

PIASCIK: They were still in Liberia. We wanted them to send peacekeepers to Sudan, President Yar'Adua was so ill that there just wasn't a lot of bandwidth on their part.

*Q: Well, there was always some kind of local residents in the delta area there where they were tapping oil lines and all that.*

PIASCIK: The Niger Delta is in very bad shape and the area has been devastated not only environmentally but economically. A lot of people in that region were fishermen and farmers and they can no longer support themselves because of pollution from oil spills. People in the Niger Delta saw little if any benefit from oil in terms of development, jobs, funds and so on. This led to unrest that had environmental, economic, political and ethnic dimensions. Eventually, armed groups came into existence, and they didn't hesitate to use violence, ranging from kidnapping and pirating to blowing up pipelines. They were also paid by politicians who used them as security forces to pursue their own political agendas. And they also tapped into pipelines to siphon off the oil and sell it illegally.

The Nigerian government formed a military task force to conduct operations against the militants in 2008-2009, and announced an amnesty program just before I left in the summer of 2009.

*Q: How did you find the oil companies involved?*

PIASCIK: We had a good relationship with the oil companies. There were two main areas where we had a lot of contact. The first was security, since they did have people in the Niger Delta and on offshore oil platforms. The second was on Nigeria's attempt to pass legislation regulating the oil industry.

*Q: Did you have many high-level visits?*

PIASCIK: Not many. When I was chargé d'affaires, Deputy Secretary John Negroponte visited. Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee also visited. Former President Jimmy Carter and Mrs. Carter came in connection with events to commemorate eradication of guinea worm disease. Former President Bill Clinton also visited. He had been invited by a Nigerian businessman to attend a very large dinner – there were also a number of well know Democratic Party operatives there as well. The embassy became involved because he wanted to pay a call on President Yar'Adua, so we helped to set that up and run some interference when the Nigerians balked at letting the Secret Service carry weapons into the Presidential Palace.

President Yar'Adua did visit Washington and met President Obama. By all accounts, he was quote star-struck by the experience.

*Q: How did President Obama, a black president, how was it perceived in Nigeria?*

PIASCIK: Nigerians were really interested in the election and in Barack Obama in particular. There was a story that the name Obama was Nigerian, not Kenyan. We had an election day activity, and had these cardboard cutouts of both Obama and John McCain. Everyone wanted their photo taken with the Obama cutout. Poor John McCain's cutout got very little attention. Nigerians were very happy that an African-American would be president and believed it would be a good thing for Africa.

On the other hand, George Bush was also quite popular for the PEPFAR program.

*Q: He really diverted a lot of aid to Africa.*

PIASCIK: We were spending over a million dollars a day in Nigeria, just on PEPFAR.

*Q: Would you explain what that means?*

PIASCIK: PEPFAR was the president's emergency program for AIDS relief, instituted by President George W. Bush to deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic and it had both treatment and prevention aspects to it. During my time in Nigeria, the focus became on transitioning the program from emergency response to long-term sustainability with greater host country participation. In Nigeria, the HIV/AIDS effort was really one-sided. It was a U.S. effort. Neither the central or local governments could get themselves organized to be a contributing partner, unlike in a couple of other countries. IN addition, Nigerian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) were small and inexperienced and just

did not have the wherewithal to manage anything but relatively small programs. In addition, many Nigerians felt that HIV/AIDS was just less of priority than, for example, malaria, which affected far more people.

*Q: Of course, down in South Africa it was a major problem but how did we succeed? I mean from our perspective, the AIDS problem?*

PIASCIK: Well, hundreds of thousands of people received treatment who otherwise would not have, so yes, we succeeded.

*Q: Did you run across of AIDs naysayers, was that a problem?*

PIASCIK: No. On the other hand, many Nigerians believed malaria to be a bigger problem than HIV/AIDS, so they didn't quite understand why we devoted so much effort on HIV/AIDS. Everyone knew someone suffering from malaria.

*Q: Well, were we doing anything on the malaria front?*

PIASCIK: Nigeria didn't qualify as one of the focus countries for President Bush's malaria initiative. The ambassador made representations, however, and did get funding for malaria programs. Congress increased funding for health programs in 2008, I think, as a result, program funding was significantly increased in the Obama Administration.

*Q: So many, at least it seemed to be, Nigerian con men operating either in the United States or stealing cars and bringing them back. Did we get involved in that sort of crime?*

PIASCIK: It wasn't an issue I recall at all. I believe the concern was that the car trade was being used as a way to launder money going to terrorist organizations.

*Q: How did you find the morale of the Americans in the embassy?*

PIASCIK: It varied. Most people in Abuja were fairly happy. Abuja was a relatively new city, it was quiet. There was a good international school. We had a lot of families and they were pretty happy. The housing was not bad. Lagos, on the other hand, was a big, bustling city. Traffic was terrible, and the crime rate was high. You could go out to the airport only in an armored vehicle and it could take hours. There were a lot of areas that were off-limits. We did have one instance where a criminal gang was able to force its way into the Marine House compound. They managed to force their way through the gate behind the Marines' vehicle. A couple of local guards were shot, one was injured quite seriously, and one of the Marines was shot as well. It was a robbery attempt. From time to time, there would be shoot-outs, and the worry was that people would be in the wrong place at the wrong time. So people got very, very nervous, understandably, when things like that happened. The housing in Lagos varied – the U.S. owned housing was in poor shape, but the leased housing was not bad.

Despite all this, Lagos is a city that never sleeps and there is always something interesting going on, and a lot of people enjoyed it. There was a really good international school there.

*Q: How about travel?*

PIASCIK: It could be done with lots of advance planning. The only real no-go area was the Niger Delta. Our reporting officers were anxious to go there and would complain constantly about the restrictions. In their view, the regional security officer (RSO) just would not allow it. I would push back and say, well, it is the emergency action committee (EAC) that sets the travel policy, so if you think it needs to be adjusted, bring it up an present your case to the EAC. The problem for them was that they were never able to document their arguments for a change. The RSO always came well prepared with statistics about what was happening and so on, and they were just not able to overcome that.

Travel in the north could always be arranged as well. Terrorism was not the issue that it is today. The main thing throughout the country was you had to be prepared for anything – running out of gas, vehicle problems. Those were the main concerns.

*Q: Was Biafra <u>an issue</u> at this time? There had been this Biafran war at all but there was sort of a unique place?*

PIASCIK: No. Most Nigerians are so young, that the Biafran war was just not something that was a sensitive point for them. However, Nigeria is still a very tribal society. People would identify themselves as being Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa, Fulani or whatever.

*Q: So you left there when?*

PIASCIK: I left in the summer of 2009 and I went to Iraq as a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) leader. I was there for a year, from September 2009 until September 2010. I was just outside of the Baqubah, in Diyala province. Baqubah is about 35 miles to the northeast of Baghdad so the province runs from Baghdad to the northeast and the province itself borders the Kurdish autonomous region in the north and Iran to the east. The PRT was on a U.S. Army base – Forward Operating Base Warhorse – and the Army supported us almost entirely. Warhorse had the reputation as being one of the more austere bases in Iraq. It was ok. It had a gym, and a Green Beans, which is the equivalent of Starbucks, and one of our guys jury-rigged satellite connections for us, so we could watch CNN and had a few other stations. So I was happy. The base commander used to say we had the best cafeteria facilities (DFAC) in Iraq, which always made me laugh, because when you are making food for a couple of thousand people, it's not that good. I lost a lot of weight there and near the end was living primarily on bagels, Clif bars and chocolate pudding.

I was very fortunate with the U.S. Army. My predecessor and the brigade commander did not get along very well, and this led to tensions between the PRT and the brigade. But

just before I arrived, a new brigade came in, and the commander, Colonel Dave Funk, and I got on very well. He was really determined to have the reconstruction effort succeed under civilian leadership, and detailed his artillery battalion to support the PRT. This was very unusual and he took a lot of heat from the division leadership. Normally, brigade commanders assigned a couple of officers, usually civil-military officers, to work and liaise with PRTs. But we had an entire battalion, which was several hundred people, and they not only made sure we had the resources to move around the province and visit projects and officials, but we incorporated officers into the PRT itself. Some of the PRT members were very suspicious about this because they thought the military would just take over or at the very least, co-opt us. But these suspicions were not at all justified. If anything, those military people who were with us drank our Kool-Aid, so to speak. It also helped because most of the financial resources we had access was from the Army, so we were able to better coordinate what we were trying to achieve and mitigate the military's tendency to just throw money at a problem to solve it. In addition, the battalion commander, a lieutenant colonel named JP Moore, was able to sell our approach more effectively than we sometimes could to the "land owning" battalion commanders – his colleagues who were running constituent bases out in the province.

