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

AMBASSADOR JOSEPH PRESEL

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy
Initial interview date: February 27, 2004

INTERVIEW

Q: Joe, let's start at the beginning. Tell me when and where you were born and a little about your family.

PRESEL: I was born in December of 1941 in Providence, Rhode Island, the son of typical American, middle-class, Jewish parents. The light of the mind mattered. Everyone in my family went to Brown, which is why I did not go to Brown. These were people not of the Depression, but certainly marked by the Depression, and for them the concept of working for the U.S. government was honorable, and in fact more than honorable. So that when I was of an age to think about my post-university future and had not done well enough in university to get into a really good graduate school except on pulls I didn't want to use, and did not know if I wanted to be a lawyer or a banker or what, and was very interested in the foreign policy process and in the Foreign Service, I took the exams in the spring of my senior year. Somewhat to my astonishment I was accepted by the Foreign Service and offered $5,910 a year which, in the beginning of 1963, seemed like rather good money.

Q: I want to stop you here and go back, way back. What do you know about your family? First your father's side.

PRESEL: My parents in both cases were born in this country. All four of their parents came from Europe. My father's people were Austrian Jews. It is believed that the family came from Arabia to Vienna in the 1820s when Jews got civil rights in the Habsburg monarchy. My grandparents on my father's side came separately to America in the 1880s or 1890s, part of a huge wave of Ashkenazi Jewish immigration to the United States, and settled for reasons that I don't understand in Providence and met and married there. My mother's people were Russian Jews. Her mother was born and brought up in St. Petersburg, which was unusual for Jews at that time. Her father came from Kazan. They too came separately to the United States, in both cases in the late nineteenth century, met in America and married. And the family's business was furniture. My father was a politician. He did the war, however, did not see combat. And I am an only child from a very small family.

Q: Did your father go to school, higher education?

PRESEL: Yes, as I said, everyone in my family went to Brown except me. My father and his siblings all went to Brown. My mother and her brother went to Brown. That's why I didn't go.

Q: Brown is a private school, isn't it?

PRESEL: Brown is a private school. It's one of the Ivy League universities. It is a very good small Ivy League university. My parents were very active in the university when I was the age to apply to college. I went to Brown for an interview and the dean of admissions, who I knew very well, said, "Don't worry, of course we'll take you. But we think you should go away to school because it will be too easy for you here. So I've followed up with the dean of Harvard and told him to take you, but don't worry. If they don't take you we'll give you a place."

Q: Well, before we get to that, what was it like being a kid in Providence?

PRESEL: I have no idea because I've never been a kid anywhere else.

Q: All right, but what did you do—I mean was this a large city?

PRESEL: It is a city which has gotten very much smaller. I discovered when I went back to Providence as an adult how very much smaller downtown Providence seemed than when I was growing up. It was, in the 1940s and 1950s, a city that was on the decline. The textile industry was moving south, the engineering industry had long since ceased to exist; the waves of immigration were still coming. It was, and remains, a city of very peculiar politics. It's highly corrupt. Mayors of Providence and governors of Rhode Island have been doing time for more than a hundred years. I like to say that the politics of Rhode Island are so baroque that they are occasionally rococo.

Q: Did you go to public schools there?

PRESEL: No, I went to private schools there because, during the war, my mother was running the family business and so I was sent off to a private nursery school at the age of two. After the war, after my father came back, I'm told I was apparently happy at my private school so I was left there. And when it the time came to go to high school—

Q: Where was the private school?

PRESEL: Providence Country Day School. And when the time came to go to high school, which in my case would have been Classical High where both my parents had gone, friends of the family said, You know, you don't want to send Joe to Classical because the school's not what it used to be and if you can afford to send him to private school, please do, because those schools are just very much better.

Q: So where did you go to high school?

PRESEL: Providence Country Day.

Q: All the way up?

PRESEL: Yeah.

Q: What was Country Day School like?

PRESEL: Small, boys only, very personalized. I graduated in a class of twenty-one. It was academically, for me, quite easy. It was a school which I guess, in retrospect, was trying to decide whether it wanted to be a pale shadow of the preparatory boarding schools that were common in New England at the time and still are, or whether it was trying to be a more modern sort of school. I had a great deal of fun. I enjoyed it.

Q: Providence had quite a large immigrant community, didn't it? From the Azores or other places?

PRESEL: You are extremely well informed. There was and is a large Portuguese, French [from Canada], Irish—the most ethnically diverse and ethnically compact state in the union—the most Catholic state in the union, and a state in which the concept of balancing a political ticket in ethnic terms was absolutely essential.

Q: In this mix, how did Jews fit in? Was it too small to be anything other than just—

PRESEL: Jews had been around since the beginning of the British colonial period in Rhode Island. The oldest Jewish synagogue in America is in Newport. The Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe came to Rhode Island and other cities in the late nineteenth century. By the time I was growing up, I was, I guess, conscious that I was Jewish although I was certainly not observant. But I'm not conscious of discrimination against me in school or in social terms. I'm clear that the Jews were still conscious of their separateness. There were Jews in the retail business, there were Jewish lawyers, there were Jewish doctors, there were Jewish musicians, and there were Jewish professors in university, practically all the stereotypes of the European Jews coming to America. There were at that time no Jews, I guess, in the downtown clubs or in the country clubs. But it was not particularly a problem—one was not conscious of anti-Semitism. One was certainly not discriminated against in school or in education.

Q: In, say, both grammar school and in high school, what were your favorite subjects?

PRESEL: History, Latin, English—not mathematics, not sciences.

Q: You sound like a typical Foreign Service officer—

PRESEL: It's self-selecting, isn't it?

Q: Were you much of a reader?

PRESEL: Was and am. Coming from a family in which light of the mind mattered, I was brought up reading poetry, I was brought up reading history, and I was brought up with a somewhat curious approach to what America was all about. At an early age, I was made to appreciate that we were an Anglo-Saxon society. We were English. We were a Protestant society. Our history was English history. Of course Shakespeare was the most important dramatist of the late Renaissance. We won the battle at Waterloo. We won the battle of Trafalgar. And the cultural and philosophical positions which created America are Anglo-Saxon. There was very much less emphasis given to the other parts of the melting pot than would have been the case had I been born twenty-five years later.

Q: Can you think of any particular books that really influenced you? Fiction or nonfiction?

PRESEL: No.

Q: How about teachers, were there any ones who really stick out in your mind?

PRESEL: No, but you have to understand that the school I went to was so small that all of the teachers were very much a part of one's life. And Providence, for all that it was a city of 150,000, was a small town. And everybody knew everybody. People sort of looked after people. No, I'm not conscious of it.

Q: What about activities—sports or drama or music?

PRESEL: I'm quite possibly the world's worst athlete. No, not a major interest in my life.

Q: Up through high school, did the international world intrude on you?

PRESEL: Yes, very much. First of all my parents were in the fortunate position to have enough money to travel and take me with them. They cared, and felt when I was a child that since they could take me to Europe they should, as I might not be able to see my old country later on. Then, as they said, I double-crossed them by joining the Foreign Service. This was Providence, this was the northeast of the United States, and this was a society in which one was conscious of the ways of immigrants, of the Jewish refugees coming from war-torn Europe in the late '40s. There were moreover, at Brown, a large number of Jewish refugees and non-Jewish refugees—people of the left—people who had been obliged to leave Germany and Italy in the 1930s and come to America and ended up in places like Brown, teaching there.

Q: More of a socialist societal thing—

PRESEL: And before you asked me the question, I should tell you that my parents were very much people of the left. They were not in the party. I know they were not in the party because I would have never gotten in the service had they been in the party, but they were certainly people of the left. We would not go to Spain because it was Franco's Spain. One of the fundamental arguments that I had with my father was what the Soviet Union was all about and why. It was a highly political family, highly argumentative family. My father was a politician, needless to say a democratic politician. I can remember Adelai Stevenson in our house in 1952. I can remember caring about international events all my life.

Q: Did you play the dutiful son and oppose your parents when they abdicated? Did you tend to argue with them?

PRESEL: I was an only child of parents who married relatively late, and I was in the fortunate position of having parents who were friends as well as parents. And their friends became my friends. So the faculty of Brown University were the people with whom I was brought up, in a sense. I certainly did not oppose them like a dutiful son. In fact, well I can hardly call myself of the right and by American standards I'm still of the left, I have politically always been to the right, at least of my father. I think that is as much a generational thing as anything else.

Q: Would you put your father in the European left-wing socialist camp? Marxism?

PRESEL: No—it was social democracy. In the case of my father, it was social democracy and also, since he'd been in the American army during the war, a hatred of anything involving the Nazis. In the case of my mother, it was rather a function of the necessity of fighting for civil rights for particularly the blacks, and then called the Negroes. Providence was a city which was, even in the 1950s, probably 10 percent Negro and while it certainly wasn't Jim Crow, it would be idle to pretend that blacks in Rhode Island had anything like a reasonable shot at life. And so, a great deal of my childhood was spent being conscious of my parents being very active in the civil rights movement.

Q: What was your father doing in politics?

PRESEL: He was for many years the head of the city council's finance committee of Providence City Council. This was a time when it would have been impossible for a Jew to be elected in Rhode Island—as the mayor. So for many years he was head of the finance committee and when I was very young, I never understood why our street always got plowed out first when the snowplows came through. And when I was of an age to discover girls, I never understood why it was that my father always knew where I had been necking and with whom. At the same time it was very useful because it also meant that I was unlikely to get a speeding ticket or be cited for going through a stop sign.

Q: Did the cold war intrude at all, up through high school? Was this something one thought about, the Soviet Union—

PRESEL: As the British would say, I'd like to have had prior notice of that question—a very good question. Clearly, it did. I can remember, I guess I was nine. I can remember Stalin dying. I can remember this being an important fact, not that one was either pleased or not pleased, simply as an historical moment. Did the cold war intrude? Yes, I suppose. To start with, the Korean War is the first war of which I have a genuine recollection.

Q: You would have been nine years old—

PRESEL: Yes, I was nine. I think I can remember my father being demobilized. I think I can remember the end of the Second World War, but I've never been sure whether it is that I can remember or I was told that I could remember. But the Korean War is certainly the first war that I can remember. The rest of the cold war, certainly. I can remember the notices in school corridors about where you go if there's a nuclear bomb detonated. I can remember the fallout shelters. I can remember the first radar put up on Cape Cod in case the Russians chose to drop bombs on us. Yes, the cold war did very much influence me.

Q: You would have been in your early teens, I guess, during the McCarthy period. I take it this is something that would have stirred your parents up a bit.

PRESEL: It did. I can remember the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] coming around to talk to my parents about friends of theirs whom various bits of the American level of bureaucracy were unhappy about and were investigating. We were not people who found the McCarthy episode one of the more positive in American history.

Q: Then you would have graduated when from the Country Day School?

PRESEL: Nineteen fifty-nine.

Q: Where did you go?

PRESEL: I went to Harvard.

Q: Now had you thought of going anywhere else? You decided not to go to Brown.

PRESEL: My parent's position was that I could go to any university I wanted as long as it was a first class one, and I could get in. In practice I applied to Brown in case I didn't get into Harvard and I applied to Harvard because it was where I wanted to go but also because my father, after he graduated from Brown in 1928 [note the year], had signed up for Harvard Law School and went to law school. He took an apartment opposite a two-year girl's school, bought a Packer convertible, and as nearly as I can make out did nothing but drink and seduce women the first year at Harvard Law School. At the end of which the dean suggested that he take a year off, and three months after that was October

1929, so he never went back. My view therefore was that if I could last more than one year at Harvard my old man couldn't complain. In addition to that, there was an Italian professor of Slavic literature named Renato Fojoli who had come to American in the 1930s and would have been very active in the Italian anti-fascist movement in the late '20s and '30s until he had to leave, for whom my father had gotten his first job at Brown, and who had always said that he wanted to teach Joe. So when I was of an age to go to college, I gather that Renato called up the Harvard dean of admissions and said I want Joe Presel to come to Harvard. It wasn't a question—I was first in my class in high school anyway.

Q: You were at Harvard from '59 to '63. What was Harvard like when you arrived there?

PRESEL: It was unique in the world, as it always is. It was a place to which I had no business to go. I was, even by the usual standards of young people of that age, incredibly callow. It would have been far better for me had I spent a couple of years doing something like going in the army, before I went to university. I was extraordinarily immature. I had a wonderful time. I learned a great deal. I got a perfectly good degree. I'm not sorry I went, but I would have benefited more from it had I been a little bit older. And even though I was brought up in an environment very much like Harvard's, and after all even though I was away at school it was only forty miles, it was an extraordinary opportunity had I been sensible enough to take advantage of it. It was an extraordinary opportunity to fly with my own wings, to have this phenomenal breadth of opportunities to grow, intellectually and in all other ways, and it was tremendously exciting. I expect it still is. I expect each generation of young people going to any university, but particularly a university like Harvard, finds it exactly the same.

Q: Yes, there is certain wastage by people who are too young when they go in, to be up against that. But I suppose it is a little hard to figure out what to do with it beforehand.

PRESEL: Good argument for the army.

Q: Yeah, absolutely. Were you interested in any particular subjects or were you following any particular line?

PRESEL: I never had any doubt but that I wanted to study, in one way or another, Russia. Whether this was because of Professor Fojoli who was a specialist of Slav literature, whether this was because my mother's mother was still alive and more than alert, or whether this was the cold war and I was simply fascinated by it, I don't know. But I began studying Russian my freshman year at Harvard, and my university degree is in Russian literature and while I did all of the courses that one might expect, that is to say the required science courses and also Henry Kissinger's course in international relations and Stanley Hoffman's course on foreign policy, mostly what I did was Russian and Russian literature.

Q: In Russian literature and Russian language, would you say at that time that there was any particular thrust to the faculty as to point of view—you know, were they strongly anti-communist or people who were more sympathetic? Some universities had a Marxist tinge to them.

PRESEL: Well, bearing in mind that I came from a family which, by American standards, was leftist, which meant that by European standards it was probably centrist, I was not at all surprised or shocked by the political views that I found expressed among members of the faculty. This was, remember, roughly the period when conservative Americans were going on at great length about how Harvard was full of Keynesian economists who were teaching economics. This was a period of the Verikas society, which had right wing political views. It never was a question for me. Those professors of mine who had come from the Soviet Union at one time or another brought with them the political views that they had. If they had gotten out just after the revolution, they were really quite conservative. If they had gotten out after the Second World War, their views were somewhat different. If they were European socialists who had to leave, their views were somewhat different again. Certainly the education that I received was not consciously political, and I can think of very few of my peers at university who were likely to be conned by the kinds of political views that their professors had. We certainly were aware that professors had these political views, left or right, and I think we tended to make allowances for them.

Q: In Russian literature, was this pretty much pre-revolutionary, or did you include Soviet literature also?

PRESEL: Very much Soviet literature as well. I mean you started from *The Song of Igor's Campaign* and went through the eighteenth and nineteenth century and Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and then the extraordinary period of literature of the early part of the twentieth century and then early socialist literature. But also Pasternak. I mean there was not a great deal of time spent worrying about official Soviet literature because it was so awful.

