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AMBASSADOR ALFRED PUHAN

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INTERVIEW

Q: This is Lew Schmidt interviewing Ambassador Al Puhan at his home in Sarasota, Florida. Al, I wanted to ask you to start off by giving us a brief biosketch of your background, where you came from, what your education is or was and how it was that you first got started in the information program. If you had any work experience prior to becoming involved in the information program, you might cover that briefly before you get to that phase of the discussion. So I'll stop now and you can take it from there.

Biosketch, Education and Pre-Government Experience

PUHAN: Okay, Lew. Well, I was born on march 7, 1913 in Germany in the borderland between East and West Prussia, the city of Marianburg which is now Malbork in Poland. My father had American citizenship and we came–I was brought over to this country as a child. I went to schools, junior high and high school in Illinois, Sandwich, Illinois; AB from Oberlin College in 1935; a Taft teaching fellowship and Master's Degree from the University of Cincinnati; and then went to Columbia to work for a Ph.D., the idea being that I would be a teacher, academician. I completed all my course work for the Ph.D. at

Columbia. The thesis on which I was working was interrupted by World War II and by the information program which I joined.

I had no previous experience in radio or journalism for that matter. All my experience was academic. I had done some teaching at Rutgers and Barnard and Columbia. I suppose that my entry into the Voice of America was almost accidental.

1942: Employed By VOA, Broadcasting To Germany; Later Incorporated Into OWI

Before World War II or before we entered the war, I think most of us who were in the academic field were asked to sign some sort of a questionnaire asking what particular qualifications we had that might be of use in case we were in the war and I had put down that I knew German and French. I received a telegram at Rutgers in New Brunswick, NJ from something called, I think at the time, Coordinator of Information or some such name and asked to come to New York. This was in May of 1942.

I went there and that evening was an announcer in the German language over the facilities of the BBC. I had to ask what the BBC was and when told that it was the British Broadcasting Corporation I asked what it was doing in New York. I was told that the Voice of America, which this was, was in its infancy, still had no facilities of its own and was using the BBC facilities.

I moved rather rapidly from announcer to producer to scriptwriter and producer/scriptwriter and spent the next 11 years at the Voice of America.

Q: Did you go overseas at anytime? I presume this ultimately merged into the OWI, Office of War Information. Did you take any overseas assignment in the Voice?

PUHAN: Yes, my first check was paid by something called Short-Wave Research, Inc. which I believe was part of Wild Bill Donovan's operation, OSS. This was to become shortly thereafter the Office of War Information with headquarters in New York City.

1944: Assigned To Head German Language Broadcasting From American Broadcasting Station In Europe (ABSIE)

Yes, I went overseas in 1944 to head the German language broadcast at the American Broadcasting Station in Europe, the acronym is ABSIE, and spent most of 1944 there. This was during WWII–the Blitz was over of course, but the V-1's had just begun, were just beginning while I was over there. I had a brief respite at home at Christmas time '44 and then went overseas again in February or March of 1945, first to London and then to head German Broadcasting from Radio Luxembourg which, as you probably know, was to become the sort of forerunner of the German post-World War II network.

Vehicular Accident Derails Prospective Assignment As Head Of New German Radio Network

I stayed there until September. In September of 1944 I accompanied three other officers in a jeep. We went to Frankfurt to look into the setting up of Frankfurt as the headquarters of the German network. And I suppose I was destined to become the head of the new German radio network under Allied, under American control.

A vehicle accident, automobile accident, in the Hunsrueck Mountains of Germany–I was sitting in the passenger seat next to the driver, two captains in the back seat and a jeep coming from the opposite direction containing a chaplain got off the side of the road and swung back too quickly and we smashed it head on. We weren't going very fast, 35 miles an hour. Otherwise, I suppose I'd have been killed. The three others were all thrown out. I was in the jeep, went down an embankment and fractured by hip. I was taken to the 97th General Hospital in Badnauheim in Germany where I spent the next three months recuperating. That ended my career as the head of broadcasting or future chief of broadcasting of German stations.

Main Objective(s) Of Broadcasts From London and Luxembourg

Q: I'd like to ask you a few questions now about the earlier part of your broadcasting experience. The first question I would like to ask is exactly what did you look upon as your objective? What was it you were trying to attain? Were you talking to the German troops? Or were you trying to get to the German populace and influence their thinking and activity? What was your main purpose in your broadcasting, from Luxembourg for example?

PUHAN: Well Lew, let's go back just a bit. You know the objective, of course, of the information program, the Office of War Information under Elmer Davis and Robert Sherwood overseas was to seek the defeat of the Germans.

When we went to London the idea here was, I suppose, to show the Germans that the Voice of America–not only troops there in England, but the Voice of America had moved closer to the mainland. We were not a black station, like Soldatensender, for example, which was a black station. Our objective here was to broadcast the news of the advancing of the Allied troops and German defeats or occasional German victories. In Luxembourg it soon became a matter of broadcasting to a defeated nation. So in neither case was this specifically aimed at German troops.