*Q: Could you explain, let's take this province as you called it, what was the situation there?*

PIASCIK: Diyala was ethnically very diverse, so it was like a little Iraq in many respects. Because a census hadn't been carried out in so long, we were never quite sure about the exact percentages but the province was largely Sunni with significant Shi'a and Kurdish minorities and a smaller percentage of Turkmen as well. It had the headquarters of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Al-Qaeda had driven many people out of the province and did their best to destroy their villages so they couldn't return. In addition, fighting to dislodge Al-Qaeda destroyed a lot of the infrastructure and economic activity had also resulted in displaced people. Diyala had the highest number of internally displaced people in Iraq aside from Baghdad – over 260,000 left.

The Sunni, Shi'a and Kurds had come to a modus vivendi on political cooperation, with governor being a Sunni, his deputy a Shi'a, and the speaker of the provincial council was Kurdish. It wasn't always pretty, but it did allow the provincial government to operate at a minimal level and probably as best as they could given that most were pretty inexperienced. Provincial governments had almost no ability to raise funds, so they were almost completely dependent on the central government. Because the central government was led by Shi'a, Diyala because of the Al-Qaeda in Iraq issue and because it was just suspicious of Sunnis, had difficulties getting funds released. In addition, the Iraqi military and police forces were largely Shi'a, which created a number of difficulties

The PRT program was moving from reconstruction to building capacity in the areas of governance, public services, rule of law, and economic and business development. We were looking less to build things, although we had a few legacy projects, than to help the provincial and local governments figure out their priorities, work out budgets, and execute them, and also work with the central government. We worked with them to

devise how best to provide for things like basic health care and trash collection and management, which sounds dreary but just try to do without it.

We had two pretty major projects. One was a continuation of a project to re-establish the province's main market. This was in Muqdadiyah, located in the center of the project. At one time, some 1700 merchants were there. But it was destroyed in fighting to liberate the province from Al Qaeda in Iraq in 2006-2007. The PRT had worked with U.S. Forces, USAID, and the provincial and city government to clear out the rubble and re-establish things like streets, lighting, electricity and water. But merchants weren't able to reopen their businesses because they had no access to funds to rehabilitate their shops. The banks just didn't provide credit. The economic specialists on the PRT wanted to establish a loan program for them, but the funding mechanisms did not allow for that. The Army had plenty of money for grants, however, so we came up with a project to provide merchants with up to $5000. They were to use the money for paint, tile work, equipment, and so on but not for inventory. The money was disbursed in two tranches so we could check up to make sure they were spending the money properly. We also worked with the Iraqi Red Crescent to send the grant recipients to business development training. It was a very successful project. That market went from having one merchant operating to over 1500, and it really led to increased economic activity in construction. And the increased economic improved security. CNN International even came and did a feature on it. It was so successful, we began to expand it to two other troubled areas, one in the Kurdish area and one in a Shi'a city. We worked to bring banks into the equation and disburse money through them as a way of getting the banks used to offering customer services and perhaps one day offer credit to small businessmen, and to avoid have to disperse large amounts of cash, which required a lot of resources both in terms of manpower, accounting, and time.

The other large scale project to assist with the re-integration of internally displaced persons who were returning to Diyala as security improved. This was part of a central government program called the Diyala Initiative, which also involved various UN agencies, International Organization for Migration, and the U.S. Government. The PRT became involved when our agricultural experts suggesting organizing village farmers into co-ops so we could provide farming and irrigation equipment and training on more efficient agricultural practices so they could have a way to support themselves. We brought in our governance and public service experts to work with their provincial contacts to help them better organize and to work with these international organizations as well as the central government. And we helped the international organizations whenever they came to visit as they had only local people on the ground.

*Q: Let's say you've got these projects. Did you run them through an embassy or a central committee to figure how where does this fit?*

PIASCIK: It depended on where the funds were coming from. Most funding came from the Army, so we would work with our battalion on proposals and get the brigade commander to sign off, and then work it at the division level for approval. If the funds

were coming from the embassy or USAID, we would submit it through whichever channels they directed for funding.

*Q: Did you see problems in this dual way of allocating money?*

PIASCIK: Not really. We worked really closely with our military counterparts on the local level, and with the embassy and military on a country level, to figure out what priorities would be.

The Army was pretty flush with money. That's not to say they were writing blank checks to us. They certainly looked over what we were proposing very carefully. Because our PRT and brigade were on the same page, we were able to make our cases, and try to head off ideas that we didn't like. For example, U.S. Special Operations people were in our province, and they weren't really under the brigade's command. They had a tendency to try to win hearts and minds by drilling wells in various villages. This made the villages happy but at one point, the central government person who oversaw the province's water resources started complaining that all that drilling was affecting the water table. We were able to get the Special Forces guys to stop doing that and to work with us. Likewise, some of the battalion commanders wanted to help out communities in their areas by restoring school buildings. But it led to a lot of disappointment because villages would have these relatively nice schools but no teachers, no desks and equipment, and no books because no one had thought to consult with the central government person responsible for education. This person was upset because he had his priorities for where he wanted to direct resources and felt the Army was undercutting him. So we were able to put a stop with that and initiate meetings with the education director to better cooperate.

Funds from USAID usually had to fit in with their larger national programs and we were successful with some things and not so successful with other proposals. As I recall, there were always a lot of bureaucratic requirements to fulfill. We found this maddening at times, but when USAID is responsible for multimillion dollar programs, well, you cannot blame them.

Other funding from the embassy was quite small scale and for on-off projects or for elections. The paperwork was quite daunting and we just were not appropriately staffed to handle it. This made the military our first choice because the Army guys would handle all the paperwork.

The embassy did have funding for women's programs. Programs for women were a very popular thing to do, to give women a way to make money. There were a lot of widows and the Iraqi system for compensating them was really slow and not working very well. So giving women a chance to set up a business and earn a living was thought to be a good thing. One project we had involved providing sewing machines and some training. The idea was that they'd be able to make and sell clothing. Well, after a while, the governor told us, "This is not really working because the women cannot compete with cheap commercial clothing, and they are just selling the sewing machines. "

*Q: So what did you do?*

PIASCIK: Well, by that time, we had finished the program, so we agreed not to do that type of program again.

*Q: So you called on local officials. How did these meetings go?*

PIASCIK: We had good relationships with local officials. I saw the governor and provincial council chairman on a weekly basis, and other PRT members were seeing other provincial officials on a regular basis. You know, we were there on one year assignments, so I think they were always bemused by the rotations. There were a couple of people, mainly provincial council members and the chief justice, who saw us as an easy way to get money or things that they couldn't easily get from the central government. The chief justice, for example, always complained that when he was in another province, the PRT there had gotten him air conditioners and he didn't understand why we wouldn't do the same. I was pretty adamant that this was really something he needed to work through his ministry since it was no longer in our writ. Even some of the PRT and military guys just thought it was the price of admission to give people things like air conditioners and computers or desks.
*Q: Did you have trouble with car bombs and that sort of thing?*

PIASCIK: We didn't go off the base without the battalion doing advance work on security conditions. We always travelled in heavily armored vehicles – MRAPS – and wore body armor and helmets as well as lots of heavily armed soldiers. We basically were able to move about the province 5 days a week with no problem.

There were very few times that we couldn't travel, and if we couldn't the usual reason was weather. The Army needed visibility to meet certain standards so that a helicopter could come in and get us if necessary. We had a lot of sandstorms that were just terrible. Everything was orange and you couldn't see a thing.

We did have one really tragic incident where one of our outlying units was going to visit a PRT project and one of the vehicles in the convoy was hit by an EFP – an explosively formed projectile. It penetrated the vehicle and killed a sergeant, an Iraqi interpreter and very badly injured a lieutenant. These were people that we worked with very closely and was a big shock to all of us.

There were a number of incidents where attacks were directed against the Army. These would usually be roadside bombs or direct attacks rather than car bombs. The armored vehicles more often than not protected people, but for sure, soldiers died. And some died because they committed suicide or as a result of accidents. It was very sad to go to the memorial services.

I knew to what extent the Army went to to ensure our safety and had great confidence in them.

Although rockets were directed at our base from time to time, I felt that the embassy in Baghdad was far more targeted than we were. The last couple of times I was there, it seemed that the duck and cover alarm was always going off.