Q: In your language did you get involved in reading Pravda and that sort of thing?

PRESEL: Oh sure, but I was reading Pravda in order to see what Russian read like in a day to day way, it was not an attempt to try to come up with—

Q: It was a good exercise in vocabulary I suppose. Were you involved in any activities at Harvard?

PRESEL: No. No. I skied; I come from New England so I skied. All my life I've hunted, so I hunted. But I was not doing drama, I was not doing the hasty pudding, I was not doing the Harvard Crimson, I was not doing those things. I was rather an uninteresting undergraduate.

Q: How about when Kennedy ran for president, the election of 1960—Kennedy versus Nixon. So many people got engaged. Did this engage you at all?

PRESEL: I don't think it engaged me as an undergraduate. Because to me there was no question as to where right, truth, and justice lay. And in any case, in the 1960 election I still couldn't vote. Although as the son of a politician in Providence, I should tell you that I first voted when I was fourteen, and I voted five times in that election. That was not an issue. There is no doubt that among the reasons that I joined the Foreign Service was the fact that Kennedy was in the White House. But in partisan political terms the election of 1960 was irrelevant. And this was—remember I'm on the other side of this huge, tremendous social, cultural, intellectual, and psychological gulf, which is the Vietnam War and the race riots of 1968 and Berkeley and the riots in Europe in 1968. It is, I think, one of the fundamental cleavages in Western society, and I'm on the other side of it.

Q: Were there significant numbers of students at Harvard while you were there standing on street corners trying to organize and march on somebody or doing anything?

PRESEL: I'm sure there were. I wasn't conscious of them. This was before the anti-Vietnam War riots. This was even before the civil rights activities reached their peak. Practically the first thing I did when I got to Washington in 1963 was to participate in the Martin Luther King march. But as an undergraduate, it wasn't an issue and I was at peace with myself politically, and was not rebelling against the views of my parents particularly. I'm sure they were there, the Students for a Democratic Society existed, but it was not something that was anything.

Q: How about the Foreign Service? Did this cross your horizon, your radar at all?

PRESEL: It was something I was interested in enough to take the written exam in the spring of my junior year.

Q: In 1960?

PRESEL: Nineteen sixty-two. It was something I was interested in enough to go to a lecture by a man named Mike Eli who was at Harvard Center for International Affairs for a year and who I now realize was trying to recruit for the Foreign Service.

Q: Yes, I've interviewed Mike. He's an economist.

PRESEL: I served with Mike later. He's a super man. I'm very fond of him. And that was of interest. At that period, I guess, if one was interested in international affairs, the choices were fairly limited. There was the Foreign Service, the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] about which I knew nothing except that it was there. There were a few banks. There were a few foreign correspondents. There were a small number of businesses overseas. And that was about it.

Q: By the time you graduated, the Peace Corps was in place, was that anything to impress you?

PRESEL: No, it didn't. Probably because $5,910 seemed like a lot of money, and the Peace Corps paid substantially less than that.

Q: What about the social life at Harvard? Did you have as much fun as your father did—without getting kicked out?

PRESEL: No, I was afraid of girls. In fact I think I could probably argue that I'm still afraid of girls. Being an only child and going to a boy's school does terrible things to one's sense of the female sex.

Q: I know, I went to an all-male prep school too, and—oh well. So, did you take the Foreign Service exam your junior year with the knowledge or forethought of what you wanted to do, or was this just for fun?

PRESEL: It was certainly for more than fun. It was one of the small numbers of things that I was interested in. It was by then clear that while I would get an honors degree, I would not get the kind of honors degree that would get me into a really good graduate school, and it didn't seem right to go on taking the old man's money if I didn't know what I wanted by way of graduate school. Did I want to be a lawyer, did I want to go to business school, and did I want to be an academic? I knew that I didn't want to go into the military, another mistake on my part, but I knew I didn't want to go into the military. I was very interested in foreign affairs and the Foreign Service seemed to be the way to go. I took the exam and in the spring of my senior year, took the oral exam.

Q: Do you recall on the oral exam, any of the questions or how it was set up?

PRESEL: Yes, I recall it very well. Federal Building in Boston. I was the last interviewee. There were three examiners, the names of all three of which have escaped me. I think one of them was named Hartmus and was a USIS [United States Information Service] officer. The other two I don't remember by name. It was a conversation. There were none of the tricks about which one hears; they didn't nail the window shut and ask me to open it. At one point, they began speaking French because I had said that I spoke French. And fortunately in that particular case, I hadn't lied. They talked about things designed to see if I knew anything. They talked about things in a way designed to see if I were articulate on my feet. They were less interested in what I knew than in how well I deployed what I did know. I found it rather exhilarating and, because I was the last interviewee of that day, when it finished and they said, Go out and wait, I went out and waited and they called me after about fifteen minutes and said, Don't worry, we'll take you. You're the last man who has ever spoken that directly. I thought it was a rather pleasant introduction into the Foreign Service.

Q: Did you have any choice about what you might want to do? Did they ask you what sort of things you'd want to do, specialties or anything?

PRESEL: Well, it seems very clear since I was a Russian specialist that I would be a Russian specialist. And at no time then did they ask me if I thought I wanted to be an economic officer or a political officer or a consular officer or administrative. That never came up.

Q: When did you come into the Foreign Service?

PRESEL: Four days after I graduated from college.

Q: My goodness—so it would be June of '63.

PRESEL: I graduated from Harvard on Thursday, stole my mother's car, drove down to Washington in it, and the following Monday took the oath.

Q: Before we get to that, did the Cuban missile crisis in October of '62 leave any impression on you at Harvard?

PRESEL: No, aside from the fact that we all assumed that the Americans were wrong. Because one always assumes that one's government is wrong. No. In my case it probably made me even more interested in being part of the American government than had been the case before. But I wasn't like Paul on the road to Damascus and suddenly saw in the aftermath of the Cuban missile crisis that the United States desperately needed me to help solve its problems in the next generation.

Q: You came in June of '63 with you mother's stolen car—

PRESEL: I had to unsteal it fairly soon thereafter.

Q: What did your parents think about this?

PRESEL: They were thrilled. They were delighted. This was the kind of thing that they would have wanted to do and that they wanted their son to do.

Q: I assume that you went into an A-100 course.

PRESEL: No, I didn't, not immediately. The first thing I did was to go to work in INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research], in the China part of INR, because I came down at the wrong period to get into an A-100, I'd just missed one. So my first activities in the Foreign Service were working in the Chinese part of INR for about two months.

Q: What particular area were you dealing with?

PRESEL: I expect, in retrospect, what I was dealing with was learning where the men's room was and how the culture of the Foreign Service operated and why every so often parts of the office seemed to disappear and come back a little later. And my eyes were as big as saucers because I was actually meeting people from CIA, NSA [National Security Agency], and discovering what the intelligence community could and couldn't do. They were wonderful people with names to conjure—genuine experts like Paul Crisberg and this was a pretty exhilarating thing for a young kid who's twenty-one years old.

Q: So, after this—

PRESEL: After that, when the next A-100 course came around, I joined them.

Q: What was the A-100 course like, the one you were in? Which number was it?

PRESEL: I haven't any idea. It was big; we were fifty—half State Department people and half USIS people. I was by far the youngest member of the class. I was twenty-one; the oldest member of the class was thirty-one—seemed ancient. Nearly all of the people had either been in the army or had been in graduate school or both. Or had worked in a company and decided that they were not made for the business world. It was not, as it turned out, a very distinguished class. And it was a class that left the Foreign Service, by and large, fairly quickly. That is to say, I think the wastage rate was higher than was normally the case at that time.

Q: Looking back at yourself, at twenty-one with most of the class older than you—usually these fall into either the bright young kid who's overly zealous and sort of a show-off or keeping quiet and watching everyone else. What kind of kid were you?

PRESEL: Not the latter. And there were those people in the Foreign Service who would say that I was difficult and a show-off and unwilling to keep my mouth shut for the ensuing thirty-eight years.

Q: What did you get out of the A-100 course?

PRESEL: How the U.S. government worked; what the State Department expected out of the Foreign Service; what an embassy expected out of a junior officer. But it was very much training, it was not education. And it was very much short-term and not long-term. I don't think that they did junior training very well then. I'm not sure they do it any better now—

Q: I know, I think it remains a problem in that it teaches you how to do things, but not why we do things. It certainly doesn't get you involved with understanding the policy process. Was there ever the chance while you were there to sit and talk to somebody and say, "Where should I go, what should I do?" I mean the equivalent of mentoring or career counseling or something like that?

PRESEL: No, there was none of that at all. There was a desire to prepare one for one's first post. There was the desire to explain how the government worked, that is in operational terms, not in policy terms. I think there was a certain reticence that one's private life was one's private life. The kind of social engineering that the Foreign Service and society as a whole wants to do now, or has wanted to do for the last ten, fifteen years, was utterly foreign to the service that I joined.

Q: My Foreign Service was always sort of sink or swim and here you are and you're bright and you really should just pick up things and do it, and I'm not too sure it's too bad a way. Rather than having people come out of the cookie cutter way of doing it.

PRESEL: I've no idea if it makes sense or not. It's what happened to me and I survived.

Q: Where did you go? Did you have any choice in the matter?

PRESEL: Yeah, you filled out a form that said where you wanted to go. And in my case among other places, I put the Soviet Union obviously. I had been there when I was an undergraduate and I very much wanted to serve there—Russian was my language. And I also put down Turkey and I got Turkey.

Q: You said you were in the Soviet Union as an undergraduate. What did you do?

PRESEL: In the summer between my sophomore and junior years I was very lucky. Eight of us, most of the people were from Brown, got together and drove six thousand kilometers through European Russia living in campgrounds. This was the summer of 1961. It was the only year that foreigners could do this without a guide, so we were more or less free to drive where we wanted. We had to check in and I expect if we had gone too far off the beaten path the authorities who were following us would figure out what had happened and put us back on the straight and narrow, but it meant that when I did finally serve in Russia, my personal understanding of the Soviet Union goes back to 1961, which is in historical terms only just barely after the end of the Second World War, when the Soviet Union was still thinking it was going to do the right thing. So I put Russia on my wish list, and Turkey, and got Turkey. I was delighted. One's first post was like one's first girlfriend, whatever he gets entirely—

Q: Did you take Turkish before you went out?

PRESEL: No, that was the first of a large number of fights that I've had with the State Department. I asked for language training, and the State Department took the position that because I qualified in two languages—French and Russian—they wouldn't teach me Turkish. The logic of this absolutely escaped me, but that I would find that there was a very good language program at post and I should get out to post as quickly as possible. And not knowing any better, I argued for a while and gave it up and went to post.

Q: What was the post?

PRESEL: Ankara.

Q: What was your job there?

PRESEL: It was a time when junior officers—I have a feeling the State Department kind of reinvents this kind of thing about once a generation, but I was in a period where you were an over compliment to the embassy and you spent your first tour among the political, economic, consular, and administrative sections of the embassy, learning a bit about all four of them and hopefully decided which part of the operation you wanted to spend your time in. This was at a time when one did not join the Foreign Service as part of a particular cone, an expression that I detest, but rather one joined the Foreign Service and then decided how one wanted to spend one's time subsequently.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

PRESEL: My first ambassador was Raymond Hare and my second ambassador was Parker Hart.

Q: How would you describe Turkish-American relations when you arrived there in '63?

PRESEL: They were pretty good. They got a lot worse during the two years that I was there—this is not a case of cause and effect, because I was sent there—but they were fine when I got there. The heroic period of American-Turkish relations was still very much clear and a part of the approach which both countries took. We had nuclear weapons in Turkey. We had nuclear weapons, which were designed to be given to the Turks in case we decide to re-fight the Second World War. We had a large number of intelligence operations there. We had the Peace Corps there. The Turks still remembered the [*USS] Missouri* bringing back the body of the Turkish ambassador who had died in Washington in '46 and anchored in the Bosphorus. The Turkish alliance with us in the Korean War was very active. Relations were extraordinarily good, and became bad because while I was there the first Cyprus crisis blew up and I was there when Mr. Johnson sent the famous Johnson letter and relations got a lot worse.

Q: What was your first job there?

PRESEL: I began, if memory serves, in the economic section.

Q: What sort of things were they having you do?

PRESEL: Talking to people. Taking specific assignments—doing something on Turkish foreign investment law, learning about how the Turkish minister of commerce operates, seeing how American businesses were getting on in Turkey; thinking up ways to help American businesses overcome the problems of having a foreign exchange regime which meant that the Turkish lira was not really convertible; trying to come to grips with our

USAID [United States Agency for International Development]—this is a problem which I've had to face at various times throughout my career. It was not expected that I was going to do serious macro-economic analysis.

Q: How did you find your Turkish contacts, both official and non-official?

PRESEL: I found Turkish contacts easy. I should say that I found that aspect of the profession always easy. Younger Turks by that time spoke English. Older Turks mostly spoke French. I learned Turkish, although it wasn't terribly hard. It was a period when Westernized Turks, Turks working for the government by definition were, and Turks in Istanbul were, were themselves interested in meeting and talking to and getting to know foreigners, Westerners, Americans—especially Americans. And Ankara was a small town, so even a third secretary in the American embassy was someone who found himself invited to receptions and had a chance to get to know people.

Q: And then you moved on to what?

PRESEL: Then I moved on to the administrative section and then to the consular section. I spent the summer of 1964 in the consul general in Istanbul because there was a great deal more consular work there than in Ankara. And since I was a junior officer, it was easier for me to get sent, and since I wasn't married, it was easier for me to go, so I spent the summer of 1964 in Istanbul, working in consular. Then lastly, I spent six months doing political work.

Q: In Istanbul, what sort of consular work did you find yourself doing?

PRESEL: Everything—passports, visas, protection, and welfare. There was a fairly large American group of tourists coming and going and therefore losing their passports and getting mugged. The American army was there, so there were a fair number of birth certificates and passports to give to babies. There were the problems, by then, of American soldiers who had been born in Turkey because their parents had been serving in Turkey and under Turkish law they were therefore Turkish citizens and the question was how you get them out of the country so that they wouldn't get drafted before anybody knew about them. There were just a lot of visas. There was visa fraud of a very rich nature, and of a very imaginative nature. There was protection and welfare, there were the ships coming in. It was all of the things that traditionally were part of consular work, and in addition, because the capital was by then in Ankara, although by far the largest city and the economical center of the country was Istanbul, the consulate had perhaps more importance locally and consular work much more importance, than would have been the case if the embassy had been in Istanbul. It was a wonderful education.

Q: Did you run across drug cases—had they begun to surface? I'm talking about kids picking up hashish and—

PRESEL: No, that came later. I'm sure it was there, but it wasn't a serious problem. Nor was terrorism.

Q: Was there terrorism?