Now, I might add, in addition to news and editorial and so on, we also broadcast the music of Glen Miller. I was the man who taught Glen Miller enough German so he could say a few words before playing a number. My secretary was the Mistress of Ceremonies. These appealed, of course, to the young people, soldiers and younger women and so on. So in that sense we were broadcasting to the troops. But that was not generally the goal. The general goal was to address the Germans as a whole.

Q: On a more personal basis, when you made this trip into Frankfurt and perhaps around Frankfurt, did by any chance you have a man by the name of Ed Schechter with

you in that group?

PUHAN: Well, I know Ed Schechter very well, but he was not in that group, no. I knew him somewhat later than that, but he was not in that particular group. He was not at Radio Luxembourg to the best of my recollection, at least not while I was there.

Q: Well, he did go to Radio Luxembourg. Whether he was there at the same time that you were or not I don't know. But he went to London in 1944 and then was moved forward when the Allied armies moved into Europe and began fighting their way into Germany. He did make a trip which later took him down to Frankfurt and then into Austria which was his native area. So I thought he might have been there when you were.

PUHAN: Well, no. I have no recollection of Ed Schechter at that point in time. As I say I know Ed very well and we've exchanged Christmas cards and so on, and I have no doubt–and it's possible that he was in Luxembourg. But you see we had a colonel, an American Philadelphia lawyer incidentally, who was the head of the station in Luxembourg and I was the civilian deputy to him.

Now, the big guns were, well, Golo Mann, the son of the famous German writer Thomas Mann, was our chief broadcaster. But I don't recall Ed Schechter at that time, no.

Q: So as you began broadcasting to the Germans as a defeated nation, your music program, I suppose, was designed to soften the attitude of the Germans for what would happen when you ultimately took over the control of the country. You said that your career in the broadcasting area terminated with your injury and your hospitalization. What did you do and where did they send you immediately after you were released from the hospital?

PUHAN: Well, I spent–the accident took place early in September of 1944 and I was not ZI'd (Z-I stood for Zone of the Interior), as they called it at the time, sent home until December of 1944. I spent some time in limbo, you might say, recuperating. I went out to Sandwich, Illinois, where I grew up, with my young wife and we stayed there until I received a letter from Werner Michel who was the Program Director and who had hired me originally, asking me to return and rejoin the Voice of America.

1945: While On Home Recuperation Leave In U.S., Called By, And Goes To, VOA/New York

I was in the process–you see, in the meantime, in these early months of 1945 as you know the war was winding to a close–of debating my future: whether I would go back to the academic world or stay with the U.S. government. Werner Michel sort of made that decision for me by asking me to come back. I had enjoyed my work, so I went back in early '45 and joined the Voice of America again in New York.

Q: Did you stay in the States than for some time after that? Or did you ultimately go back abroad?

PUHAN: Except for a trip or two on missions like the study of the takeover of HICOG by the State Department and the changing of this from a military to a civilian operation, I remained in New York until I left the Voice of America in 1953.

Q: What was the general purpose of your study of the takeover by HICOG from office?

1949: Member Of Mission Studying Personnel Requirements For RIAS in Berlin

PUHAN: I was a member of that mission. The idea was to see what would be required in the way of civilian personnel–the war was over–what was required to run, to supervise, the German radio, the American information station, RIAS, in Berlin. And I don't have too many recollections of that, but I remember we were over there and looking into this. This was about–what? 1949, I would say.

Q: Did you have anything to do with making the recommendation as to how the HICOG information program would be structured? Was there any part of your study which was involved in that?

PUHAN: Speaking of myself personally I don't know what–I can't remember what contribution I made. I was a member of a delegation. It was headed by higher ranking officials than I, but I was a fairly aggressive young officer and no doubt I made some suggestions. But I don't remember what they were or whether they were acted upon or not.

Q: When you left VOA then did you leave the information side of the program completely? Or did you stay on in other aspects of it?

PUHAN: Well, I stayed with the Voice of America until 1953. Now, in 1952, Foy Kohler, a fine Foreign Service Officer and the last director before the onslaught by McCarthy, Senator McCarthy, said to me–I was at this point Program Director, one of three jobs below the Director of the Voice of America: Program Director; Technical, George Herrick; and Evaluations, Leo Loewenthal. So I had a big operation. I had 900 people, hiring and firing, setting up desks like the Russian desk and so on, the Persian desk. But I had reached a point where I probably could not, well, most likely–I shouldn't say probably, most likely couldn't go any further.