*Q: The surges in your area, were they making a difference?*

PIASCIK: The surge was over by the time I was there. Al Qaeda in Iraq was not really a factor in Diyala Province, although there were certainly elements lying low. But that didn't stop the Iraqi security forces, which were basically Shi'a, from rounding up Sunnis on terrorism charges. Some of these people no doubt were guilty, but we weren't so sure against about the others. Once these people were detained, they ended up in jails and that was it. It was hard for them to gain legal representation and those lawyers who were willing to take them on had difficulty accessing them, among other things. On the other hand, it seemed that Shi'a were never picked up, despite the fact that a number of Shi'a militant groups were quite active.

Rule of law was something we had as a priority. But many in the military and some in the PRT thought it was just a matter of installing computers and software which they thought would help move cases through the justice system. Clearly, however, these cases were not moving because no one was interested in that, not because they had an inefficient system. And the conditions in jails were quite horrible, so one of the things the military and our rule of law guy wanted to do was to build more jails. They tried to tell me that the jail space was insufficient for the province's overall population, but I always pushed back that if we build more jails, they'd just stuff more people in them and they'd be just as horrible as the existing ones. Do we really want our most visible legacy to be a jail? In a way it was. In the early days of the occupation, U.S. Government contractors had built a jail in the province, out in Khan Bani Saad. They hadn't done a good job and the complex had never been completed. Tens of millions had been spent on it, and what was there was falling apart. The U.S. Government had tried to turn it over to the Iraqi Government, but the Iraqis refused to take it because it was in such bad shape. The special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction wrote quite scathing reports about it. We tried to turn it over to the Iraqi Government in 2007.

We were also worried about Iranian influence or presence in the province since it bordered Iran. The Sunnis constantly brought it up with us but could never provide any details about where they were or what they were doing. We knew there was a relationship with Shi'a militant groups but whether anything took place in Diyala was not anything we were able to discover.

*Q: How about relations with the embassy for you?*

PIASCIK: Our primary contact was with the Office of Provincial Affairs (OPA) and we had a pretty good relationship with it. Two of the three desk officers were people who had worked for me in Warsaw, so I knew them well and they were great. Because of our work on re-integrating returned displaced persons, we also had a very good relationship with the people from the Population, Refugees and Migration Office. We didn't deal all

that much with the management people than on travel vouchers because the military provided for so much of our support. Contact with the political, political-military and economic sections was limited to cooperation on election-related programs and clearing reporting cables. With the public diplomacy (PD) people, we had an ok relationship. CNN International came twice and the PD people were very nervous about that. The last second visit was to look at PRT programs and we set up some good visits for them, but the PD people were more concerned that we not say anything about Iran. When the piece was well-received, they couldn't have been happier. We had USAID representatives on our PRT and they made sure we had good relations with USAID in Baghdad.

A fair amount of my time, especially in my last three or four months, was working with the embassy to iron out the future of the PRT after U.S. Forces withdrew. The plan was for five PRTs to remain – they were called the enduring PRTS, and Diyala was one of them. But when the costs of facilities, security, life support and so on were enormous. For Diyala, example, we planned on having a dozen, maybe a few more experts, and hundreds of support people. Robert Ford, who was DCM, said the budget for each of the enduring PRTs was more than that for Algiers, where he had been chief of mission. Eventually, Diyala fell off the enduring PRT program and the embassy was scrambling to find what they called "lily pads" to park a few vehicles for visits by embassy based staff. A small group came from the embassy to explore this with the Iraqi provincial military commander, but he was not at all interested in it. In the end, two of the enduring PRTS became consulates or consulate generals, and the others were just written off.

One of my main issues with the embassy was not anyone's fault, it was just the way things were. We – all the PRTs – had to do quarterly progress reports of all of our programs and these were of interest not only to the embassy but to U.S. Forces. But quarterly evaluations were almost meaningless. You just cannot make judgements whether capacity is growing on a quarterly basis. These are processes that take years. As a result, PRT members felt pressured to always show progress, but it was based on things like having meetings rather than development of capacity. It was very frustrating.

*Q: You were there from when to when?*

PIASCIK: I was there from September 2009 to September 2010.

*Q: When you left, how did you feel?*

PIASCIK: I felt good. Looking back six years later, I don't think much of what we did remains. A number of the Iraqis we worked with have left the country or been killed. But, at the time, I felt good. I was proud of what we had done, and working with the Iraqis, I thought conditions were better. Iraqis for the most part were hopeful about their future. I thought we were on the right track.

*Q: Do you ladies have anything to ask?*

*Q (Intern): I guess we'll start with Iraq because we just finished talking about that. But was there any government pushback on the programs that you were helping to lift up the women from this poverty-stricken state?*

PIASCIK: No, not at all, not at all. We tried to work in concern with the provincial and local governments wherever we could not only because it was the right thing to do but because we hoped it would strengthen their credibility and ability to deliver services. In any case, those programs were pretty small. Provincial and local governments were far more interested in larger programs, usually with an infrastructure angle. Some saw it as a way to benefit either personally or for the community in one way or another.

*Q (Intern): Pretty wonderful. Switching countries but the same topic. For Nigeria, did you establish any of these programs for women, slightly different?*

PIASCIK: Not in terms of income generation. However, some of the health programs focused on women's health and women's access to health services. We did have programs focusing on girls' education, especially in Northern Nigeria. Not only working to get girls into schools, which often meant making sure families allowed them to do so, but making sure the schools had toilet facilities. Believe it or not, one of the biggest obstacles to girls attending school was lack of toilets.
*Q (Intern): It makes sense.*

PIASCIK: It made total sense.

*Q (Intern): Still on Nigeria. You had mentioned diseases like polio and what not were still present. If you or anyone else at the embassy got sick, did you stay in Nigeria because I know in Mauritania they would just fly you out?*

PIASCIK: Generally people were medevaced if they got sick or had a condition that couldn't be treated locally. Luckily, no one became desperately sick from illness when I as there. About six months after I left, someone at the embassy in Abuja died from malaria. I think it was cerebral malaria. Malaria was actually one of our biggest concerns, MED recommended that everyone take malaria prophylaxis, but there were a few people who were concerned by the long term implications of being on malaria meds for a couple of years, especially for their kids. We regularly put out notices and talked about the importance of taking malaria meds, but there were a few who chose not to. I'm surprised we didn't have more people get sick. You really have to take care of yourself in places like that.

*Q (Intern): Absolutely. So with Nigeria I'm sure as in many different African countries religion was very important to people in Nigeria. Like Poland is Catholicism. It's so present there and I was just wondering if in Nigeria you felt about with the people that you interacted with?*

PIASCIK: Religion is a big deal in Nigeria. About half the population is Christian and half is Muslim, and the north is mostly Muslim and the south is mostly Christian. For the

Christians, going to church and church activities are important elements of social life. There was some inter-religious conflict that often had nothing to do with religion but were about access to land and services. This happened in the town of Jos, a couple of hours to the north of Abuja.

*Q (Intern): Did you find that a lot of the tribal religions also influenced more mainstream?*

PIASCIK: Yes, traditional beliefs were incorporated one way or another in religious practice or influenced daily life. I think this was more of an issue with Christians than with Muslims. For instance, some tribal groups practiced polygamy. There always seemed to be news stories about children being expelled from families or villages in the southeast because they were thought to be witches.

*Q (Intern): It's fascinating.*

PIASCIK: Yeah, it is.

*Q (Intern): Absolutely. I guess my final question, there are so many but you ended up answering almost all my questions, so we haven't asked any of them. In Poland, did you have the opportunity to go to 24-hour pro-V café?*

PIASCIK: No, I did not.

*Q (Intern): But that's all my questions.*

*Q (Intern Two): Well, I guess I'll start with Iraq. Did you find that when you fund these projects they were kind of upsetting the economic balance when you were building these wells? Were there any programs that were geared more towards training the locals to kind of build their own wells so that it had more of their decision-making?*

PIASCIK: That's a good question. I don't want to get into the history of the reconstruction effort in Iraq because that has been documented pretty extensively. What I can say it that from my point of view, the Iraqis tended to come to us because it was too hard to get funding from their own central government, or because it was too much of an effort. It was easier to get funding from us. We were really moving away from reconstruction – from building them things or giving them things – and moving toward capacity building. We did a lot of work with the provincial government and with the local governments to get them together to decide – together – what are your priorities? What do you need? How are you going get buy-in from communities and explain your decisions? How are you going to make your case for funding to the central government? How are you going to draw up your budget, and then allocate it, and then check to make sure projects are done properly, on budget and on time? What are you going to do if you don't get what you ask for?