PRESEL: I'm sure there was, but—

Q: But that wasn't— Then you moved to the political section. What was the first Cyprus crisis and what was your point of view at the lower end of the feeding chain? How were we dealing with it? What was it all about?

PRESEL: I think it was there that I first discovered that the American government never makes a mistake. This is a lesson I've had to relearn all the time I was in the Foreign Service. It changed basically the way in which we and the Turks looked at each other. They grew up. We, alas perhaps, didn't. The Turks at that time had a simple old-fashioned idea of what loyalty and alliance meant. They had, after all, had a terrible First World War; they had the early '20s when the West tried to carve up what was left of the Ottoman Empire; they had established a country; they'd gotten through Ataturk; they'd come to grips with who they were; they'd sat out the Second World War, but joined us for Korea and felt that the love that they had for the West, and the United States in particular, was not being requited, that in fact all the old prejudices were coming, once again, to the fore and this was making them desperately unhappy.

Q: What was the feeling—what was happening on Cyprus at this time, what was the issue?

PRESEL: You will remember that as part of the attempt by other people to get their independence from the various western European empires, the Greek Cypriots had begun to agitate, and their particular form was they wanted not merely to get rid of the British, but they wanted to join Greece. And roughly a third of the population was ethnically Turkish [Turkey had taken the country in 1571, the Ottoman Turks, and it had been a Turkish island territory until the late nineteenth century]. The most important political figure was the head of the local church, a man named Mucarez—a gentleman about as straight as a corkscrew, but extraordinarily intelligent, and the British had arrested him and sent him off to exile somewhere in the Indian Ocean, I think the Seychelles islands for a while. There was a fair amount of violence. The Turks kept threatening to go in and protect their co-religionists, co-ethnicists, to which they were entitled under the provisions of the London Treaty of 1961. And every time things got bad, the United States sort of sat on the Turks.

Q: Because we had a tremendous Greek lobby.

PRESEL: Yes, we did and we still do. We had a tremendous Greek lobby and I think, to an extent, the Turks were correct in their views that the United States had caught all of the historical prejudices against the Turks.

Q: How did you find the Turks were reacting, I mean your work? Did you find that during this crisis, did things dry up, was it more difficult?

PRESEL: No, and in retrospect, that relations remained as good as they were was extraordinary. I'm reminded of being called by one of the director generals in the ministry and asked to come in and going to my counselor and saying, so and so "called and asked me to come in, what should I do?" And he said, "If he called you to come in you'd better go in." So I went in and Mr.—who I knew slightly, he was a director general which is a very serious senior position and I was a kid, said—as I knew Mr. Kosegin was going to visit Turkey, this was 1964, Mr. Kosegin was going to visit Turkey and this was the first visit by a Russian prime minister. And they were preparing for it, but unfortunately their one Russian-speaking diplomatic officer was on vacation and the Russians had delivered a huge quantity of documents to be considered, all of which needed to be translated and they didn't have anybody and would I mind doing it? And I said, "I'd be delighted to do it, but you have to understand that I'm an American diplomat and I think it's probably fair to tell you that my embassy would be utterly thrilled if it could get its hands on these documents and if I'm going to translate them for you, I'm certainly going to make a copy for the embassy." And Mr.—answer was, "Well, you're an ally, so of course." So I went off and translated all of these documents and indeed the people of the embassy and I expect in Washington were drooling in high speed and as quickly as I'd get them translated, I translated them into English of course, they went away and we were all happy. This was something that was considered perfectly normal in that period. It's utterly inconceivable that it would happen now.

In the same way, when I went off on a trip to eastern Turkey with our then minerals attaché—we had a minerals attaché—and a friend of mine who was in the Turkish intelligence service, said, "Have you got a pistol, Joe?" And I said, "Yes I do" and he said, "Well you'd better take it with you because they're holding up the Ankara-Tehran bus every so often and you really ought to have a little help." This again is the kind of relationship that died, I think, after that, when we and the Turks started treating each other differently. And, in case you forget to ask me this question, let me make clear that now, one of the hobby horses that I've had during my time in the service is the way we treat our FSNs [Foreign Service nationals].

Q: Foreign Service nationals.

PRESEL: Yes. When I joined the service and went to Turkey, the Foreign Service nationals, the locals, although that term was not appropriate, the locals were very much a part of the embassy. The locals in the political section worked with the ambassador to the ministry. They used to write the telegrams after which they of course couldn't see. Their offices were with ours, we were in and out of each other's offices all the time, we invited each other to our houses—they were very much a part of the embassy team. And the way in which we went about treating our locals in the last thirty years is, I think, an absolute scandal. And if you wish later on in our discussion to talk about this more—

Q: We'll talk about it. It is a theme that should come up, I think.

PRESEL: I have very strong views about it.

Q: At this time, this had not happened while you were in Turkey. I mean there was still a more cohesive team.

PRESEL: Oh yes, very much so—physically, to start with. Every one knew who everyone worked for, and no one hid it, and we were in and out of each other's offices and whatever the regulations said, I'm quite sure that if one of the locals came into one of the political officer's offices, he certainly didn't rush around closing his files up and turning all the papers over.

Q: How did you find—did you have any dealings with the Turkish press, did you follow the Turkish press?

PRESEL: Only to the extent that, through my parents, I had had letters of introduction to a couple of Turkish journalists. The Turkish press was then pretty awful. I think the Turkish press now is pretty awful too, but the Turkish press then was certainly extremely awful and one read it, but one read it more to find out what was going on than to read the political commentary. And one also read it to improve one's Turkish.

Q: Were there any personalities that particularly stick out in your mind in Turkey while you were there?

PRESEL: Well, at the risk of telling war stories, I was very lucky. I lived halfway up a hill between the embassy and the presidential palace and about two hundred yards up from where I lived was where General Ismet Inonu, Kamal Ataturk's deputy and a famous general and the second prime minister of republican Turkey, lived. And he was an old man and a widower and like Abrel Haren was selectively deaf. And he loved to play bridge and discovered that the junior third secretary at the embassy spoke a little Turkish and liked to play bridge. So I used to play bridge with him. And I tell this story now to Turks who look at me as though I'm sort of Rip Van Winkle because I knew Inonu. It was kind of like having known George Washington.

Yes, there were a number of Turks, people who've remained friends for the ensuing forty years. Turkey at that time had an extraordinarily competent Foreign Service and the friends whom one made remained friends. This was perhaps a nineteenth century approach to diplomacy, where one acquired one's friends and contacts as junior officers and they remained one's friends and contacts throughout one's entire time in the Foreign Service. But certainly I was very, very lucky in having had an exceptional introduction to diplomacy through the then Turkish diplomatic service, which was extremely good.

Q: What was your impression of your ambassador, who was—

PRESEL: At that time it was Hart.

Q: How did you find him?

PRESEL: I found both Ambassador's Hare and Hart old and Olympian, which from the point of view of a twenty-one-year-old secretary is only reasonable, particularly given that the American embassy residence was built with that wonderful example of conscious American arrogance, next to the Turkish president's house. Raymond Hare had begun his service in Istanbul in 1929. That was his first post. Hart was an Arabist, not a Turk. These were extraordinarily intelligent, subtle-minded, thoughtful people who represented an America that I guess still existed but with which I had a certain amount of difficulty in identifying. I was extremely lucky to have had them as my first ambassadors because they were so good.

Q: What party was in power at the time?

PRESEL: In Turkey, or in the United States?

Q: In Turkey.

PRESEL: They had a coup in the summer of 1960, 27 of May, and the democratically elected Democratic Party had been ousted by the army. And the Republican People's Party, Ataturk's party, had been brought back in. And there was a series—we didn't like that very much, we object to coups—we object to coups as a matter of principle irrespective of the reasons that caused them. And there was a series of coalition governments of which the Republican People's Party was by far the most important member. And then in the spring of 1965, there was a sharp in-drawing of breath among the political class and the parliament voted out the then government, it lost a motion of confidence, and a young, smart politician named Suleyman Demirel from what was left of the Democratic Party, now called the Justice Party, became the prime minister and everyone held its breath to see if the Turkish army would accept this. And to the intense astonishment of everyone except, I think, intelligent Turks, the Turkish army did say nothing and there was a perfectly normal, Western-style change of government in which the ins went out and the outs came in. This was considered in the middle '60s quite an achievement.

Q: Was Bob Dylan in your political section at that time?

PRESEL: Bob Dylan was very much in the political section at that time. Bob Dylan was then probably the most acute observer we had of the Turkish political scene. He spoke wonderful Turkish, and in fact was in the political section, he had the internal job, and I can remember the problem that he had when Mr. Demiral became the prime minister because he'd been a close personal friend of Bob's when he was in the opposition and all

of a sudden he became the prime minister and what the hell was Bob supposed to do about it?

Q: Well, I understand also that Bob had been down in Izmir or someplace where Demirel's power came from—the embassy's contacts were all of one party and all of a sudden a new group came in and, particularly were people from out of town, and Dylan knew them I guess, from the time he was at Izmir?

PRESEL: That's right. It was exactly the way these things are supposed to—

Q: How is it for a lower to mid-grade officer having the best contacts?

PRESEL: It was a problem, and it's been a problem since then. And it's probably never been solved in the Foreign Service. Sensible ambassadors will say, "Let the lower to middle guy who happens to know the prime minister extremely well go off and see the prime minister." However, most ambassadors who care about that kind thing seem to prefer that they do the prime minister themselves.

Q: Well, did you find yourself watching, and was there a problem in our embassy?

PRESEL: Yeah, I think there probably was. I'm sure there was. For all kinds of reasons, one of them having to do with the importance of the military and who was going to look after our relations with the military. It was a very closed, clannish group. And another one having to do with the importance of our intelligence relationships with the Turks and who was going to look after that. But there was also the question of domestic politics and politicians, and the two people who did domestic politics in the embassy were a lady named Elaine Smith and, as you say, Bob Dylan both of them smart, both of them Turkish speaking, both of them with a good deal of Turkish experience, neither of them exactly shy and retiring.

Q: Did you feel that you'd whetted your political officer skills there? Was this a good place to learn?

PRESEL: Yes. The embassy was small enough that I wasn't in London or Paris. The relations were sufficiently broad and complex that it wasn't as though I was in Chad. The country was exotic enough that it was clearly not Western Europe. And the problems it was facing were such that they were mostly accessible to a foreigner interested in trying to find out what was going on.

Q: Was religion—Islamic leaders, Islamic fundamentalists, was this at all of interest?

PRESEL: It wasn't an issue. Remember the kind of society and economy and culture that Kamel Ataturk had been trying to produce in modern republican Turkey was one that resembled Lenin's socialism in a lot of ways. There were state economic enterprises, there were five-year plans, they didn't much like religion, they went about it somewhat

differently but they had the same problems as the Soviets. What do you do about a former empire that has just undergone tremendous stress and strain and is trying to put itself together? Religion was not a problem—mosques were not—one did not hear the call to prayer, mosques were not being built. The Dervish orders were repressed and there was not a great deal of Islam.

Q: Were women wearing veils and—?

PRESEL: No, that was not allowed. In the same way that the wearing of fezzes had been forbidden, veils were not allowed.

Q: Kurds—at the time you were there were Kurds an issue?

PRESEL: Well it depends on how you look at it. Kurds were not an issue because there weren't any Kurds. They were mountain Turks; they were Eastern Turks. There were Kurds who individually were not discriminated against. The first finance minister I knew there, a man named Feret Melen, was a Kurd. There were lots of Kurds. There were lots of Kurds in the government. But Kurds were not allowed to speak Kurdish in public, there was no education in Kurdish, there was no media in Kurdish. The revolution was pretty badly suppressed. There was martial law throughout Eastern Turkey. In fact the trip I made with Clarence Wendell, the military attaché, to Eastern Turkey was the first trip that foreign diplomats were allowed to make there in quite a long time. The issue did not present itself—we all knew about it and knew that it was an issue but they were pretty badly repressed.

Q: Was there any exchange with our embassy in Athens, I mean looking at this problem from different sides and the officers comparing notes?

PRESEL: There may very well have been and I wasn't aware of it. Which leads me to believe that there probably wasn't.

Q: Yeah, I suspect there wasn't. Well, I think this is a good place to stop here and we'll pick it up next time. After this, where did you go?

PRESEL: I went back to Washington where I joined the Arms Control Agency and did something called the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Q: We'll pick this up, this would be in—

PRESEL: The end of 1965. I left Turkey at the end of 1965.

Q: Okay. We'll pick it up then.

Today is the twelfth of April, 2004. Joe, in 1965 you were part of ACDA. Was it called that at that time? Arms Control Disarmament Agency.

PRESEL: Arms Control Disarmament Agency, founded by Hubert Humphrey. He wanted to make an alternative to the Defense Department and it was a mixture of State Department people, civil servants, and military people. It was small—there were less than a hundred people. And it was run by a man named William Foster and his deputy was a man named Adrian Fisher, who had been a legal advisor whom everyone called Butch because he was a tackle at Princeton before he was in the Foreign Service, having been in the university, and I joined just when we began to negotiate the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Q: Looking at it at that time, where did the agency stand? I mean how was the State Department—did it have much clout or influence, or how did you see it at the time?

PRESEL: I didn't. I was a twenty-three-year-old kid. I didn't see it at the time. Twenty years later, when I was its executive secretary, I saw it in a different way and we'll get to that.

Q: But that was a different time, too.

PRESEL: Yes, that was a different time. I was not in a position then to have any idea what it did. I was aware only that it was small, that it was full of fairly smart people. This was just when Vietnam was getting started and most of us believed in the cause we were negotiating, which was the NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty].

Q: What piece of the action, or supporting action, did you have in this?

PRESEL: ACDA was divided into I don't know how many bureaus. One of them did nuclear weapons, missiles, and things like that. Another did negotiations. It had done the Limited Test Ban Treaty [LTBT] and it was doing the Non Proliferation Treaty, which is the part I was in. There was a negotiation in Geneva called The Eighteen Nation Disarmament Conference or ENDC, which was remarkable primarily for the fact that it only had seventeen members because the French refused to participate. And it was set up of a mixture of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] countries, Warsaw Treaty countries, and neutral, non-aligned countries vaguely under the aegis of the UN [United Nations] and it provided the opportunity for the Americans and the Russians to negotiate the NPT. It was in Geneva, which was rather nice. One spent a couple of months in Geneva in the spring and a couple of months in Geneva in the summer and then one went to New York for the first committee of the UN General Assembly. It was a very pleasant way for a junior officer to spend a year.

I was there because I was a Russian speaker and a French speaker and had served in Turkey and knew something about the Soviet Union. It was very interesting. I learned a great deal. And we actually negotiated a treaty.

Q: Who was in charge of your section?

PRESEL: The head of the part of ACDA that negotiated was, first of all a remarkable old-fashioned Foreign Service officer named Jake Beam, who ended up being the ambassador to Moscow and before that had been the ambassador to Prague.

Q : And in Israel, too, is that correct? Was he in Israel?

PRESEL: I don't remember if he was in Israel.

Q: But anyway, he certainly belonged to really the old guard.