*Q (Intern Two): Now skipping to Nigeria, you mentioned they had some, there was of a seed of colonialism that kind of steered them away from a lot of intervention…*

PIASCIK: Yeah, they didn't want American boots on the ground.

*Q (Intern Two): Did you find that… You know I've read somewhere that one of the ways that British had maintained power over these colonies was that they would divide tribes and use ethnic fractionalization. Did you find there was still that kind of legacy there that maybe made it difficult to work with the local governments?*

PIASCIK: Like so many colonial states, Nigeria was formed to meet the needs of the colonial power – the British – rather than to reflect ethnic or any other kind of reality. So there was a largely Muslim south, a largely Yoruba east and an largely Igbo west. The British ruled indirectly, either through emirs or sultans in the north, or tribal leaders in the south. These people were of course traditional leaders. They also appointed non-traditional leaders who were often not accepted by the local people which led to force. Since Nigeria gained its independence, it has had to figure out how to build a real nation where these differing groups equally share power and access to services. Too often, hey compete.

Nigeria trades off its presidency between northern Muslims and southerners. President Yar'Adua was Muslim from the North. His vice president, Goodluck Jonathan. When Yar'Adua was dying, there was a lot of angst because the North felt it would be cheated out of a full term of holding the presidency. In addition, when a new president assumes office, his government has to have representatives from all 36 states in the cabinet. It is a balancing act for the president to divvy up these seats in a way that everyone is satisfied with what they are getting. It looks very messy and causes a lot of trouble, but this is their way of dealing with that colonial legacy.

*Q (Intern Two): Okay, well, I had to write a paper on it so just like the colonial legacy and how that affected economic development so I found it very interesting to see how that played up and let the political aspects. And then my last question has to do with Poland. I had visited there in summer 2014 and I noticed that Krakow was a very kind of cosmopolitan area. A lot of young people there from all over the world but it still had its cultural roots. Did you find that, when you were in Poland, that it had that youth and hope for the future and that trend towards modernization?*

PIASCIK: Oh yes. Poland's economy generally was doing well, and for the young, educated and ambitious, there were opportunities for advancement, either there or in other EU countries. On the other hand, there were others – farmers, miners, older people in rural areas – who felt they were being left behind. It was frequently described as the "Polska A/Polska B" phenomenon.

*Q: Today is the 11th of October, 2016 with Lisa Piascik and we left off talking about your time on the PRT in What did you personally do? What was your day like?*

PIASCIK: The PRT consisted of a few foreign service officers, a civil service employees from USAID and the Department of Justice, and contractors from State and Agriculture who were subject matter experts in governance, infrastructure and service delivery, economic development and agriculture. Some people, for example, had been city or county managers. While some of the contractors had been Iraq for several years, they usually did not have an understanding of development principals or experience living and working overseas, or even a lot of experience working for the federal government. We were supported by some Iraqis we hired locally and by American contractors known as bicultural bilateral advisors or BBAs. Most BBAs were of Arab origin, and their job was to serve as a bridge with our Iraqi contacts. The BBAs and local hire Iraqis did everything from interpreting to advising us on cultural issues and communication and figuring out what our contacts really meant in the local context. Some of them had particular expertise, such as engineering or a law background. We also had attached to us a military support element which was made of reservists who had a civil-military background, and whose job was to provide administrative and other types of support. The military guys were allowed one trip back home during their one year tour, and the rest of us got three rest and relaxation trips of about three weeks each or five shorter regional trips. So the PRT was a complex organization, and my job as the team leader was to make sure everyone was cooperating, coordinating, that our work proceeded and progressed in accordance with our country-wide and provincial goals, and that people were held accountable for their work.

I also served as the senior USG civilian in the province, so spent a lot of time on representational types of activities both with our brigade, the division which oversaw military activities in the northern part of Iraq, and with provincial and local leaders. This meant explaining what our purpose was, and working out common activities with both groups. And pushing for course corrections when required.

*Q: Well now where did your foreign service experience help you and where didn't it help?*

PIASCIK: It was very challenging. My Middle Eastern experience was helpful because I did understand Arab culture and this helped with the Iraqis. My Arabic was pretty rusty, and while I always used interpreters, it was good enough to catch when the interpreters were either not translating exactly what I said, or what our interlocutors said. In some cases, the interpreters tried to shade things so they would be cast in what they thought was the best possible light. In others, well, they had no formal training, and may not really have understood some of the details of what was being discussed.

Living in a variety of countries with different cultures helped me to be flexible. That was really helpful in dealing with U.S. Forces. The military really does have its unique culture and you just have to try to understand it. The PRT was located on a military base, we needed to adapt to their way of doing things, including their work rhythms, their briefing formats, their orientation towards action. Many people on my PRT felt that since we were supposed to be leading the reconstruction effort, the military had to do things our way.

This was just not going to happen, so I spent a lot of time working with our people to get them to understand how to accomplishing our goals by leveraging military assets.

Finally, I had a lot of leadership and management experience, and this helped me project myself as authoritative with the military and within the PRT itself. You really need to be able to know when to be forceful, how to pick my battles, and also how to position people to work together cooperatively.

*Q: So did you, on these teams, have local representation? In other words, an idea would come up and somebody who lived there could give you a feel of how it would be acceptable or not acceptable.*

PIASCIK: Yes, we had some local hires on our economic/agriculture unit and on most of our outlying PRTs. In the latter case, the outlying PRT was an American and a local hire, although on one there was only a BBA. There were BBAs in all the units on the main PRT except econ/ag. We did look to both the local hires and the BBAs for help on figuring out what was acceptable and what would not be. To be honest, some were better than others. We had a BBA on our governance team who was Iraqi – Ali – he was really helpful on our reporting efforts, because in addition to reconstruction, we also did political and economic reporting. I had weekly meetings with the governor and if there were not projects on the agenda, I would take the reporting officer, Ali, and my interpreter. Afterwards, the reporting officer, Ali and I always met to go what had happened and he was really good about putting things in context and giving us insight and background on what was going on, on relationships and so on.

Many people saw the PRT as a way to make money. So if we had a project, it would be bid out, and we would work with the provincial government and council to ensure our procedures were in alignment with Iraqi law. Some of our people said the law was pretty good, but the devil is in the details, and our local hires and BBAs in letting us know, for example, that a certain contractor was the brother of one of the council members who was on the evaluation committee meeting. Or that so-and-so was providing kickbacks to a particular person. People were very entrepreneurial. perfect contractor. And it was usually a friend or a relative so we really had to be careful about that.

*Q: When you're dealing with such an entrepreneurial culture and as in any country, there's deals within deals within deals.*

PIASCIK: Exactly.

*Q: Well this is one of the things that in talking to people about our involvement in Iraq was in a way the military had too much money. I mean there was a problem when there was something that money doesn't solve almost.*

PIASCIK: It all goes back to the counterinsurgency doctrine of "money as a weapons system" in which money is used as part of pacification efforts, which includes not only compensation for war damage but buying cooperation and perhaps winning hearts and

minds. There was also the story that officers on the ground had to spend money on the ground to get a decent evaluation and have a better chance of promotion. A lot of civilians swore this was the case, but no military person I talked to ever confirmed this, so who knows. But they were all aware of the doctrine. By the time I was in Iraq, there had been some bad press on funds being wasted, or skimmed off. Money was available for projects, but the commanders on the ground had to get approval from the brigade commander and then from the division. So there weren't any instances of people thinking, "I'm just going to give money so this school can be fixed up."

At one conference for the PRTs and brigades organized by the northern division, the commanding general of the division at one point said, "We have plenty of money, don't think that the money is drying up, so spend, spend, spend." The brigade commanders really pushed back and said, "No, we can't just spend, spend, spend; it's got to be done in a logical manner that produces results." I was so happy to hear this; the colonels got it!

Sometimes the generals didn't. One of the division deputy commanding generals, who was a brigadier general, during one of our weekly meetings, said that Camp Speicher, which was the division headquarters and a huge base in Salahuddin Province, which just to the east of Diyala, was taking rocket hits from a village in Diyala Province. So he had met with the mayor of this village in an attempt to enlist him to pressure whoever was firing these rockets to stop. And the mayor said that he really wanted the Americans to rebuild a school in the village. The general really wanted to do this because he thought it would establish good will and perhaps ensure the safety of American soldiers. I had to explain to him that I was all for that, but that the mayor needed to have a talk with the provincial director general of education to make sure he would supply teachers, desks, chairs, ongoing electricity and so on. Because if he didn't, then that school would not reopen, the mayor would be unhappy, and would make it our problem to work things out. I am pretty sure that the mayor had tried to talk to the director general and had been told that rebuilding the school in that village was ow on the priority list. So some of the more senior officers had a tendency to want to make friends through money.

This same general, and he was a nice guy and got along well, wanted to build a bridge in response to a request by the mayor of a fairly major town. The idea was that it would help commerce by relieving pressure on the road system. This was a really expensive proposal – I think it was a million dollars or so. The Army worked with the mayor and the director general for roads and proposals were written up and passed around. Things were moving along. Well, I raised it with the governor, who was from that town, and he had some serious objections to the entire project. I don't remember why, but they seemed legitimate. I never did find out why we had not run this through the provincial government. It was just another example of good intentions really tripping us up.

*Q: Let's take the Kurds. How did they fit in to the work you were doing?*

PIASCIK: The northern areas of the province were historically primarily Kurdish but had been Arabized under the Saddam Hussein regime. After the fall of the regime, the area was retaken by the Kurds, and then once again by the Iraqis. So there was always a lot of

tension in the area with lots of jockeying for position. The U.S, military had worked out an agreement with Iraqi and Kurdish security forces to conduct joint patrols in these disputed areas, which included areas in other provinces, to deal with some of these problems. But a lot of Kurds still complained of Arab transgressions of one kind or another, and it was pretty tense. We were beginning to replicate out market rebuilding activities in Jalawla, which was one of the larger, and more problematic towns. The idea was that increased economic activity would bring security and help to mitigate some of the tensions. But the Kurds pretty much wanted to be part of the Kurdish autonomous area.

*Q: How about the Sunnis and Shia's? How were they getting along?*

PIASCIK: Politically, they got along ok, and made accommodations for each other. But on the level of everyday life, they were growing further apart. A lot of it was just driven by fear and distrust. I mentioned earlier that there had been many, many people who were displaced during the fighting with Al-Qaeda in Iraq and even before when Al-Qaeda had moved into the province and wanted to establish a caliphate. A lot of Sunnis had been displaced, and villages which had been depopulated and destroyed. As security improved after Al-Qaeda was vanquished, people began to return. The Iraqi government and international community were focused on helping them reintegrate, and many Shi'a felt this was really an effort to tip the balance of the province in favor of the Sunnis.

In addition, as we discussed earlier, the Iraqi military and police forces in Diyala were mostly Shi'a. It seemed Sunnis were constantly being picked up on terrorism charges. Some of these people were quite prominent, such as a female national legislator and a top political leader. Who knows whether the charges were true or not, because they rarely were processed through the judicial system. On the other hand, Shi'a were hardly ever picked up on terrorism charges, despite the fact that various Shi'a militia were active in areas of the province.

Another sore point was the Sons of Iraq. These were Sunnis who had organized and fought to defeat Al-Qaeda in Iraq and for the most part were paid by American forces. The plan was that they would be integrated into Iraqi military and police forces, or given government jobs. But that never happened, so there were a lot of unhappy people because of that.

*Q: Were you there the whole time when we had American troops there?*

PIASCIK: Yes. For most of the time I was in Iraq, the brigade we worked with operated province-wide. They left in July 2010, and the incoming brigade operated in both Diyala and Salahuddin provinces. This was in preparation for the eventual withdrawal of U.S. Forces, but their resources were stretched pretty thin. In August or September, the U.S. military mission changed from a combat mission to and advise and assist mission. Practically speaking, however, I do not think much changed about the way the military operated.

*Q: You mentioned you're in one province and rockets are coming from another province. Talk about the security situation.*

PIASCIK: Well, we were on a military base and the base had been a previous civilian airfield so it was pretty stark. Every now and then, there would be rockets fired at the base, and an alarm would go off. Once, when I came back from leave, I discovered a bullet had come through the roof of my containerized housing unit and broken the sink in my little bathroom. But all in all, it was pretty calm. We just couldn't go off base wherever we wanted. The military had to do its due diligence in checking out what the threats were for any movement that we made, and they were great in making sure we could get out and about for meetings or to visit projects. We moved in MRAPs – heavily armored vehicles, and we wore helmets and body army, and were surrounded by soldiers with arms. I had great faith in everything the Army did to ensure our protection. That said, security was something I thought about all the time.

Now there were attacks against U.S. forces throughout the province. There was an incident where a PRT movement to visit a project came under attack. Two people were killed and one seriously wounded. They were military people and an Iraqi interpreter. I don't think the attack was directed against the PRT; I think it was just a target of opportunity against U.S. forces.

I went to Baghdad a couple of times just before I left, and it seemed that the embassy came under rocket fire far more often than we did in Diyala.

*Q: Did you have much problem with the Iranians?*

PIASCIK: In Diyala, the Sunnis would always complain about nefarious Iranian activity but could never provide details about exactly what it was or where it was. For sure, there were contacts between Shi'a militia and the Iranians, but it was never anything we saw. People in the province also claimed that importation of cheap Iranian vegetables and goods undercut agricultural efforts. Iranian tourists transited the province on buses to get to Shi'a religious sites elsewhere in the country.
In general, the U.S. was worried about Iranian influence in Iraq generally and more specifically on the Iraqi Government, as well of course as Iranian activities either direct or indirect against U.S. forces.

*Q: Were there Al-Qaeda cells that were operating there?*

PIASCIK: Al-Qaeda in Iraq had been greatly weakened, but there were still remnants as well as affiliated groups which were active. During the time I was there, the Shi'a groups posed more of a threat.

*Q: Did you see any reconciliation going on between these two groups?*

PIASCIK: Not really, no, no.

*Q: I mean was this strictly a faith difference or was there anything else going on between the two?*

PIASCIK: Sunni-Shi'a conflict goes back centuries and comprises not only differences over faith but over access to resources, political and economic power, and social position,

*Q: How did you feel towards, on your side, the Americans, Baghdad's control over you?*

PIASCIK: I felt the embassy was supportive when we had something we wanted to do and could lay it out in a logical way. There were only a few times I felt as if we were being micromanaged, but I never felt it was personal. It was driven more by circumstances than anything else. Most people in Iraq were there on one year assignments so the turnover was very high.

*Q: Well one of the problems being the short-term… I know I was a consul general in Saigon at one time and being in on something dealing with third-country nationals and I realized I had been there something maybe eight months or so and I really looked around and I had historical perspective on the situation where everybody else was short-term.*

PIASCIK: Right. We had some contractors who were there for longer than a year so they had some historical memory. But some of those people really shouldn't have been there in the first place. In addition, we all spent close to three months outside the country on leave. Staffing was always thin to begin with, so we very rarely had everyone present at the same time, It was a problem for continuity.
*Q: How did you use your leave time?*

PIASCIK: I came back to the United States actually each time on my three R&Rs. Well mainly because my mother very kindly took on my cats and one of them was quite ill so I really felt obliged come back.

*Q: How would you describe the situation in your province when you left?*

PIASCIK: I was hopeful. Security seemed to be improving. The provincial government was making some progress on things like planning, budgeting and budget execution. The local governments were more of an issue – leaders on that level were all appointed several years earlier and efforts to conduct local elections had stalled for a variety of reasons. Our market renovation project was successful and expanding.

*Q: How did you feel about the people on your team? Were these people really qualified?*

PIASCIK: We had some really terrific people. Our economic and agriculture people were excellent, especially those in place when I first arrived. Unfortunately, two of them left (one was poached from us by USAID) and their replacements weren't very good. We had a couple of people on our governance team who were also very good. But there were

other people who were terrible. I have no idea how they got hired in the first place, but they seemed to be in just for the money. Getting rid of them was hard.

The first military support element that was attached to the PRT was also excellent, and they did a lot to foster a sense of community and teamwork. They also worked hard to set us up for success with U.S, Forces. And they undertook a much-needed renovation project of our facilities, which were either containerized housing units or plywood office units. For our offices, for instances, they put linoleum on our floors so we wouldn't have dust billowing up from the gaps in the floorboards, and they replaced all our conference chairs, every one of which was broken, and brought in a cleaning crew on a weekly basis. Those things made all the difference.

*Q: In 2010 what?*

PIASCIK: In 2010 I left. Before I went to Iraq, I had gotten a handshake on the consul general position in Paris as my onward assignment. At some point, we all realized that the position was language designated for French, and my French language scores were decades old, so I went to FSI for six months. I probably could have met the requirements after three months but I elected to stay the entire six months. I'm very glad that I did because it really helped solidify my language skills.

So I went out to Paris in May of 2011 and served there for three years.