PRESEL: Very much the old-fashioned Foreign Service. Extremely portly man—his deputy was a man named Samuel Palmer, also a Foreign Service officer who was a great specialist in the UN in political-military affairs. And then the part to which I belonged was run by yet another Foreign Service officer named Bob Cranick, who was a German specialist. There must have been eight or nine people. It was a time when it was, after all, fairly unusual to be negotiating with the Russians. We sort of approached them on the theory that they all had trousers cut extra full in the back so that they could coil their tails up. And some of the Russians whom one met then, in my case at least, were people I would see on and off for the next thirty years.

Q: When you got there, where stood the NPT?

PRESEL: Well, nowhere. Because the intellectual work that lay behind it had only just begun and the political situation, which ultimately enabled us to negotiate with the Russians, had not yet gelled. We wanted, and ultimately got, an agreement which allowed us to say that those that had it, that is the bomb, wouldn't give it to anybody else. And those that didn't have it wouldn't try and get it. And that part mostly worked. Most of the countries that have since gone nuclear are countries that refused to sign it. We were in fact rather less successful living up to our obligations, which were to move toward nuclear disarmament; that is the nuclear powers were meant to do that. And we haven't done that.

Q: At that time, what was the feeling? What should we do?

PRESEL: I think people like me believed that—I didn't know the first thing about nuclear weapons, although one of the nice things about having been, quite early on, in the Arms Control Agency was it meant that I got something called a Q clearance, which is a clearance that allowed me access to nuclear weapons information and that was very useful then and later on. Most of us felt that we should try to negotiate this agreement, that it was a desirable thing, that all countries should join. We were still part of feeling that this is an America that is a force for good in the world. This was, after all, before Vietnam, before the Berkeley race riots, before 1968, before all these problems. So we felt it was the right thing to do and we signed the agreement in 1968 and it was then in force in 1970.

Q: What were your impressions of the negotiations?

PRESEL: Slow, difficult, operating at several levels, very careful. It was in retrospect rather like porcupines making love. There was the unusual aspect that the Russians and we were really negotiating about the family jewels here. Not just about the family silver, but the diamonds. And also the fact that we were negotiating with the Russians and the Russians, as we all knew, were going to try to cheat us. So this made it an exceptionally sensitive negotiation. It also, however, gave us the opportunity to get used to negotiating with the Russians which is something we hadn't done very much of. And that I think was one of the desirable aspects of it.

Q: Was there the feeling that actually, in this particular instance, both the Americans and the Russians didn't want the hoi polloi to end up with these weapons and so you entered this negotiation essentially in agreement?

PRESEL: I guess we did—this sort of opportunity. I was about as junior as it was possible to get. I think that's possibly true. There is no doubt that it's the kind of club of which when one's a member one wants to limit the membership to the extent that one can. There was also a huge amount of mistrust. Justified, I think, in both cases as to the extent to which the nuclear powers were going to be prepared to observe the NPT and not help their allies get nuclear weapons. This was a serious problem. It was also a serious problem in the fact that we didn't really trust each other very much.

Q: I can't remember at that time if the Chinese had the bomb at that point or not.

PRESEL: The Chinese, I think, did not yet have nuclear weapons. The British did, of course the French did, I don't think the Chinese did yet. And I don't know whether the Israelis yet had it.

Q: Of course we keep coming back to where you were on the food chain, down at the bottom. Was there the feeling that the Soviets might want to share this with the Chinese or were the Chinese not that close to the Soviets anymore and we were on the same side in wanting to keep it out of their hands?

PRESEL: I think we were prepared to assume the worst on the part of the Soviets. That they were going to help the Chinese, that they might very well help the Indians, that they might help the North Koreans. From a Soviet point of view what mattered most was, I think, we kept the bomb out of the hands of the Germans. And from their point of view I can't blame them.

Q: Was there the usual style on the part of the Soviets in negotiating long speeches and you're looking for nuances and small changes? How did this seem to go?

PRESEL: I can't tell you because there was the charade of the Eighteen Nations Disarmament Conference and of the first committee, which was the security committee

of the UN. We talked about the cut off of the production of fissionable material, we talked about the philosophy of nonproliferation, extending the Limited Test Ban Treaty to being a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty [CTBT], we began to talk about space and limiting missiles. And then there was the real negotiation, which was done by the heads of the delegations and to which most of us, fortunately, were not privy. Certainly the negotiations in the unclassified open forum were remarkable for their sterility.

Q: What were you doing at these negotiations?

PRESEL: What junior officers do everywhere. Translating, taking notes, writing papers, feeling self important, wishing I were doing more, conscious that I knew a great deal more than the great leaders who were my bosses and of course not. Learning about negotiating, learning about the Russian—I'd been in Russia, my degree was in Russian, but learning about negotiating with the Russians. Laying down with the Russians, and with other people, that framework of friends and acquaintances that are so useful in our as in any other profession because as you become older and more senior it is extraordinarily useful to have in foreign ministries people who one can call up and get some work done.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Soviets?

PRESEL: Yes, quite a lot. As I say, there are people whom one got to know and whom one preceded to see for the next thirty years. There's a man named Vladimir Shustoff who ended up being ambassador three or four times whom I knew in the middle '60s and later on. And the same thing with many of the delegates from the other eastern European countries. I don't recall whether there was an attempt on their part or on our part for that matter to recruit each other. Certainly I was there, to my knowledge, as the object of a pitch. Whether or not there was a formal or informal—treaty— But certainly at a time when it was very hard to see, to meet these people, they and we were sanctioned to talk to each other.

Q: How long were you doing this?

PRESEL: It lasted from January of '66— My assignment should have been for two years and I agreed to stay on for an extra six months because there was first the NPT to clean up before it was open for—and then there was something called the Conference of Non Nuclear Weapons States—which we cruelly called the "Non Conference"—to which the Americans sent a small delegation that happened in the summer of 1968 in fact just before the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army. And I stayed on for that and that was the end of my assignment with ACDA.

Q: While you were with ACDA was the talk going on about getting this ratified by the Senate? Ever since the League of Nations the whole idea is to co-opt the Senate into negotiations.

PRESEL: The talk, I think, was less "can we get the Senate to ratify this particular agreement" than it was an excuse for us, something behind which we could find. One found it, when one saw it operating in the UN General Assembly when a resolution would be passed and we would put our hands on our hearts and say, We're terribly sorry, we couldn't get that past the Hill, it was very useful, I'm sorry to say. But I don't think at the time it was negotiated that any of us thought it was going to be extraordinarily hard to get it ratified.

Q: Sometimes you have something, as we've seen, there are a number of treaties that we've almost adhered to but have never been ratified.

PRESEL: It was open for signature again the summer of 1968 and it was important for me because it was the first time I'd been to the White House and the first time I met a president.

Q: What happened?

PRESEL: What happened was that it was open for signature. There was a signature ceremony at the White house and Mr. Johnson said he wanted the people who did the work to be invited in addition to the ambassadors and the other important people. And the protocol people apparently invited senior people and Mr. Johnson apparently said he wanted the people who did the work so at the last minute three or four of us were told to pull up our ties and paint our fingernails and go to the White House where I met, among other things, Mr. Johnson and Mrs. Johnson and found them both extraordinarily nice and friendly. Mrs. Johnson was conscious of the fact that she was dealing with a young man who didn't quite know where he was or what he was doing and took me around and showed me some of the paintings in the house.

Q: Well how very nice. I've always heard that Mrs. Johnson was a great asset to her husband.

PRESEL: It was an extraordinary experience for a twenty-four or twenty-five-year-old diplomat to have had.

Q: Well then, '68 wither?

PRESEL: I took leave of absence. This was before it became popular to do that. I agreed to serve in the embassy in Kabul which I thought would be a really fun kind of thing and would be another way to get at the Russians and would be another way to learn about another part of the world that I was interested in and sort of build on Turkey as well as Russia. But what happened was, I'd been in the Foreign Service for five years and wasn't sure that I wanted to spend the rest of my life in the Foreign Service. Friends and my parents said I should consider going to graduate school. Some English friends said, Why don't you go to Oxford? It's easy to get into Oxford as a foreigner because we don't have the kind of courses or requirements that American schools do and there were some people

who were doing serious work on Russia and Turkey, which is what really interested me. So I took leave of absence and went to St. Anthony's College at Oxford for a year.

Q: This would be from '68 to '69.

PRESEL: Sixty-eight to '69. I was the beneficiary of a fellowship called Cresel, which had not previously been granted. The source of the funds for the Cresel scholarship was my bank account and at the end of one academic year I still wasn't sure I wanted to be a Foreign Service officer for the rest of my life but I was pretty sure that I didn't want to be an academic. And I'd run out of money. So I took a leave of absence from St. Anthony's College—which was an all graduate college. It wasn't one of the old beautiful gothic colleges from the twelfth century. It was only graduate students and only the social sciences and it was an extraordinary year and I got a great deal of thinking done.

Q: What was your impression of how your lecturers and all were looking at the Soviet Union at that time?

PRESEL: They were by and large very much farther to the left than were their American counterparts. They were much less afraid of Russia, of the Soviet Union, they were much more willing to give socialism—even Soviet style socialism—a chance. They were much more conscious of the war—on the face of capitalism as it was practiced in the United States. Certainly part of that was resentment of the fact Britain alone was running the world. But part of it was a refusal to accept the American ideology of how the world should be run. So from that point of view it was very interesting. I learned a lot about myself; I learned a lot about Oxford; I learned a fair amount about how other people might approach the problem of the Soviet Union.

Q: Where were the graduate students from? Were they pretty much British?

PRESEL: A fair number of Americans; a lot of people from India and Pakistan and some of the African countries and a couple of Japanese. It was very small, it was very poor, there was no rigid distinction between the junior common room and the senior common room. It was intellectually extraordinarily exciting.

Q: Particularly with the Indians did you get into arguments or disagreements? There always seems to be a tremendous gap between the Indian perspective and the American perspective—particularly in view of the Soviets.

PRESEL: Yes, I found that Indian graduate students were of the same mold as the Indian diplomats with whom I'd come in contact at the UN. That is to say from my point of view they were the most sanctimonious hypocritical bunch of bastards I'd ever run into. All determined to tell the Americans how to do things.

Q: I think that's sort of a legitimate consensus. And I'm sure they have the reverse view so we deserve each other I think.

Seeing how the leftish wing of the academic world was looking at things, particularly at Oxford, did you find yourself agreeing with it, was it changing our point of view or was it stiffening your American resolve?

PRESEL: I'm reminded of two observations of growing up. One was Mark Twain who said that when he was twenty he thought his father was the dumbest man he'd ever met and by the time he was thirty he was astonished how much the old man had learned. The other was the journalist who said to the then prime minister of France that his son was a communist and—also said that yes, his son was twenty years old and if he was not a communist he would disown him; and if he were still a communist at thirty he would disown him then. I think I must have started to grow up by then.

Q: There does seem to be in this period the intellectual world the kind of artsy fartsy world which always has had a leftward spin and particularly in the academic setting. You said you discovered you didn't want to be an academic—was this part of the thought process or not?

PRESEL: I don't think it was so much that. It was rather that I was more interested in doing things than in writing about how other people did things. That was the reason.

Q: Did you find that you were able to contribute much? Granted you were at the lower end of the totem pole dealing with the Soviets. But when academics would say, Well we should negotiate—you had seen the hard edge of what negotiations can achieve and can't achieve.

PRESEL: I think it was the point at which I became conscious of the fact that as an American diplomat one had certain obligations that representatives of other countries didn't have, simply because one was an American. I like to say now that it's not that we work better than other people, we probably work harder than most other people but I don't think that we work better than other people. But the fact is that we were then one of the two superpowers and we are now *the* superpower and that gives us obligation and responsibility as well as privilege.

Q: The Europeans, not as much the British but still the left of the British side, have a wonderful time sniping at the Americans often with reason. Did this get under your skin?

PRESEL: No, no, not at all. It's perfectly true that Vietnam was bubbling along and I guess yes, by then it was clear I was not going to have to serve in the American army in Vietnam and that made it easy for me. It was also the case that by the fall of 1968 the Russians had invaded Czechoslovakia, which kind of meant a pox on both your houses as far as traditional—

Q: You started at Oxford just after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, which, of course, was one of the turning points of the non-dedicated left in Europe, looking at the Soviets. Was there a conversation or anything?

PRESEL: It came as a hell of a shock to a lot of my St. Andrew's colleagues. It kind of marked the end of the age of innocence in terms of what socialism could offer. Yeah, it was bad. But it should also be noted that that was at the same time as the 1968 riots in France and the rest of Europe. As well as at Berkeley and so on, this tremendous break in peoples' perception. As I said I think in our last interview, I was brought up on one side of Vietnam in '68 and Berkeley and so on and people very much younger than I were brought up on the other side and it has made a profound difference in the way we look at the world.

Q: Although you were in graduate school at Oxford did you see rumblings of the May-June '68 demonstrations in Paris?

PRESEL: No, because I wasn't there yet. I was there after.

Q: But were there student movements? Was something happening at Oxford at that time?

PRESEL: Post '68, yes very much so. This was a moment of intense political activism on the part of Oxford students, more of undergraduates than graduates— (phone rings) Excuse me.

Q: Another question. This is a time when all hell is breaking loose in universities in the United States, particularly about Vietnam but there were other movements at the time. Were you getting any reflections of this while you were at Oxford or was this something that you weren't particularly experiencing?

PRESEL: Well as I said to you last time, I am some of the people on the left—by American standards. And I was therefore predisposed to welcome this kind of thing. On the other hand, it's not at all the reason that I wanted to take—I was not terribly affected by it either way.

Q: I was close to the spirit of '69—I was in Saigon. As a Foreign Service officer if you're out of the country you didn't quite get the same feeling, you never quite had that rapport that so many of our people who have come into the service since have gone through this mill. Did you find yourself looking at Vietnam and why were there? Was this a topic of much conversation while you were at Oxford?

PRESEL: It became very important later on, when we get to what happened after that. (phone rings)

Q: On Vietnam, then, did you have any sort of set—for Vietnam? This is such a dividing thing—

PRESEL: No, I had no set—for Vietnam. And as I say, when we get up to 1971 I'll be able to talk to you about Vietnam because it had an important effect on me and my career.

Q: In 1969 you'd finished this year. What did you get out of these—were they Soviet studies or Russian studies?

PRESEL: Remember that the purpose of this for me was to take a year off to think. And if I wanted to stay on to get a DPhil that would have been fine.

Q: You're talking about a doctorate in philosophy.

PRESEL: Yeah. But the main purpose was to take a year and figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I was then twenty-seven years old.

Q: Did you have a significant other at this point?

PRESEL: No, I had a triumph sports car at that point.

Q: That's probably even more maintenance than a significant other. (laughs)

PRESEL: And what I was doing was working on Soviet-Turkish relations because I spoke both Russian and Turkish and that was a combination that was not then very common. And I could do more work on that with less trouble than other things. I ran out of money and at the end of the year I decided I didn't want to be an academic. The State Department was not prepared to renew my leave of absence—this is before it became fashionable in the department to take leaves of absence, they didn't like it very much—and so I came back, without a degree, having decided that I didn't want to be an academic.

Q: So you came back—

PRESEL: In the summer of '69 and went into INR.

Q: And you were in INR from '69 to—

PRESEL: Seventy-one.

Q: What piece of the action did you have?

PRESEL: Inevitably Soviet Union. INR/RSC.

Q: RSC is?

PRESEL: Research in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

Q: And what part of that did you have?

PRESEL: I did Soviet foreign policy, Soviet relations with Eastern Europe. Not criminology. And it was at a time when INR was full of a mixture of really, really serious analysts—people like Paul Cook and Ken Curst and Ben Zook. And kind of dilettante Foreign Service officers like me who thought we knew a lot because we could speak Russian. It was extraordinarily interesting for me because at a fairly early age in my career I was, as it were, welcomed into the world of American intelligence and therefore was able to make friends with people in several intelligence agencies, but also able to understand what the intelligence agencies can and can't do for you. What they can offer and what they can't offer. And so when I was more senior I was never afraid of the CIA, I was never afraid of the NSA—I wasn't prepared to be conned either—but I wasn't worried about them. It also gave me a time when more interesting clearances were very hard to find, particularly among the Foreign Service offers. I got a whole bunch of very unusual clearances that I kept and that opened up whole areas of intelligence that I would otherwise not have had. So I learned a great deal from that.

Q: In INR at that time were—you say, "Soviet foreign policy"—did you have any particular piece of this or—

PRESEL: Yeah, well, I guess because I still had my Q clearance and because I had worked in ACTA on nonproliferation, I did missiles and the politics of missiles—not the throwaway particularly of SS-11s, but the politics of offensive and defensive weapons and this meant that I was involved with more security than I'd been before. I was involved in things like the national intelligence estimates on Soviet offensive strategic weapons, which was very very interesting because it was kind of the guts of what we were trying to do.

Q: How did you feel the Soviets were doing with their nuclear diplomacy—how effective or ineffective were they?

PRESEL: I think it was the point at which I began to realize that while we all worried about nuclear weapons and the ultimate threat to the world, nobody really expected it to happen. We'd come fairly close in 1961 apparently with the Cuban missile crisis and I guess we sort of became interested in 1968 when they invaded Czechoslovakia. But while it was very important, few of us sort of thought a generalized nuclear exchange was about to take place. This gave us a broader margin for operating than would have been the case if you only think that they push a button and thirty minutes later Washington or Moscow explodes.

Q: One of the things that struck me as I've been doing these interviews is how terribly ineffective Soviet diplomacy was. I think with Japan, for hanging on to a couple of stupid little islands, they destroyed any effect they might have had. And much later the SS-20s in the long run went back on them and there had been peace offensives and all this. But then

they invaded Czechoslovakia or Afghanistan and their whole African things didn't go anywhere and they never got a hold in the Middle East. I'm not trying to put words in your mouth and you may disagree with me, but I just think that for all our concerns the Soviets seem to have been quite ineffective.

PRESEL: I'll have to say that it's fortunate for us that the communists were Russians. Had the communists been Swedes, we'd all be speaking Swedish. They're not very confident; the system didn't allow them to do many things, the last thing that the Soviets had done fairly well was the Second World War and it cost them an awful lot to do it. They were much more limited—the system made them much more limited—than we were. And they were far more guilty of thinking they knew it all and being pleased with themselves even than we were. We had Vietnam, after all. And our system is such that when we do something really dumb like Vietnam or discriminating against blacks ultimately society rises and we stop doing it. That was not the case in the Soviet Union.

Q: Also, the Soviets seem to be essentially unable to assimilate. Think of African or Middle Eastern countries where the Soviets went, they went sort of as a gang and stayed together and didn't seem to relish getting out, and made themselves quite unpopular. For one they didn't spend much money, I'm talking as individuals.

PRESEL: They didn't have much money. And they are far more racist than we are. They don't like blacks. They don't like—in contemporary Russia they still refer to the "yellow peril." It's appalling.

Q: I remember dealing with African students coming out of Bulgaria who disliked being called "black monkeys."

PRESEL: I can't blame them.

Q: You say the intelligence agencies—I would think if you were dealing with nuclear matters this is exactly where the intelligence agencies could display much more effectiveness than say the American diplomats. In political matters I think American diplomats really can get out more and mix and mingle than the intelligence people, and come up with a more balanced view. But in nuclear matters you have to rely on all sorts of other means to find out what's going on.

PRESEL: I don't think what the requirements for your oral history are but even now there's a whole bunch of stuff I'm just as happy not talking about.

Q: Oh that's fine, because this is obviously completely un—

PRESEL: Yes. And one of the things I cannot stand is the absolute inability of the American government to keep its mouth shut.

Q: Oh yeah. And I'm not trying to pry there, but I'm just wondering—in other words, I would think that you would find the intelligence in the field you were working in far better coming from other agencies than coming from overt sources.

PRESEL: There was no intelligence that we were getting—not that I was aware of. There were the clues that criminology could give us but it was the famous national technical means which were only getting started then that enabled us to know what we did clearly not enough and equally clearly not the right kind of information that we were able to get on what the Russians had.

Q: This is—Penkaoski or Petoskey?

PRESEL: Petoskey.

Q: Yes. Well. Was there the feeling that this is mutual assured destruction—the MAD theory. These were unusable weapons and so let's look at dealing with this in some other matter?

PRESEL: I think Foreign Service officers thought that way—I certainly did. There was the American fascination with technology and an interest in Soviet missiles, Soviet tanks, Soviet warheads simply because they were Soviet missiles, Soviet tanks, and Soviet warheads. And in both countries the extrapolation was from our approach into theirs. Not very many Americans knew very much about the Soviet Union, not very many Americans were rubbing up against the Soviets—certainly not official Soviets—at the time. Because I had, I suppose I was perhaps less afraid of them than other people. I'd been in the Soviet Union, I'd been there before I was in the Foreign Service, and by that time I had seven or eight years of service mostly involving the Russians. I felt that diplomacy offered us something. I was also conscious of the fact that we were a lot more able to question the sea of wisdom than they were. One of the lessons I took from the nonproliferation treaty was that it was up to the Americans to think through what it was that we wanted to have happen and tell the Russians what we were trying to do and have them react, but it was up to us to do the thinking and make them think about it. That their system made it extraordinarily difficult, not for them to think, but for them to think and to get permission to talk about it, which was a tremendous advantage for us.

Q: From what I understand of negotiations that went on over the years, often through our own intelligence we had to inform the Soviet negotiators of what they had.

PRESEL: There was the famous INF—cases where the military came and said, Please don't tell our civilians what you know. But I'm thinking of those in policy terms. In trying to come to compromise it always seemed to end up being incumbent on us to have the ideas and then to react. It's not that we're less intelligent than we are, not at all. And they were certainly much more disciplined than we were. But their system made it very hard for them to be able to take the lead.

Q: Was our analysis that their military was running the show in this particular field or was it just the very top of the Kremlin?

PRESEL: I think that's an example of the way in which we extrapolated from our approach into theirs. Despite the evidence that Caesarism and Bonapartism had never been a part of Russian or Soviet history, we tended to assume that the military occupied a more important position in policy making than was in fact the case.

Q: During this time were there any significant development changes or something that picked up? I'm talking about Soviet foreign policy on the nuclear side.

PRESEL: No. Individually I began to realize that decisions in this field are not taken in a vacuum; that reactions to an otherwise perfectly sensible decision may mean something that neither us nor them would have wanted to have happen. And it's a fairly good argument in telling people why you want to take a position when you take a position.

Q: You were now back in the United States and the Vietnam demonstrations were reaching their height and all. Did this affect you at this point?

PRESEL: It affected me because at the end of my service at INR, my two years were up, the personnel people—I couldn't serve in Moscow because I wasn't married. We at that time had this somewhat—policy of allowing bachelor marines and bachelor secretaries to go but except for the—

Q: And communicators too.

PRESEL: Except for aids bachelor diplomats couldn't go to Moscow. I therefore couldn't even go, which I should have. And I was a French-speaking bachelor. The department personnel said, You're going to go to Vietnam. They were then under a great deal of pressure to come up with a large—of people to serve in Vietnam. And I said that I wasn't, that I objected to our policy in Vietnam, I did object to our policy in Vietnam. Not on moral grounds but that I didn't think it was working. And if they chose to send me to the embassy in Saigon of course I would go. But what I was not prepared to do was to go to FSI [Foreign Service Institute] to learn Vietnamese for a year and then go off to be a provincial advisor in something called CORS, I can't remember what it stands for. At that point they were clearly under tremendous pressure because I was invoked by the director general of the Foreign Service who explained to me that this was the new Foreign Service and I was going to have to serve in Vietnam in CORS. And I said that maybe it was the new Foreign Service but that I wasn't interested in doing that. I repeated that I would be happy to go to Saigon to serve in the embassy but that as far as I was concerned Vietnamese was a useless language, I wasn't interested in the area, and that I was a diplomat not a colonial administrator. That was perhaps an unfortunate choice of words and the director general said that I was going to have to accept this assignment or resign. I said fine, I'd resign.

Q: Was this Harry Barnes?

PRESEL: No, it was J. Wesley Adams. And Mr. Adams said that I would have to resign and I said, "Fine I'm on leave of absence from Oxford University, I'll go back to Oxford and finish my degree."

Q: What happened?

PRESEL: What happened was I thought I was going to be out and what happened was they caved. As is so often the case in the State Department they caved. I was re-summoned by the director general and told that I would not have to resign but that I could stay in INR until I rotted, as far as he was concerned. This was then not a part of the State Department and ambitious young Foreign Service officers who wanted to be part of—and I did, I learned a great deal from them and I'm very lucky that I had it. And then the promotions came out. I had hitherto been promoted rather more quickly than most of the members of my class and I was of course not promoted and indeed got a letter from them saying that I was in the lower 10 percent of my class. And displaying probably a good deal of the immaturity which I then still had I immediately demanded another interview with the director general and went in and said there were only two possibilities here. One was that he was trying to punish me, the other that he was trying to save face by using the fact that I was in the lower 10 percent of my class not to send me to Saigon because I could not be expected to perform well if I was in an assignment I didn't want.

In any case, I was excused from service in Vietnam, as it were, and told I was going to have to stay in INR unless I could find something else. So I went and talked to a man named [Adolph] Spike Dubs who was then the head of the Soviet desk and asked him if he had any jobs. And he said yes there was a job at the Soviet desk and was I interested. And I said, "Yes but there's one thing you should know." And he said, "Yes, you're currently an incompetent because you're in the lower 10 percent of your class; we think that's very amusing." So I said, "Well if it doesn't bother you it doesn't bother me," and was assigned to the Soviet desk in the summer of 1971. The previous summer I had been asked to take the—dancers to the Soviet Union, which I did. It was a wonderful way to spend two and a half months.

Q: This was who?

PRESEL: The—American dance theater.

Q: This is an African American group?

PRESEL: Largely but not entirely African American. American ballet. The Americans and the Russians sent cultural groups as part of an agreement where they would send X number of groups a year and the sending country always sent an escort officer along. In the case of the Soviet Union we all knew who our escort was. In our case we didn't find it necessary so they sent me.

Q: I wonder if you could talk about this because ballet is such an integral part of Soviet culture and to see this group which is quite different from the classical ballet—wasn't it? I mean it was—

PRESEL: It was partly Martha Graham techniques, partially American folk dance techniques. It was mostly but not entirely black. It was an extraordinary opportunity for me because it enabled me to see part of the Soviet Union that very few American officials ever did. There's nothing like getting to know the real Soviet Union if you have to put on a show in seven different cities and get seven tons of props and costumes and transport it from one city to another and operate in a theater and so on. It was also the problem of looking after twenty-five young, extremely attractive, highly sexed and, among the men, almost exclusively gay people. Very important for all kinds of reasons; very important because ballet, as you've just observed, is something the Russians kind of felt they had the monopoly on and they were fascinated by the kind of dancing that—was doing. And Alvin was a choreographer as well as a dancer. He created the ballets as well as running the company—intense fascination with black Americans on the part of the Russians; black American dancers. Intense fascination by the mostly African black students in the cities where we went. It astonished how many foreigners came out of the walls when we showed up. And from my point of view learning a huge amount about how the Soviet Union operated by trying to get this ballet company around, and opening when it was supposed to open, where it was supposed to open. I learned a huge amount about the real Soviet Union.

Q: Were the people who were involved in this trying to get visibility for it or were they trying to restrict it? Did you find that Noma Katura [?] had all the tickets and that sort of thing?

PRESEL: The Soviet authorities were clearly very much of at least two and probably seven minds on the subject. They knew they couldn't send their groups to the United States if they didn't let us send ours; they knew that they could make a lot of money on us selling tickets in the Soviet Union because they can charge more for Western things than they could for their own. And there was also a good deal of pressure on them, clearly, from electoral circles to make this thing happen. At the same time there was the desire to limit to the extent possible the extent to which the Americans were learning—So they wanted to send us, and succeeded in sending us to places like Zaporizhia in Ukraine and Rusov on the Dahn in southern Russia. Which is kind of like, I apologize, sending people to Kansas City.

Q: Or Topeka.

PRESEL: Or Topeka. They had very mixed feelings. We were very closely watched. They were very worried about a large number of Americans running around. It was hard for them. But it was absolutely fascinating and it was a tremendous window in the West for the Soviets; a window into the Soviet Union for me.

Q: I can't help but ask: how about all this highly charged group of young Americans—did you have problems sorting people out or getting them out of trouble or that sort of thing?

PRESEL: It was a highly professional group and they had wonderful dances. It was important for the American government for several reasons. One was clearly cultural diplomacy in general and cultural diplomacy with a black group and also I think it's fair to say the—American Dance Theater existed in a hand to mouth kind of way almost exclusively on the contracts they had got having the State Department send it to various places in the world. And so it was important to us. It was quite remarkable and has had a long-term influence, I think it's fair to say, on Soviet dance. People tell me that.

Q: Were you finding people involved in Russian ballet coming? Was there an intermingling and discussion or was it basically just being watched?

PRESEL: Watched. I don't know what the dancers did in St. Petersburg and Leningrad and Moscow, but in—or in Lugansk there really was not very much to do. So it really tended not to happen.

The reason I mention that to you, to go back, I had signed up to go to the Soviet desk with Spike Dubs. And the reason I mentioned the—dancers was that shortly after I had agreed to go to the Soviet desk I was asked if I wouldn't do another cultural group to the Soviet Union. And I said sure, and found myself taking Duke Ellington's orchestra to Russia. I'll be happy to talk to you about that because in its own way the influence of jazz in Russia and so on was profound and extraordinary as what the—did. But the reason I mention it in the context in which I was raised in was that on the way out from the Soviet Union I stopped in Paris with the Ellington group and stopped in the embassy and found a friend and found myself talking to DCM [deputy chief of mission] Perry Cully who said, "Why don't you come to Paris?" And I said, "Well I've just signed up to the Soviet desk," and to make a long story short, I found myself at the end of 1971 serving in the embassy in Paris. And I'll talk to you about that later on. But I find it more than somewhat piquant that someone on the verge of being thrown out of the Foreign Service and being put into the lower 10 percent of his class and being told that he could stay in INR forever found himself six months later in the American embassy in Paris. I was kind of lucky.