*Q: Did you take your cat?*

PIASCIK: I took two cats with me. They both passed away in Paris and I came back with a French cat.

*Q: All right, let's talk about Paris. What was sort of the situation when you arrived there in 2011.*

PIASCIK: By 2011, we had pretty much gotten over the bad patch that came about as a result of the Iraq war. France was seen one of our best partners and we shared common interests and values. We didn't always share the same views on how to achieve our goals, but we had a really good working relationship with the French on almost every level.

*Q: Let's talk about the consular work there? How did you find the consular section when you arrived and then what were you up to?*

PIASCIK: Paris was a full-service consular section with non-immigrant, immigrant and American citizen services. The consulate general in Marseille performed American citizen services and had a dedicated consular staff, although the consular officer was also the management officer for the post. The consulate general in Strasbourg offered limited American citizen services; it accepted passport and report of birth applications and carried out notarial services and emergency consular services We also had four American presence posts (APPs), in Rennes, Toulouse, Lyon, and Bordeaux. These were tiny posts

with one officer and two to three local employees. They offered the same types of consular services that Strasbourg did. These APPs were the first anywhere and had been grandfathered to officer those routine consular services. Finally, there was a consular agency in Nice that reported to Marseille.

As far as the workload was concerned, Paris was a medium-sized non-immigrant visa post, which processed some 60,000 non-immigrant visas per year. France was in the Visa Waiver Program, so French nationals who wanted to visit the United States for tourism or business for 90 days of less did not need a visa. So those who needed visas were going to stay longer than 90 days or needed visas to work, study or invest We had a very large pool of applicants from North and West Africans who were living in France. We also saw a lot of Chinese applicants, mainly students who wanted to go to the United States during summer vacation. The visa work was pretty straightforward, but there were a cases that needed special handling of one sort or another. This ranged from French performing artists whose applications got stuck in the clearance procedure to Syrian opposition figures who needed to travel to the U.S. Our embassy in the Central African Republic didn't process visas, so we used to see a fair number of applicants wanting or needing diplomatic visas.

We had a small immigrant visa (IV) workload. We only processed 1200-1500 applicants a year. When I was there we took over IV processing for Portugal. CA decided to cease offering immigrant visas in Lisbon because the workload was so small it just wasn't efficient to do them there. The original plan was to move IV processing in Portugal to Spain, but I understand the Portuguese objected to this for political reasons rooted in history. I never really understood why. Anyway, CA saw that we had the capacity to take on the workload.

*Q: You mean that a person from Portugal had to go all the way up to Paris?*

PIASCIK: Yes, yes.

*Q: Oh my God.*

PIASCIK: Not very convenient for them. We did send our IV officer and a local employee to Lisbon once a year to interview anyone who couldn't come to Paris.

Now, our real bread and butter was American citizens services. France is a very popular tourist destination, and Paris is one of the most visited cities in the world, with more than 1.5 million American visitors each year. Most people had perfectly lovely experiences and left. But there were also those who encountered problems: they were pickpocketed, ran out of money, they fell ill or went off their medications or died, some had run-ins with law enforcement. There was also a large resident American community and again, while most of them lived their lives with no problems, there were others who had problems, For instance, child custody or child abduction, runaways, abuse, deaths, estate issues, trials and court cases. Something happened every single day.

*Q: Do you remember any stories from while you were there?*

PIASCIK: Well, we had family living in Brittany – they had been there for quite some time and were out of status. In other words, they were living there illegally. There was the mother, her husband, who was quite a bit older than the mother and in poor health, and their two children. The older was 16 or 17 and the younger about 10, I think. The mother's father was also there as well. The mother had a history of mental illness, and at one point, the children had been removed from her care and put in foster care. Her father claimed that he was being held against his will by her. And at some point several years earlier, the woman's husband had applied for and received a passport in the woman's husband's name. I don't remember how it was discovered, but we referred it to the regional security officer for investigation and follow-up. However, the husband died, and then the father also passed away after he returned to the U.S. We kept trying to convince the woman to return to the U.S., but she didn't want to. She managed to subsist on French social welfare subsidies, which is pretty crazy considering she was there illegally. She started acting erratically again, and the kids were placed in foster care. The older child, a girl, ran away and reunited with her mother. The mother also tried to remove the younger child, a boy, from foster care. It was a real mess. The boy was very unhappy and just wanted to be with his mom and sister. He received very good care from the foster family and French child welfare services, but we had to send an officer out to check on him. The mother and sister did return to the U.S. We eventually got the French to agree to return the boy and we worked with CA and the child welfare services in Vermont, I think it was. And the fun and games did not end there; we heard that the mother tried to abduct the boy back in the U.S. This was just a very complex case requiring a lot of time.

We also had a case in which a teenage girl who was attending boarding school. Her parents were assigned to a military base in Germany. She attended the school during the week and went home on the weekends. Well, one Friday she did not show up at home. It turned out that she ran away with some guy she met on the internet. It wasn't so much a consular case and the primary actors were the management section and our FBI representatives, but we worked very closely with them. The girl was eventually found and we worked out an agreement that she would be returned to her parents in Germany rather than enter the French social services system as a runaway.

There was also another complicated case in which an American citizen killed his doctor in a very brutal manner. This happened in the U.S. He had fled the U.S. and gone to Guadeloupe, which is a French overseas territory, and claimed he was also a French citizen. This turned out to be true. France wouldn't extradite him, but he was tried and convicted and sentenced to prison. He was able to cite some provision in French law for a retrial, so he was brought to Paris for that and this is where we got involved. The family of the doctor was really concerned that he would be let off the hook, and they were in constant contact with us. There was also congressional interest in the case. It put us in a delicate position since the perpetrator was also a U.S. citizen. We reached out to him but he didn't want anything to do with us. We did work with the French prosecutor to get them to cover the family's expenses to come for the trial, and we sent an officer and local

staff member to attend the trial itself. He was found guilty once more and received an even long sentence.

We would had contact with celebrities. The actress Hilary Swank a came in because she'd been robbed in a limo on her way in from the airport. Her bag and her passport were stolen and she needed a new passport. She was perfectly charming, called us herself, came in by herself.

*Q: My wife was pickpocketed in Paris.*

PIASCIK: Not a day went by when we didn't have people come in or call us because they'd been pickpocketed.

We had one really unfortunate case. CA had sent us instructions to have a hearing for an American woman on the grounds that she was not entitled to American citizenship. She had come to the United States as a child with her mother. She had been naturalized as a teenager at the same time as her mother. She had lived her life and moved to Paris to study law. So the point of the hearing would be basically to remove her passport on the grounds that she was not an American citizen. What had happened was that someone had made an administrative mistake when processing her naturalization. She was a a few months older than 18, and shouldn't have been naturalized through her mother in the first place. She should have qualified on her own rather than via her mother. No one really noticed this mistake until years later when she applied for a certificate of naturalization from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at the Department of Homeland Security. They had noticed the mistake and referred it back to CA.

It wasn't the fault of the woman at all. We were very concerned because if her passport was removed, she would be stateless. She had lost whatever her original nationality was when she naturalized as a U.S. citizen. We talked to the consular people at that embassy and they just couldn't get their minds around the circumstances, so it would have put her in a bad situation. We all felt very strongly that this was wrong on so many levels, not to mention the optics. We went back to CA and asked if there was any way to delay or to have her go back to the U.S. to deal with this. CA wasn't very helpful. So we reached out to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services office in Rome, and the agent in charge there was not only sympathetic but helpful. We agreed that we could arrange for her to re-enter the U.S. as a returning resident, not as a citizen but as a permanent resident, and that she could make an application for expeditious naturalization. This is what happened. Unfortunately, she had been out of the U.S. long enough that she couldn't meet the physical presence in the U.S. requirement. I mean, she had enough time in the U.S. but it wasn't in the period immediately before her application. In effect she would have to have five years in the U.S. to meet those requirements. She was not very happy, and I understand that. To live so many years as a U.S. citizen, and then be told you are not? We really did the very best we could for her.

*Q: Yeah. We get into these things. Did you have much problems with North African people in France?*

PIASCIK: Not really. There were many North Africans who were resident in France. Those who had long term residency, those whose had the right to a ten year period of residency, we didn't worry about too much. We looked more closely at those who only had one year residency visas.

*Q: What about terrorism? Association of screening people for terrorism?*

PIASCIK: Well, visa applicants went through namechecks as part of the application process. We had people who came up as terrorism or security hits or near hits. Most people were cleared and we could issue. There were others which we denied and yet others just got hung up somewhere in the system. We never really got the background on these cases and had little visibility on them.