Q: I was low ranked and received four thousands, which in those days was big money, an award for doing well in a crisis in the same year. (laughs)

Let's talk about Duke Ellington Company. I'm told on the Voice of America whose name I can't remember—

PRESEL: Willis Conover.

Q: Uh huh. Who was known to every young Russian, he was a real pop star in a way—but will you talk about your time with the Duke Ellington Orchestra?

PRESEL: Certainly. It was different in kind from the—dancers. The dancers were mostly in their twenties and thirties, Alvin was perhaps forty-five. Duke Ellington and his orchestra was a good deal older, Ellington must have been sixty-five or seventy. He was very much a cultural icon in the United States, he knew who he was. He was a personal friend of the president, Mr. Nixon, which is one of the reasons that the State Department wanted me to go. They were very worried about the potential fall out if something went wrong and I was one of the few people who had done one of these deals. I don't deserve any credit for it, I just happened to have had the experience.

It was fascinating for all kinds of reasons. The Russian musical establishment wanted the Ellington orchestra there because they wanted to hear the wonderful Duke Ellington tunes that we were all brought up with. Ellington himself had stopped being a player of jazz—he played jazz, he played jazz every night. But what he thought he was doing was composing serious American music. And for him the importance of the orchestra, besides that was how he made his living, was that he had a tool available which enabled him to play immediately the results of his extraordinarily creative and fertile mind. And so there was a constant tension between the Russians who wanted programs that consisted of nothing but "Black and Tan Fantasy," "[Creole] Love Call," and "Take the 'A' Train," and Ellington who wanted to play really remarkable music that he was still writing. That was one thing.

The second thing was the extraordinary influence of jazz in Russia, the feeling of jazz as a degenerate Western art form. At the same time the fascination with jazz, the interest in jazz, and the remarkable knowledge of jazz that Russian musical people had. Unlike the dancers the year before there was a good deal of mingling on the part of members of the band and Russian jazz. I don't think the Russian authorities liked it very much; we thought it was great of course. I gather there were even cases in which members of the band on nights that we weren't playing would sit in on improvised jazz. It was an extraordinarily important example of the use to which cultural diplomacy could be put, and I wish it was something we did more of.

Q: Did you have much contact with Ellington?

PRESEL: I had a great deal of contact with Ellington—with Ellington and with the band. Ellington was a lot more difficult person to look after than Alvin Ailey, he was a lot older, he'd been a lot more famous for a lot longer, he knew what he wanted, and what he wanted included tremendous quantities of coca cola with fresh lime and steak. And it's not immediately clear how one goes about getting fresh lime and steak in the Soviet Union at that time. This was an area in which the fact that I spoke Russian and that I had previously taken the Alvin Ailey Dancers meant that scrounging actually became rather useful.

Q: How did you find the embassy there? Were they helpful?

PRESEL: Tremendously helpful. Always extremely helpful, in both cases. They wanted to do what they could; they used this in the best possible way. The PAO [public affairs officer], a man named David Nahl, used the group's presence to have access to Russian figures that you otherwise would not have been able to see. I met Madame Prukofia [?] because of this. And Jake Beam, who is still the ambassador and for whom I had worked previously, gave a much larger and more interesting reception that he knew he could get away with and got a more interesting group of people.

I should way by way of slight diversion that I was able to stay in the staff aid's apartment in Spaso House because the staff agent who was a friend of mine had been away and said, "Why don't you stay there," and during the reception Ellington said he wanted to take a rest so I told him to go into the staff aid's apartment and lie down for a while. He came out and went up to Beam and said, "Mr. Ambassador this is just terribly unfair. I have to stay at the Rosia Hotel and Joe is staying in your house." (laughs) No, I got along very well indeed with Ellington and the band and I learned a great deal. I learned a great deal about jazz but I also learned a great deal about—this was the '70s—the position that highly successful black artists occupied and didn't occupy in then contemporary America.

Q: Could you go a little farther?

PRESEL: Yeah, the extent to which integration was changing their ability to operate. These were great musicians, these were people like Cootie Williams who'd been important in jazz since the 1920s. They had, after all, to live under Jim Crow and now no longer did. On the other hand they were also conscious of the fact that whites by and large looked down on them. It was an extraordinary education for me, as well as for my musical education.

Q: Were you picking up, both with them and the dance group, a reaction to the Soviet side of things? They had the time when Paul Robeson came over and they were feeling more empathy towards the Soviet system.

PRESEL: Much of the case of the Ellington Dancers and the Ellington Orchestra than in the case of the other dancers. Dancers, I found, were extraordinarily self-centered and self-contained. Their life was dancing and most of them—there were of course exceptions—were interested solely in what they were doing. The band, the Ellington Orchestra, which was older and more mature, and had been around for a long time [in 1963 when I was in Turkey the Ellington Orchestra came through on a State Department tour]. They'd been around a real long time so they were much more conscious of who they were. They were also much more conscious of speaking for America.

Q: Well then, I think this is a good place to stop. We'll pick back up in 1971 when you're off to—

PRESEL: Paris. I did six months on the Soviet desk doing, inevitably again, Russian foreign policy. And then the Paris assignment began to seem more likely to work and I went to see Jack Matlock who was replaced by Dubs and said, "I've signed up for this desk and I'll do it but I've been offered Paris—what do I do?" And to his eternal credit Jack Matlock said, "You only get one shot at Paris. Go to Paris and we'll figure something out."

Q: All right. Well one private question on INR. Did you have any feel for at the time how INR stood say in relation to the desk? Sometimes there's a distance and it depends on the bureau and all that. Was there a good working relationship?

PRESEL: Yes there was a very good working relationship. There was, I felt, a consciousness that what we were doing was—this was after all the cutting edge of American foreign policy. This was *the* great dispute. The desk and that part of INR were working together. The Russians were only sort of number four or five on our enemies list. Coming well after DOD [Department of Defense], CIA, Congress, and so on.

Q: National security agencies. (laughs)

PRESEL: That hasn't changed.

Q: (laughs) Well alright we'll pick it up when you're off to Paris.

Today is the fourth of May 2004. Joe, you're off to Paris 1971. What was your job?

PRESEL: It was a green job. I was responsible for the French left and part of France's relations with Russia.

Q: You were there from when to when?

PRESEL: Fall of '71 to the summer of '74. I was assigned for two years and what happened was that I was offered the chance to serve in Moscow. And having broken my assignment on the Soviet desk to go to Paris, when I was asked if I wanted to serve in Moscow it seemed very unfair not to do that, particularly since I was in Russia. On the other hand, just at that point it became quite clear that George, the president of France, was dying. And the embassy asked if I might not stay on through his death and the inevitable presidential elections. So in fact I left just after the election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in the summer of '74 for the president of France.

Q: Alright. Well let's pick this up in '71. This is three years after the events of May '68 and the great—revolt or whatever you want to call it. But where stood, from your perspective, the left and the political life of France at this point?

PRESEL: I might say that's a very good question, which is what people like me say when they haven't got a clue what the answer is and are looking desperately for a chance to think it through. The left was mature; that is to say, the left took a huge shot in the arm in a positive sense from the events of 1968. It made up for the communists and the problems with Prague. It made up for the communists for the fact that France was becoming increasingly prosperous and the French Communist Party's [PCF] hold on its electorate was beginning to shake. So that was a plus moment for them. The Socialist Party, moreover, had emerged from some time in the wilderness and had decided to align itself with the French communists. This was something that caused great shock to the American government, worried as always that France might go communist. It's difficult to think of a country whose culture makes it less permeable to communism than France, but that is nevertheless what we thought.

On the other hand, for someone like me it was a very interesting moment because the French communists were for the first time prepared to talk to people at the embassy. That we, our side, were prepared to let a person from our embassy go and talk to the communists.

Q: Before that it had been a matter of mutual distance?

PRESEL: I think so. It had been a feeling that they didn't want to talk to, clearly, and I don't think we very much wanted to talk to them. And it was all of the French left. It was in part, I think, out of a desire not to alert the French intelligence services to the fact that we might have been talking to bad people. But it was also a hangover from the bad old days when you mustn't be seen talking to communists. As it was, the instructions that I was given allowed me to talk to anyone that I wanted to, provided only that I told what I was doing. From the point of view of the French left, I was received at the—, which is the French Communist Party paper. I was received by the—, which is the French Communist Trade Union Federation. I was not received at the headquarters of the French Communist Party. But I was certainly seeing members of the party, including quite senior members of the party, both in—and in the— Now it helped that I was a French speaker and had some knowledge of French culture and French history. It was a fascinating moment, they were thinking about what they should do. They were starting to wonder if they had run out the string that then headed the French Communist Party—was a very good—but not particularly a very imaginative or thoughtful person for the future of the French Communist Party. And there was the non-communist left which was growing quite quickly. There was the re-emergence of people who had fought against the French giving up Algeria, who in many cases were the left, people like— So it was a terribly interesting time for someone who cared about France quite apart from Franco-American relations. It was a wonderful job.

Q: The Communist Party under Thorez has a reputation of being the most slavishly obedient to Moscow.

PRESEL: Of the non-ruling parties.

Q: Yeah. How was it seen at that time when you got there?

PRESEL: It was seen as being a good deal more powerful than in fact it was. I had quite by chance acquired a personal friendship with a member of the French domestic intelligence service who was responsible for the French Communist Party, a fact which drove other representatives of the American government and the embassy absolutely bananas. And they seemed to have no doubt as to the fact that this was a declining asset. The French Communist Party was bound not to be successful ultimately. I think we were still somewhat enthralled with the idea of actually taking over. Certainly we were very careful about whom we saw and how we did it. And we also tended to underestimate the extent to which it was really financed and run by Moscow, if it was somewhat the same way that the FBI financed and in a sense ran the American Communist Party during the same period. We still thought of it as part of the glorious tradition that began with the Congress of Tours in 1920 and—and so on. So it was an interesting moment; France was changing profoundly at that point and so were Franco-American relations and so therefore was the political mosaic.

Q: We've seen the Communist Party as being somewhat as it was in Italy. You grew up in the Communist Party; it was passed on from generations. You were a communist but it was really focused on trying to get something out of your factory job or something. It was almost a reflex one had rather than having a bunch of agents running around trying to sabotage things. Or not.

PRESEL: That's right. To put it differently, when a few years later—became the president of France and allowed a government coalition, which included a Communist Party, in there he had it right. Because he squeezed them and squeezed them until very quickly they went from having 20 percent of the vote to having about 5 percent of the vote, which is about where they are right now. And I think the French establishment, the permanent French governing class, had a more accurate understanding of the real power of the PCF than we did. And I agree with you that it was almost a cultural thing, an adherence to a folk religion for an awful lot of them. You did it because you did it but you certainly had no intention of a red revolution.

Q: Yeah. We'll still talk about the Communist Party and then we'll move over to the socialists. How did you operate with this? Was the CIA station chief or any of his cohorts comfortable with you doing this? How did this work?

PRESEL: Well, I think it's fair to say that since by then I'd been in the Foreign Service for ten years and had been in INR, I perhaps had a better understanding of what the—could and couldn't bear than did many of my peers. And I was perhaps a known quantity to the Soviet part of the DCI [Director of Central Intelligence], they certainly didn't object. The station clearly had enough to do without doing all reporting on the Communist Party. Some of the stuff that I did was obviously irrelevant; some of it was marginally useful to our intents to get an understanding of what French political culture

was all about. They certainly didn't object. They were equally interested in what I was doing but I wasn't aware of any problem.

Q: What about in your conversations with communist members and officials? Were they trying to sell you or were you selling them or what?

PRESEL: I don't think anyone had any illusions that either side was selling anything to anybody. There wasn't the slightest sense of anyone trying to sign me up for something. I think there was a feeling on both our parts that the world had changed sufficiently, that it was in everyone's interest that the United States government and a major non-ruling Communist Party should begin to get to know each other, that we had things to say to each other, that knowing more about each other and more about how each other thought and worked could only be desirable in a world in which neither the United States nor the French Communist Party is going to disappear. And because I was very lucky, particularly in my second ambassador in Paris and having a man who had a good deal of confidence in me—

Q: Who was that?

PRESEL: Jack Rulin. I was given a fair amount of freedom to go and do what I wanted to do.

Q: I suppose it's more leftist than communist, but communist/leftist influence in the universities. One always thinks of the universities, particularly in Europe as being, this is where all the Marxists end up and the students come out and immediately join a—or something.

PRESEL: Well this is the country in which the prime minister, Mr.—, when told his son was a communist, observed that his son was twenty-one years old and that if he hadn't been a communist by the time he was twenty-one he would have disowned him, and if ten years later he was still a communist he'd disown him then. It is certainly the case that the Europeans have a more ideological approach to politics than we do. I think it's also the case that the political spectrum is far broader anywhere in Europe—certainly in France—than in the United States. From the point of view of any intelligent Frenchman, the American spectrum goes from right of center to center, which makes it less interesting to them. Not less important, but less interesting. The universities were getting over 1968.

Q: There were two things: one was the student revolt of '68 and all this, but also there's a Czech invasion.

PRESEL: There was the Czech invasion, the Czech revolution; there was the travail of the United States in Vietnam where a lot of bright young Frenchmen were taking a great deal of pleasure in the fact that the Americans were deep in the morass. I think it's fair to say that among thoughtful young Frenchman, there was the realization that a great deal of what happens in the world happens first in the United States, certainly in the cultural

world and the economic world, like it or not. And that therefore it behooved them to look carefully at what was going on in the United States following Berkeley with the race riots and so on. But yes, the universities were bubbling still. The French who have a far longer appreciation of urban violence and terrorism than we do were spending a great deal of time with French policemen and the military out on the streets. You can reasonably argue that the Communist Party was perhaps the most conservative part of France from that point of view. These were workers who were interested in doing a little better, sending their sons to school and being left alone to enjoy their beer at night. They were not trying to produce a revolution.

Q: Let's turn to the Socialist Party. Can you describe where the wings of the Socialist Party were in those days?

PRESEL: We didn't see it much at all; it was a major event when the ambassador had Monsieur Mitterrand on to lunch. We were still somewhat shy of it; we were worried about Monsieur Mitterrand. We were, for that matter, worried about Gaston Defferre, who, after all, had been a minister about fourteen times already. The socialists seemed to us, in retrospect, to be weaker than they in fact were; to be divided, to be spending their time worrying about whether they were a part of the left, in the Marxists sense, or whether they were a part of the center left in the German or British labor rights social democratic sense. It was hard for them because they could not in the early and mid-'70s absorb a fair—of the French Communist Party because there was still a fair amount of discipline in it. So it was a difficult situation for them. They were not in government, they were in the opposition, and they were worried about lots of young people going either to the communists or to parties to their right like the French radicals. So they were in a difficult position and they thought they were losing ground. I'm not sure that was the case. Monsieur Mitterrand became the president, after all, in 1981.

Q: But this is still politically somewhat considerable in the future.

PRESEL: Politically considerably in the future. And when I got to Paris the socialists had just agreed to a common front with the communists for the purposes of presenting candidates in the next legislative elections. And this was a matter of some concern to us. What would we do if there had after all not been a communist in the French government since 1947. We were of course very worried about it for all kinds of reasons. Not only the obvious political ones but also for reasons such as the cooperation we were doing with military and other technology and so on. The socialists, I think, were trying to know who they were, and for a while they did so with a good deal of success.

Q: As a matter of fact the minute Mitterrand came in the socialists were still searching and it took a while for them to move much towards the center.

PRESEL: It did indeed.

Q: How about the socialists and their ties to the British Labor Party, the German SBD [Social Democratic Party]? These would naturally be where they would be looking for support.

PRESEL: Yeah I didn't see it, possibly because I wasn't looking for it. I didn't see it at all, is the answer. And I wonder if it isn't because the Second World War was only twenty years old and there was still an intense dislike of the Germans and unhappiness with the British who has undergone the same travails as the French but were able to tell the world that they had won the Second World War and the French weren't; and that wasn't fair, damn it.

Q: Were you still finding undercurrents throughout French society the "what did you do during World War Two, Daddy?" type of thing? In fact, daddies were still running the government more or less.

PRESEL: Daddies were very much running the government. That was very much of a problem that I believe was the period in which—the first of the French—trying to demythify, if such a word exists, what happened during the war.

But no, people did worry about what their fathers did during the war and just as one never found in the German army anybody who had ever fought on the Western Front, the entire German army fought on the Eastern Front; in the same way the entire population of France seems to have been intimately involved in the resistance.

Q: Was this a subject that when you were doing—you kind of avoided?

PRESEL: I've never tried to avoid any subjects.

Q: But I was wondering whether it was a subject that just came up and did you find—

PRESEL: It was easy for me to do so because I was a French-speaking American and therefore could not be expected to understand the niceties of French culture so I could put my feet in it—and did, with a great deal of pleasure.

Q: So it was wide-open eyes looking rather naive—where did you see the role of the "intellectuals" and the left at that time?

PRESEL: Intellectuals, in France, are part of the left almost exclusively. There was and still is a feeling among the intellectuals that America was bad because it was young and brash and full of money and not full of culture and understanding, and that we should be more tolerant of and listen to and be guided by the French. There was also the feeling whether socialism, socialist democracy or Marxist socialism was still the way of the future and that the horrors of two world wars were very much a problem that could come again and that therefore it was essential that society and government change in order precisely to change this from ever happening again. The position of intellectuals in

France is extremely important and remains extremely important today. I'm convinced that one of the reasons in the most recent Iraq war that we had such difficulty with the French is that the then French foreign minister, Monsieur Deville Pant, walked, talked, and acted like the pompousness of the French that we like to hate. Tall, good looking, well dressed, beautiful wife, wonderful English, writes poetry, writes books, knows about wine; all those reasons. Intellectuals in France are very very important. Intellectuals in France are very very unreal.

Q: I've seen it put forward that the United States often serves as the whipping boy for the French to go after some of their own problems by using the United States. It's kind of a unified force to stick it to the Americans.

PRESEL: Yes, I'm sure that's the case. It's a problem which is not unknown in countries including ours. We're rather good at it.

Q: No no, we went through a French bashing period—I think it only lasted a few months. But french fries became liberty fries and liberty cabbage from sauerkraut, that was World War One.

PRESEL: I can understand why the Americans and the French get along so badly politically and why they do their best to bring out all of the worst features of the other. At the same time I think it's probably fair to say that when the going gets really tough you're a lot likelier to find the French on your side than you are likely to find other European countries with whom in principle we have better relations.

Q: I couldn't agree more. It's one of these paradoxes.

This is tape three, side one, with Joe Presel. Where stood the right at that time?

PRESEL: I didn't have much to do with the right. Perhaps because I was inherently not very comfortable with the world of people with Des in front of their names and Chateaus.

Q: How about the Pieds-Noirs and all of that?

PRESEL: I had nothing to do with *Pieds-Noirs* (people of French and European-origin born in Algeria during French rule from 1830–1962) and I had nothing to do with the already quite large French aristocratic minority. What I did do, consciously in an attempt to get some perspective on the Parisian political hothouse life, I took a share in a small French hunt. Hunting in French is done with guns not with horses and this was in the Loire Valley, and it was a typical rural hunt; there was the priest, veterinarian, the doctor, the mayor from a town about twenty-five thousand, a couple of businessmen, me, some French civil servants—that's how I got to know them in Paris. And you didn't shoot a ____, you were lucky if you got a rabbit, but you learned an awful lot about what real France, what they call *La France Profonde* (deep France), was thinking about. To the extent, that was not the French left, and not deeply politically active, but that was a very

useful antidote to Paris, so I learned a lot about real France, the part of France that everyone in France, claims to be a part of, but in fact, most of people are not now. But I didn't do the right; I didn't have much to do with the right.

Q: How did you find the embassy political section?

PRESEL: Large—probably too large—, competent, self-consciously aware of the fact that they were in Paris, that we were lucky to be in Paris, that France mattered; it wasn't simply a function of beautiful buildings and great food. We worked quite hard. We saw a lot of people. We probably didn't think long-term, as much as we perhaps could have. This was a period when we were still doing spot-reporting because you couldn't count on CNN which didn't exist or the newspapers to do it for you. It was a very good political section; it was in fact, in retrospect, a very good embassy. It was huge, but very, very good.

Q: I'm just curious, in such an atmosphere of a big embassy like that, were there lunch-time conversations about what's going on or was everybody kind of doing their thing? Sometimes there isn't much time to almost exchange ideas within a group like that.

PRESEL: We didn't. We each did our thing. If one was a personal friend of one or another's colleagues, one saw them. But one was not spending a great deal of time worrying about what the political section thinks about the withered France. It was an intellectually quite highly charged political section.

Q: How did you feel there, during the anxietude administration and the dominance of Henry Kissinger—how did you feel that France fitted into sort of the State Department view, presidential view, or—?

PRESEL: France never fits into the State Department view or the presidential view of any world. France is itself anti-Milne pleasure in asserting itself, particularly engaged with Americans. It's difficult; it's hard to swallow; it's too different from us. But I think it's fair that for the purposes of this exercise that I repeat what I said earlier: when it's really tough, you can count on the French. It is, in fact, the case at the time of Cuba in '62—when Mr. Kennedy sent someone—Acheson—to Paris to talk to go on and show them the pictures but France said, We don't need to see the pictures. We're with you. And this still stands.

Q: I thought it was quite apt that the presidential secretary at State, Colin Powell, when asked about the problems with France over the Iraq war said, "You know the United States and France have been in marriage counseling for over two hundred years." And I think our oral histories would be replete with the stories about the French and the Americans and how they don't, at the diplomatic level, seem to clash on various things—usually not of great importance but just annoyances on both sides.

PRESEL: We tend to ignore the fact that there is an avenue John Kennedy in Paris and in most other French towns—there is an avenue Frontalin in Paris.

Q: There's a Roosevelt, too.

PRESEL: Yes, there's indeed a Roosevelt in Paris. And there is certainly, very much, a recollection both of 1917 and of 1942.

Q: It's a fascinating relationship, I think. Were there any developments during the time you were there? Well, first place, how was the Vietnamese war, which the opposition was winding down, at that point, although it wasn't going too well. How did that play out in your area of responsibilities?

PRESEL: In two ways. It complicated my life as a political officer, because of the corrosive effect it had on American foreign policy in general and on the position of America in the world. Individually, it had an entirely different effect. The Paris peace talks were going on when I was in Paris, and there was a shortage of really good French speakers. And the embassy lent me to the delegation for a period of some months to give them a hand with the public relations, the press aspect of the talk. I should say, having attended them, that the talks appeared to be proceeding with all the goodly ration of the protocol of Versailles of Louis the XIV.

Q: Did you have any feel of progress being made?

PRESEL: No, I had no feel of progress being made. And it may be unfortunate to say this, but I had a feeling that I have been right in not wanting to spend time here learning Vietnamese in the two years serving there.

Q: In your work, did you find yourself trying to get to head of the political section? Who was the head of the political section?

PRESEL: I had two heads of the political section. The first one was a man named Bob Anderson, head of consulate in Bordeaux, American-Italian, wonderful French, a close personal friend of Prime Minister Chaban Delmas. Then when he left to become ambassador in Dahomey, he was replaced by Ellen Homes, another French speaker, another extraordinarily intelligent, thoughtful American diplomat who had been promoted from within the political section to become the political counselor, and found his life somewhat complicated by the fact that he was junior and ranked everybody in the political section except me.

Q: Were you pushing through your political counselor to get either ambassador to have more contact with the left to round them anyway or to include them in functions and all that?

PRESEL: I think it's fair to say that in my relations with Ambassador Watson, like most of the people in the embassy, were frosty and complex, at best. He was not an easy man—he was not an easy man to work for. In contrast to that, Ambassador Erwin was extremely easy to work for and sensible and thoughtful and truly a gentleman. And I find it much easier to suggest that we received—lunch and I'll explain why it was in our interests to do so. But the only problem was that the lunch dates of American ambassadors in Paris then and now are very highly prized, and it's tough to get in there. But I had no difficulties in Jack Rho at all.

Q: Tell me about Ambassador Watson. What was his first name?

PRESEL: Arthur—but everybody called him Dick.

Q: Watson—what was his method of operation or irritation or whatever it was?

PRESEL: He was, I think—I'm not a psychologist—, a very unhappy man. He is the son of the man, Thomas Watson, the chairman of IBM [International Business Machines Corporation], was clearly an extremely difficult man. He was brought up in the shadow of his brother, also Tom, who ran the family company, IBM. And I think for the family, Mr. Watson's appointment to Paris was kind of a—as we say in French—he clearly had an inferiority complex. He clearly was imbued by the morals and costumes of IBM, making clear that he expected everybody to wear a white shirt, which made very little word in IBM. But of course, in the political section of the American embassy in Paris, everybody wanted to wear a pink shirt. He was known for—again I think it was a psychological problem—I can recall him walking down the political section hall one day early in the morning and looking at everybody and saying "good morning," which was unusual of himself, then calling in the political counselor and complaining that the political section was to be seen reading newspapers on the company time. Of course that's—I mean, he was not a happy man. He clearly had a psychological problem, and he didn't know how to deal with it. In contrast, Jack Rho, who was his brother-in-law, had come from being the deputy secretary of state these days, knew who he was, knew what it was, was a very thoughtful, soft-spoken, attentive man, whom I was very fond of and in fact everyone in the embassy was.

Q: You were mentioning Allen Holmes. I interviewed Allen Holmes, and he said that in his—I think he started in France as the third secretary or so and he was sort of recruited by a dancing school or something where all the debutantes went. And he was an extra man, this was where the Prince debutantes meant the French aristocracy male in order to co-mingle. He was out there to dance, but it was obvious that his hands were off the girls except to dance with them. He was just an extra man. It was an entrée to that particular society. Well then, in 1974, you were off to Moscow?

PRESEL: Not quite. Then head of the Soviet, Jack Matlock, who when faced with my request to be released from my assignment from Soviet to go to Paris had said to me, "You only get one shot at Paris. Of course you go to Paris, but I want you to come back

to Moscow at some point," called me up and said, "I want you to come to Moscow." And I thought it was perfectly innocuous, sort of less than sixteen months in Paris—I was enjoying Paris. And he said that he thought I should go to Moscow, and he would slip in the pot by letting me spend the year at Garmisch—where the U.S. army and Russian stood. And as I say, I was able to extend a few months to get through the death of George Pompidou and the presidential election that followed, and in the summer of 1974, I went up to Garmisch for a year.

Q: About the election, were you concerned about the election?

PRESEL: We're always concerned about the election. We're concerned about a tree falling in the middle of the African rainforest. We're concerned about everything. And we have a highly developed sense of self-importance, which causes us to believe that we can have an effect on everything. In fact, the election ran perfectly well. The three major candidates were Mr. Mitterrand, Mr. Chaban-Delmas, and Mr. Giscard d'Estaing. And at the end of it, Mr. Giscard d'Estaing became the president of France and a very boring kind of a French out of it, too.

Q: Okay, we move to basically '74 to '75 at Garmisch. How did you find that school? It was a well-established institution by that time.

PRESEL: I found it fascinating and fun. Fun to be in the Siberian Alps. Fun to be with the military. I found it perhaps easier than my military college, because I spoke better Russian than most of them. And also because unlike most of them, I knew I was going to go to Moscow. Most of my military colleagues who did two-year courses as opposed to one-year courses were not going to ever serve in Moscow. It was still the middle of the cold war. It was still the enemy. It was a wonderful year. It was nice to be in Germany. It was nice to try to put to rest the colitis scoop of views that I had about Germany, stock Germany and then contemporary Germany, and to get ready for Moscow. It was a lovely year.

Q: Did you find that you were getting a pretty good view of what was going on in the Soviet Union at that time or was it somewhat of an émigré-dominated curriculum?

PRESEL: It was entirely an émigré-dominated curriculum. But they weren't émigré-émigrés. And one certainly learned a great deal about how the Soviet Union really was—or in fact, I should say, really had been. This was a time when not that many people would go to the Soviet Union, when it wasn't easy to have contact with the Soviet Union. Therefore, we spent a lot of time on the history of the Soviet Union: Bolshevik did what to whom in the 1970s. But as an example of long-term investment by the American government, I have no doubt at all that Russia was an extremely good investment and I count myself very lucky to have been the State Department's candidate that year.

Q: Then you went to Moscow in 1975 and you were there for two years until 1977. Let's talk about the embassy before we get to the situation—who was the ambassador?

PRESEL: Again I had two ambassadors. When I got there the ambassador was Walter Stoessel, and when he left to go to Germany, he was replaced by Malcolm Toon. Two entirely different ambassadors, both Russian specialists, both Russian speakers, and people whose personalities could not be more comprehensively different from one another. The DCM most of the time I was there, was the same Jack Matlock, another Russian specialist, subsequently ambassador of the Soviet Union, the man who had let me go to Paris. It was a fairly small embassy, although big by the standards of the period, but a fairly small embassy, very circumscribed. We were still of the generation that counted ourselves lucky to be serving in Moscow. We felt that we were being vouchsafed for the opportunity to learn about another society that a ratio of people would have, that we mattered however successful or not it was. It was intellectually very exciting.

Q: What was the situation when you got there during the time 1975 or 1977 inside the Soviet Union and its relations to the United States?