We did have one interesting case. He was a French national of Lebanese origin and had an American car dealership in France. He'd been to the United States before and then his name came up as a terrorism hit. One of the consular officers took an interest in this case and learned that the original hit had been entered by the FBI. He worked with our FBI guys and our regional affairs people and both offices indicated that there was nothing on the guy. It just looked like some case that someone forgot to remove from the namecheck database. This officer worked for over a year and a half with CA to get a one entry visa for this man to consult with the American car company. The guy went to the U.S. and returned, and then about a year later wanted to go back. So we had to go through the same process once again because his name was still showing up in the database.

As interesting as these case were, I did not spend a lot of time on individual cases. Much of my time was spent on getting France to meet requirements of the Visa Waiver Program that had been drawn up well after the program began. These additional requirements applied to all current and prospective members. One was to certify via a diplomatic note that all lost and stolen passports were be reported within a certain time period to Interpol, which would make sure they were in these widely-available databases. The second was to conclude an agreement to share information on people who committed serious crimes. We called it the preventing and combatting serious crime (PCSC) agreement. The third was to conclude an agreement to share information on known and suspected terrorists. We referred to it as an HSPD-6 agreement, for the homeland security presidential directive which defined what it would be.

Talks had dragged on for years with the French and other Visa Waiver Program countries. The Paris consul general had generally been responsible for overseeing embassy efforts to coax the French to meet these requirements, and I took this on when I arrived. The Departments of Justice and Homeland Security took the lead on negotiating he texts of the PCSC and the HSPD-6 with the French Ministry of Interior, and I worked closely with all these parties, as well as the Department of State and the Department of Justice attaché who was in Paris. A lawyer with the French presidency or prime ministry also became involved in those talks as well. I worked directly with the French interior ministry on the Interpol diplomatic note.

The French eventually were compliant on all three requirements, but it took a lot of pushing and pulling. The diplomatic note for reporting lost and stolen passports to Interpol was the easiest. This had languished for quite some time. In France, as in many European countries, passports are not issued centrally or in a couple of places but by the prefectures in the different provinces, all under the guidance of the Ministry of Interior. They really had a lot of work to do to institute accountability procedures and programs for ensuring that lost/stolen passports could be timely reported, and they were unwilling to give us a diplomatic note saying that they would do so until they actually could. They eventually did so and gave us the diplomatic note. CA periodically checked to make sure they were reporting, and everything checked out.

The PCSC negotiations began in 2009 puttered along over the next couple of years. By the time I arrived, there were essentially only a couple of issues that were unresolved. One was how our countries defined "serious crime". For the U.S., it was basically any crime for which the penalty was one year in prison. For France, it was anything over three years in prison. Bridging that gap took a long time.

Another sticking point was that if the French shared information on someone who had committed a serious crime with us, we wanted to be able to use that information in a variety of ways whereas the French were quite adamant that we could only use that information for the purpose for which France turned it over to us for. For example, if they shared information on someone who had robbed bank, then we couldn't use that information in a murder investigation on the same person without first getting permission from the French. Both sides really stuck to their guns on this point. The U.S. side was convinced the French were not serious about concluding an agreement and talked about walking away. The Justice attaché and I just didn't think this was the case and that the French were only reflecting what was in their law. With this two, everyone calmed down and found a solution which was so technical I couldn't really explain what it was.

France held elections in the spring of 2012, and in the run up to those elections, it became clear that the Socialist candidate, François Hollande, was likely to win the presidency. This really motivated our French interlocutors as they did not want to contemplate that the Socialists might not like what was in the PCSC and we'd have to start all over again. We came to a final agreement on the text, in both French and English, a couple of days before the elections.

Then we had to figure out who would sign it. The French Minister of Interior wanted to sign it with our Ambassador. We were reluctant to do this so close to the elections as we did not want to be seen as doing something that might affect the outcome of the elections. In addition, the minister was a pretty polarizing figure. We eventually agreed that the minister would initial in Paris, and we would have Secretary of Homeland Security Janet Napolitano initial in Washington. The French minister signed, and the interior ministry sent it to their embassy in Washington and --- it never showed up. DHL lost it. So another set was draw up and the French gave it to us to transmit, which we did and it was signed in good time.

After that, the French Constitutional Court had to ok the agreement, which was not supposed to be a problem since the interior ministry had run it by them, and then Parliament had to approve the agreement, and we knew it would take a long time and we'd have some work to do with the Socialists, who had won the election. However, the Snowden revelations really put the PCSC on the backburner for the rest of my time in France.

The last agreement, the HSPD-6, was the most problematic. It was a very structured format that had some infrastructure connected to it and revolved around exchanges of information on known and suspected terrorists. The French were just not interested and we were never sure why. They felt we already had robust exchanges going on and didn't feel the need to formalize it. After many, many talks, the French finally indicated that their reluctance stemmed from the fact that any agreement would have be cleared with the Parliament, and they were concerned that Parliament not only would never agree because of potential conflicts with French privacy laws, which were very tough, and because it might affect our on-going cooperation.

The French clearly understood that the Visa Waiver Program agreements were a priority for us, and I really didn't believe that they were being obstinate just for the sake of being obstinate. On the U.S. side, the National Security Council was pushing the need for all Visa Waiver Program members to sign off on all the agreements. We just needed to find a way to accommodate French concerns, so I went to the DCM, with the Justice attaché, and said we believe the best chance of success was to modify the format of the agreement, and look for a more flexible arrangement that met our requirements and French concerns at the same time. He and the Ambassador agreed.

So I wrote a cable to the Department, and to the counterterrorism bureau, specifically, to this effect. The counterterrorism bureau did the necessary footwork with the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security, and with the National Security Council, and they suggested an exchange of letters. The French agreed, and we went back and forth over the specific language, and came to an agreement. And the exchange of letters basically brought France into compliance with the Visa Waiver Program requirements. I do understand that after the terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, the French finally did sign on to the original HSPD-6 agreement.

*Q: Who was the ambassador?*

PIASCIK: Charles Rivkin. He was a political appointee but his father had been an ambassador twice. The American Foreign Service Association award for constructive dissent is funded by the Rivkin family. I have the highest respect for Charles Rivkin, who is now Assistant Secretary for Economic and Business Affairs. I thought he was a first rate ambassador and one of the best I have worked with. He was wonderful to work for and cared about his staff and was interested in all of our issues. I was acting DCM several times so I was able to see him from the front office perspective but we also dealt with

each other on a number of consular issues. People would ask him about visas or consular issues and he was very careful to do the right thing.

He was very focused on disaffected youth in France. France is facing a challenge on how to integrate not only its immigrant population, which is largely Muslim, but also the children of those immigrants, who are French citizens. Many of them live in very depressed areas and face discrimination and limited opportunities. He had close ties to a number of well-known people in the entertainment industry, so looked for opportunities to involve them. For example, will.i.am of the Black Eyed Peas, agreed to do a number of programs aimed at disadvantaged youth which were very popular and well received.

Ambassador Rivkin didn't manage by walking around, but I invited him to the consular section several times for hail and farewells, or consular leadership days, or special events. He always attended, always spoke to us, and always, always spent way more time in our section than he was scheduled to. He took the time to talk to everyone, and the consular staff loved him.

*Q: How did you find the special consular posts?*

PIASCIK: The American presence posts?

*Q: Yeah.*

PIASCIK: Well, the American presence posts, or APPs, in France were a little unusual in that they were doing routine American citizen services (ACS). Other APPs in the world do not. APPs are supposed to concentrate on public diplomacy and commercial work. The France APPs were the first one established and were grandfathered to do some ACS work. They didn't receive any funding from CA to do so and the neither the American or French staff were paid for by CA funds. In terms of consular work, they accepted passport and consular reports of birth abroad, and sent them to Paris for approval. They also did notarial services and non-routine services, such as responding to Americans in distress. I didn't have any supervisory authority over them but visited them once a year. Except for one officer, who left shortly after I arrived, I was impressed by all the Americans and all of the local staff. They were all very good and diligent about assisting American citizens, and they were by and large receptive to guidance we provided.

But as I visited the APPs, I was pretty shocked at the lack of security accorded to the APPs. Most had no "hard lines" separating the customers from staff, no bulletproof glass. Most had to bring their customers into their office space to either provide the service or process the fee. The APPs were proud that they could provide an old-fashioned, personalized service, but it was just not in accordance with regulations. Volume 3 of the Foreign Affairs Manual clearly said that APPs were not to do routine ACS services because they did not have the security infrastructure. I brought it up with the economic chief in Paris, who oversaw the APPs; the regional security officer, the management chief, and the DCM, but none were really concerned.