PRESEL: I can't really comment on its relations to the United States. This was Brezhnev—this was fairly early Brezhnev. He had not yet become senile. We didn't realize at the time that the Soviet Union was trying to run out of its steam. It was very much a cold war. And it deserves to be remembered as such. The relations were not terribly good. Personal relations were almost non-existent. The embassy was under intense scrutiny by the Soviet authorities, and I'm sure the Soviet embassy here was. It was a very hostile place.

Q: Was the radiation—the high intensity of radio waves—was that an issue too when you were there?

PRESEL: It became an issue when I was there, and I myself believed that there was in fact something to it. I think it was a hell-hazard.

Q: I've never hit on surveys so I don't know, but it couldn't be good.

PRESEL: I don't believe it to be good. I'm not aware of—having suffered personally although I may have—but I am convinced that there was a hell-hazard.

Q: What were you doing?

PRESEL: Well, I was, in fact, responsible for reporting on decedent Jews and minorities and intellectuals.

Q: This was sort of your locked life, was it?

PRESEL: Well, when I got there, it was the most fascinating job at the embassy. It was basically a job in which I would go up and sit in the kitchens of Russian apartments, talking to people and eating bad sausage and bringing bad vodka, and lurching home at

two o'clock in the morning and getting up the next day and writing it up. It was actually fascinating.

Q: How did you go about this? I mean the contact with the descendants, considering all the security apparatus which was trying to keep us from doing that sort of thing.

PRESEL: It's perfectly true that the Soviet authorities didn't like me very much. Remember that I went there when Ford was president. And détente was still the word of the day. And clearly the Soviet authorities felt that they had to accord a certain amount of latitude to that member of the American embassy whose job was to report on these things. They didn't like it at all. When Mr. Carter became president and made human rights the fundamental part of his foreign policy, the Soviet authorities thought they didn't have to be nice to him anymore. And my last six months in Moscow were very, very unpleasant by anyone's standards. The way it was done was very simple. I had the good fortune of knowing a large number of extraordinarily brave people. If I just cite the names, you'll understand; the people I saw were Andre Morik, General Pierre de Grienco [?], all of the Jewish refuseniks but in particular Anatoly Shcharansky, occasionally Andre Michadrav [?], and these were people who were prepared to take tremendous risks. Those were just prominent names—taking tremendous risks to preserve contacts with the West, with the Americans, because they felt that it was important for all kinds of reasons which varied from one to another. But it gave me an opportunity to have extraordinary insights into Soviet society, Russian society, and Russian civilization that we're not giving to other people in the embassy, because they couldn't see them. It was intellectually the most exciting—probably the most exciting time I had spent overseas.

Q: You have these contacts with passed on's—what would you do? In other words, how did you operate?

PRESEL: Well, despite what the Russian authorities made out, I was not one of the CIA, and I was not by our standards committing espionage, I did it out in the open. I had my car, one of three Alfa-Romeos in Moscow. I had my car, and I didn't try to hide it and made my phone calls, made appointments, ran around and saw people, had people to house. Trying, to the extent, I could do to increase the amount of activity and autonomy that the men in my job in the embassy could have with respect both to his own authorities and with respect to what was going to be formulated by the Soviet authorities. But ultimately the question on what I could and couldn't do depended upon the extent to which my contacts were prepared to take the heed, and the heed in that case was very real. I told you that Shcharansky after all spent four or five years in prison. The worst that could happen to me was kind of the very unpleasant harassment that I had and I suppose I felt that by mistake I could have myself beaten up but I wasn't going to be killed or in the worst case I get thrown out, and then I'd be very close to a civilian.

Q: What would you be talking about? Let's take Shcharansky—what would you do?

PRESEL: Jews. Future of the Soviet Union. Why am I doing this, what's pushing you to do it, who does what to whom, to the extent who knew. I was providing him a certain amount of cover. We had a certain amount of pleasure in irritating our people. I can remember once walking down the street with Shcharansky being very ostentatiously followed and having Shcharansky say to me, "Those guys are your goons." And I said, "Oh no, they must be your goons. You don't understand. By American standards, by foreign standards, we're pretty good at things." "You don't begin to understand. They're too aggressive to be my kind of goons." And this one finally couldn't stand it anymore and came up and asked us to speak less loudly. We talked about everything. Remember, there was a tremendous thirst of knowledge on the part of the Americans who were doing Russian analytically, were doing Russia as for living and we knew very little about it. Though not a lot of Russians were leaving, most of the Russians who left made up very much of their opinions already. This conversation provided us windows into Russian society at the same time they provided the Russians with a life-line to the West, a feeling that we were forgetting. And in some cases, they were providing with individual protection.

Q: How did the individual protection work? If someone was arrested, could we make a protest? After all, it's a Soviet citizen.

PRESEL: Somebody might not get arrested. They think twice about arresting somebody, if they know that we would see you. Sometimes they'd deliberately play with us. Andre Bemaruv [?] once called me up and said he had been invited to the Fourth of July reception. And I said, "Do you want to?" And he said, "Yes." So I said, "Alright, we will then." And Andre also called me up and said, "Joe, will you take me to lunch?" And I said, "Sure, where do you want to go?" And he said, "I want to go to Iragui," which is the very prominent Georgian restaurant in Moscow. And I got there and I said, "Why?" And he said, "Because I want people who are looking after me to know that my relations with the United States embassy are quite warm." So we were doing things for them. It was, as I say, very much force majeure—in terms of my knowledge of Russian society. For them, it was the ability to know that the West was thinking about them, that we cared, and that we were interested and that we were involved.

Q: Were we getting any feel for the problems that had not always been there but were certainly beginning to have? Twelve years later, all hell broke—Gorbachev and all that—all the weaknesses of the Soviet Union? We still saw the Soviet Union as something that would endure in our lifetime.

PRESEL: We saw the weaknesses of the Soviet Union, alright. But I'm not sure if we drew proper conclusions from them. They were very competent—that was one of the nice things. They were very competent but we weren't trying to write conclusions. I can remember talking, for example, to one of the military attachés who picked up the fascinating tidbit into what Kruchev had done in the newspaper to the effect that during maneuvers, a regiment had suffered 3 percent casualties. And he said to me, "This has to be opined. In the American army if during a training mission, one guy gets killed, that

would be the end of the career of the commanding officer because that shouldn't happen." Yet these people were accepting this kind of casualty rate and we started complaining about it. I suppose the conclusion that should be drawn from that is, the Soviet military was in a lot worse shape than we thought. And that became clear in 1979 when they tried to invade Afghanistan and didn't succeed in doing so but we discovered the extraordinary weakness of the other reserve system and all the reserved gas and selling old batteries taken out of the trucks and stuff. There were clearly evident examples that showed how the Soviet Union was not working, and we saw them. I'm not sure though we drew the perfectly proper conclusions. The Soviet Union was not doing well but we were not fully realizing it. Yes, I don't think we did.

Q: With the advent of Carter, what happened at the end of '77?

PRESEL: The advent of Carter, what it meant to me was that life became very complicated. The telephone would ring at three o'clock in the morning and five past three and ten past three and quarter past three. I was not allowed to travel. My parents were not allowed to travel. When they came to visit me—I got married when I was in Moscow—and my wife's father came from Switzerland and found it very difficult. They would bash the car quite regularly. It was very unpleasant. And finally for the last five months I was there—they have obviously done their homework—they had found out that I don't like to be photographed. So I was ostentatiously followed by four KGB officials doing nothing but taking photographs of me everywhere I went. It was extremely unpleasant. And they would—instead of just following me to see what I was doing—follow me in cars to be unpleasant. And I almost had a couple of accidents because they had searchlights going into my rearview mirror. I stopped the car once going to the airport and banged on the door and said, "Would you please turn your headlights off? I don't care if you follow me but I'm going to have an accident." And they did. It was extraordinarily unpleasant. Ambassador Toon, a very combative individual, had gathered huge sights about me. I had to stop doing my job in effect. Most of my contacts had either left the Soviet Union or had been arrested. So it was a bit easier and Ambassador Toon traveled with me a couple of times to give me a little cover—I didn't want to be expelled. It was very, very difficult and unpleasant within my time in the Soviet Union. And surely expelling me, they did just everything that they could. Very nasty. Articles in the paper about me. Books published about me. Very not nice.

Q: As far as you were concerned—was it a feeling that the KGB was doing this or was this a part of the regular Soviet system or could you distinguish between the security apparatus and the normal diplomatic apparatus?

PRESEL: Not then I couldn't. Although we assumed that the expelling of me had abducted everybody. It was a function of a specific decision. I should tell you, however, that I very much treasure a document that I have in the early '90s. It was momentarily possible for foreigners to do research in the Soviet political archives and a friend of mine, a former DCM, Mark Garrison, was a director in Brown, had a graduate student doing a research project on Soviet-American relations after the war, and he came across Politburo

minutes, from the Politburo meetings in, I think, February 1977 in which the Soviets had done a discussion on the instructions to give to Ambassador Toon to complain about the sequence of events about the unacceptable activities of the American embassy in Moscow. And the archives from the Politburo minute said, "If your American conversation partner asks what we have in mind, you are to say we have in mind the activities of secretary of embassy Presel." I take that to be a good conduct medal.

Q: Your job—somebody else had held it before.

PRESEL: Yes, Nell Ovski.

Q: And when you left, somebody else picked it up.

PRESEL: No. When I left, it changed. It changed in kind for several reasons. Well, for most of the time I was there, I was a bachelor and therefore was able to do things that married people with children certainly would not want to do such as staying out late every night. The environment changed. Andre Morik [?] had left the Soviet Union. Shcharansky had been put in prison. Most of the decedent Jews had left or been expelled. Andrei Dmitrievich Sakharov has been exiled to Kazan [?, Nizhny Novgorod]. General de Brianco [?] had been obliged to leave the Soviet Union. The world has changed. In addition to that I think there was a correct feeling on the part of the foreign office of the embassy that it was not sensible to give one person all of the unpleasant jobs. So it kind of ended with me.

Q: What were your dealings with Andrei Sakharov and Mrs. Millener [?], his wife?

PRESEL: I saw them on occasion. We consciously respected the fact that he had after all been the father of the Soviet Union. One of the fathers of the Soviet Union who couldn't return. And we did not wish to give the Soviet authorities that we were trying to get secrets of the Soviet bomb out of them. I guess we knew but I certainly didn't, for Soviet bombs, or in any case, copies of American bombs. So we were kind of careful in not seeing them too often. On the other hand, it is also the case that the kinds of insights that he provided were quite remarkable and very unexpected. I can remember him saying to me that he didn't want the Jews to leave the Soviet Union. And I said, "But Andrei Dmitrievich, that seems to run entirely counter to what we've always thought you believed"—that he would not want the Jews to leave. And he said, "No, no. Jews who want to leave should leave. Anybody who wants to leave should leave or stay." But he said, "But what I find so depressing about it is that to the extent that any pieces of Soviet society still carries with it the optimistic, civilized Russia of the czar period when Russia was at its best. It is the urban intellectual of the Jew and to the extent that he leaves this important connection with our culture, our history, our past reprehensive selves. Leave with it, and that would be a great shame. Now, I can get that insight from no one else.

Q: No, in a way, I've always thought that—considering of course the Holocaust and all that—one of the last emigrants came from Germany. They sort of just took the souls out of the society because the German-Jews fit in so well to their society.

PRESEL: It came out great for us.

Q: Yes, but you know almost all facets of American life have found that, including the Foreign Service, but he is dead-on.

PRESEL: Well, we were very careful with Mr. Sakharov and Mrs. Millener [?]. And then after a while, he disappeared. I mean they signed into residence in Europe with the other people, to the extent to which depended on how they felt. And it varied from time to time, what they were trying to do. But most of the time I would say there were more opportunities to see people, to see part of Soviet society that otherwise is inaccessible to us. But I was able to, because of the nature of my job.

Q: You sitting around the kitchen table, drinking poor vodka and not very good sausage. Was there an assumption that there was a microphone hanging under the center of the table and that you were, in a way, talking to the listeners of the KGB?

PRESEL: With some people, that was. And one of the few presents I was able to bring to my decedent friends was these magic slates that children had. You could write on a piece of cellophane and you pull up the cellophane and the messages go away. And it was called in Russian slang, a "Russian phrase holder." There was certainly some of that. And indeed, it became clear that we were all right, sort of think one of the books called the *White Book* came out in which the activities of a lot of journalists and me were publicized very unpleasantly. So yes, there was some feeling that we were being listened to at some of the times. Certainly in my apartment it was. But as I said, these were the people who themselves took the risk.

Q: As a bachelor, what about the so-called honey traps? Were you the prime target due to the fact that you were a bachelor? They couldn't blackmail you as easily as they could if you were a married man.

PRESEL: I had a very good looking maid. And I'm very confident that had I wanted to go to bed with her, she would have been glad. But that was not something that I found necessary to do.

Q: Were there any other publications or anything like that?

PRESEL: No. Let me just add this though, by now, by 1976, they knew an awful lot about me. I've been going on and off in Russia since 1961. I spent almost my entire career one way or another worrying about the Soviet Union. I had taken three cultural routes to the Soviet Union as an escort officer, a job which when the Soviets came here was very much the job with the KGB. They weren't just being provocative when they

said that I work for the CIA. They probably genuinely thought so. And in fact, I think there are some people who still genuinely think so. So they probably also figured that I was not a very likely candidate to be signed up.

Q: Just because we're trying to get the background of who these speakers are, you had served in the Foreign Service offices. Tell me a bit about how you met your wife and her background.

PRESEL: Certainly. I met my wife in and she is Swiss. She's Claire Junod [?] and I met her in 1966, when I was involved in negotiating an operation duty, and she was a guest at a dinner party of my British office's member. And we met, and nine years later she came to Moscow over the weekend. It had been on and off, and this is often the case; it was put to me that the time had come. She is a Switzerland-American citizen, a translator by profession, and she comes from an old-fashioned, upper class, Geneva family. Her languages are—French is her native language—English, German, and some Temin. She worked for the World Bank in Washington; she works as a freelance translator. She found it perfectly reasonable to be a wife of a diplomat, at least for a while.

Q: How did—I don't know much about the Swiss, but do Swiss marry out much, or is that a problem?

PRESEL: Well, remember, when you say the "Swiss" there are three distinct Swiss societies. And certainly, the French-Swiss are very outward-looking and marry out. I don't think I'm a part of my wife's family; there was a feeling that there was something wrong in her American marriage, I mean I don't think they felt that there was anything wrong in her marrying a diplomat. And I genuinely do not think that there was any feeling that she was marrying down by marrying a Jew. It was a—and it still is—her piece of genuine society, very open, welcoming, and interested and involved kind of society. I never had any trouble with my in-laws.

Q: That's great. Well, I think this is probably a good place to stop. And we'll pick this up next time. You left in 1977 to where?

PRESEL: To Vienna. To do something called the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions [MBFR] twelves.

Q: Good heavens! One of those six?

PRESEL: Yes, one of those.

Q: Alright, we'll pick this up from here.

End of interview [Note: This interview was not completed.]