We were inspected by the Office of the Inspector General in the spring of 2012, and right before that occurred, the regional security officer suddenly told me he was very concerned by the lack of security features at the APPs. Naturally, I raised my concerns with the security inspectors. The inspectors wrote in their report that if the APPs were going to continue to do American services they need to have security infrastructure to do so. This was really a non-starter as we were in the midst of budget cutbacks, the fallout from the Benghazi attacks, and the fact that there was no way to make changes to most of the APPs because of structural issues. So eventually, we just stopped the APPs from offering routine consular services. We agreed to send consular officers to the APPs periodically to offer services, and did a lot of public relations work in the run-up to that to make it more palatable. I think the people who were most affected were those with children. Adults could renew passports by mail, but parents needed to bring kids in for the application, so this could entail a train trip to Paris or Marseille plus most like a night in a hotel. On the other hand, with a little planning, these folks could just wait until a consular visit. From the point of view of efficiency, Paris and Marseille were able to leverage economies of scale that the APPs never could.

*Q: Were many Americans getting arrested? I'm thinking of kids getting drunk and that sort of thing?*

PIASCIK: Not really. If it happened, people were released pretty quickly for drunkenness or disturbing the peace. We only had about seven Americans who were in jail throughout France during the time that I was there. They were in jail mostly on murder or drug charges.

*Q: How about students?*

PIASCIK: There are thousands of U.S. students in France. Most seemed to be on semester abroad programs. We worked closely with the universities to brief them on safety and security as well as the consular services we offered. We had a very sad incident when an American student was killed in a fire in a dormitory, so we wanted to make sure they knew what to do in the event of a fire. We also used these talks as opportunities to encourage people to take the foreign service exam and work for the State Department.

*Q: Well, during my time France had the reputation, the French of being very rude to Americans. But I'm told it's been changing a lot. I've been there a number of times; I've had no problem but was this a problem?*

PIASCIK: No. You know, Paris is a big, international city, and people can be impersonal. The French, like many Europeans, don't smile a lot, which Americans find off-putting. Parisians appreciate that millions of tourists benefit the economy but I understand how tiresome it can be to deal with this tide of foreigners all the time clogging up sites like Versailles or Notre Dame. The French government did make an effort to make sure Parisians were nice to visitors. Once you are outside of Paris, people are generally very friendly and nice to foreigners. Most French people are very well-disposed towards

Americans and those in areas where Americans were a factor in World Wars I and II are particularly well-disposed. I have to say I never ran across any French who were unfriendly to me, either on a professional or personal basis, or even just from very brief contacts in stores or on the street. Nobody made fun of my bad French accent or my grammatical mistakes so I found them really very easy to deal with and certainly outside of Paris they were just delightful people. People really went out of their way to help.

We had an American woman write that she and her twin sister had been born in France. Their father was a soldier. Her twin sister had died as a baby and had been buried in France. She was trying to find out where exactly the sister was buried. We normally would not have the resources to help her out, but my American office management specialist, a really capable person who had previously been a French teacher, asked if she could take this on as a project.

She was able to find the cemetery where this baby was buried and she established a good relationship with the woman in charge of the cemetery. This woman was able to locate the gravesite and she and her husband took it on themselves to clean up the site and take photos, which we were able to send back to the American lady.

The embassy always received requests from small towns which would hold memorial ceremonies to commemorate a pilot who had been shot down or a soldier killed during one of the world wars. We always tried to send someone to say a few words, and the towns were always so grateful. President Nicolas Sarkozy came to the embassy for a September 11 commemoration, which was a big deal, and he gave a very moving speech in which he talked how Americans had come to the aid of France twice and died so that France could be free.

*Q: Well, is there anything else you should cover?*

PIASCIK: I don't think so. I think that about covers it.

*Q: And then what?*

PIASCIK: I came back to Washington in May 2014. I knew I would be retiring in 2016, and I had been overseas for 10 years at that point. I didn't want to retire overseas and I felt I needed to come back to the United States. So I went to the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) as a consular inspector and did consular inspections in Mexico, Japan and Pakistan. I also was part of the team which inspected the Bureau of International Organization Affairs and I was the deputy team leader on the inspection of Egypt last year. I really enjoyed the work.

A new inspector general had arrived a year or so earlier, and he had made a lot of changes. Even when I was there, it was a time of continual change. He changed on methodologies so that inspections were based on criteria and facts. I think this made for better inspection reports in that they were more focused, dealt with the major issues and were less dependent on the personality or experience of the inspectors.

I became the coordinator for all the consular inspectors during my second year in OIG and worked to establish and implement use of checklists and guidelines so that all inspectors were working from a consistent set of guidelines.

*Q: What was your impression of huge consular footprint in Mexico?*

PIASCIK: Mexico has the consular section in Mexico City, nine consulates and consulates general and nine consular agencies. Some of the consular agencies and consulates/consulates general were among the busiest in the world, and had more work than most consular sections elsewhere in the world. We were pretty impressed. CA takes care to send really strong managers, especially to Mexico City, and the section there was very well run. There were a few issues with poor leadership, either at the post or consular section level, in some of the border posts. At the time, the border posts were all receiving danger pay, and it was often hard to staff them with good people. On the other hand, for the most part, people were doing the best they could under difficult circumstances, and leadership in Mexico City as very forward leaning on that.

We arrived just after a hurricane had struck Cabo San Lucas. The mission had helped to evacuate 10,000 Americans in four days, which was a success by any measure. There were many Americans in jail, and making sure they were visited was a major resource issue, given the dangerous areas in which prisons were located. Over the past couple of years, for a variety of reasons, many Mexicans who had been living in the United States, were coming back to Mexico either because they were forced to or of their own free will and they were bringing their American-born children with them. In many instances, these children had not been documented either as American citizens or as Mexican citizens, so they were having trouble getting into Mexican schools, getting into the health care system. Our consular sections throughout Mexico undertook a campaign to document these kids both as Americans and Mexicans, and were working very successfully with the federal government, local governments, and non-governmental organizations to organize outreach to these communities. It was very impressive.

*Q: What about the violence there? Particularly border places but also drug violence. Was that hitting our people?*

PIASCIK: It was very series. I went to Ciudad Juarez, Nogales and Tijuana and conditions varied in those three places.

Tijuana was ok for the most part. We could walk around most areas quite freely. But in Juarez and especially in Nogales, we were limited. Nogales was pretty grim. We were able to arrange a walking tour of the historic area of Ciudad Juarez but there were a lot of areas that were off-limits. Although the situation in Ciudad Juarez was improving, it could be dangerous. A policeman was killed in front of a compound where many Americans lived. These things set everyone on edge.

*Q: Well, okay, say in Ciudad Juarez, are places you don't want consular officers to go but there are Americans there. What do you do?*

PIASCIK: The consular staff would have to coordinate with the regional security officer. For the most part, this involved visits to Americans in jail. Cooperation seemed to be pretty good and the consular staff were able to get their work done.

*Q: It must have been a different world going to inspect Tokyo, wasn't it?*

PIASCIK: Tokyo was quite different. We were free to go wherever we wanted in Japan after work or on weekends. In terms of consular services, the most distinguishing feature is the large American military presence in Japan. ACS work there is largely driven by the need to service American military members or their families who need passports or reports of birth abroad, or other routine services.
*Q: Then you retired?*

PIASCIK: I retired at the end of September 2016.

*Q: So what are you doing now?*

PIASCIK: I am volunteering at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, I am going to work as an election officer in Fairfax County, and I am going to return to OIG in the spring as a retired annuitant.

*Q: Well, it sounds fascinating. Okay, well, Lisa, I thank you very much.*

PIASCIK: Well great, thank you.

*Q: I really appreciate this. Now what will happen is, we're having a little bit of a problem with funds coming in but we'll get this transcribed and you will get the transcript and, of course, it will come to you in pretty rough form. And so we ask you to clean it up or finish your sentences that you or I left dangling and say what you or I were planning to say anyway. And also, and very importantly, if you think gee, I forgot to tell him about such and such, or why didn't he ask me about this or why didn't I expand on that? Do. In fact, you don't really have to but insert one or more questions. Anyway, the whole idea is more is better than less in oral history because we don't know what somebody will be interested in and so the more of you in there, the better.*

PIASCIK: Great, great.

*Q: Well, I really appreciate this.*

PIASCIK: Happy to, happy to.

*End of interview*