1952: On VOA Director, Foy Rohler's Advice, Puhan Applies For And Is Accepted Into Foreign Service, The State Department

Foy Kohler called me in one day. We had worked very closely together and he said to me, have you given any thought to what you were going to do? And I said, really I hadn't but I was aware of the fact that I should make some sort of a decision as to my future. And he said, have you given any thought to joining the Foreign Service?

My initial reaction was rather negative, and this was due to the fact that in my work at the

Voice as Program Director I had made frequent trips to Washington to consult the various desks in the State Department as to personnel or policies to be followed and so on. I was always a little–I was depressed by the fact that I saw Foreign Service Officers coming to New York looking for jobs. I thought that this was a career service and that the career service would place these officers and here they were being sent out on their own apparently and looking for some sort of employment.

So I was not too impressed with that. Moreover, I had been in a very active type of operation and much of the Foreign Service it seemed to me from what I'd seen of it was a rather passive or rather studious or quiet, contemplative operation. Remember we didn't have Iran in those days or that type of thing. So I was not entirely smitten with the idea that I should join the Foreign Service. But the more I thought of it–my wife and I talked it over, and I decided, well, why not try it?

So I took the examinations. There was a program at that time called Section 517. This was prior to the Wriston program. 517 was a very intelligent program. It allowed a very small number of officers from other government offices to take examinations for the Foreign Service and enter at an appropriate rank. The Wriston program, as you know, sort of blanketed everybody in there and was a disaster in many ways because a lot of the people who didn't want to join it were like fish out of water once they were sent overseas.

But Remains As VOA Program Director Until May, 1953

So I did take my examinations in early 1952 and was shortly thereafter informed that I was a Foreign Service Officer if I passed the security and medical requirements, which I did. But there was no onward assignment. Foy Kohler in the meantime had left and I remained at the Voice as Program Director until May, I guess it was, 1953.

Q: You must have been there then during some of the worst days of the McCarthy problem. Did you have any experiences in that that you wouldn't mind recounting?

PUHAN: Yes, I regret to say that I was there when this onslaught took place. As you know, McCarthy undoubtedly was a product of–everybody is a product of the times. If you recall the consternation that we felt at the fact that the Russians were not going to be our allies after 1945 or '46–I think Jimmy Byrnes, who was Secretary of State, made that famous speech in Stuttgart, Germany where he pointed out the fact that they were not going to be our friends and we began to work on building up a deterrent. In 1948 they threw out the coalition governments in Eastern and Southeastern European countries and threw us out too, the Allied commissions out of those countries and indeed it looked for a while as though the threat to the West was real which led to the formation of NATO and the development of the Federal Republic of Germany, and then the reaction on the part of the Soviets forming the Warsaw Pact and the German Democratic Republic communist state.

The McCarthy Onslaught

Now, McCarthy probably knew nothing about communism, but he was clever in seizing the issue when there was fear, real fear, that we were all infiltrated by communist agents. He took advantage of that situation. He had three aides who–or at least three, more than that. But he had three at least who were very hot and heavy on the trail of communists. The late and scarcely lamented Mr. Cohn, Schine and Bobby Kennedy. We were unfortunate at the Voice of America at that time because we had a very poor director, a man who came from the outside and who one time told me and Ed Kretzman, who was the man in charge of policy matters at the Voice, that he thought it would be better if he stayed out of all of this because once the purge was over he would be clean, would have clean hands and start with this organization cleansed of all its evils.

Q: Who was the director at that time?

PUHAN: You know, I can't remember. I think it was Poppele, but don't hold me to that. I believe it was a man named Poppele. He came from the radio broadcasting business. He knew nothing, I think, about international affairs and he left us without a head. Indeed we ran the big staff meetings, policy meetings. It was Kretzman and I basically who ran that. Now, McCarthy you know lashed out first at the Voice of America. It looked like a target of opportunity because after all it had all these foreigners there and foreigners were suspect, and he was going to find a rich harvest of communists in the Voice of America.

Now, let me go back just a bit. I think I'm probably the only man who found communists in the Voice of America, two of them. One of them was a Pole and I learned about this because I came across an article in a Polish newspaper signed by him, a Polish newspaper printed in Poland, and the other one was a Bulgarian who used to send his scripts to the Bulgarian Embassy or Legation in Washington. I found out about this and I fired both of them. And both of them went to their native lands where they presumably carried on their careers. This was more than McCarthy ever did.

"The Loval American Underground"

Now, when McCarthy lashed out at the Voice of America, there developed a very ugly atmosphere in the Voice. There was the so-called American underground, patriotic American underground. This was a bunch of people who thought that everybody who disagreed with them was a communist.

Now, I with my upbringing in the middle west and a fairly conservative outlook and not ever having been a member of any organization except the Modern Language Association when I was a young teacher, thought I had very little to fear from McCarthy. But one morning my wife received a telephone call–we were living in New Jersey–from Bobby Kennedy asking me to report to the Waldorf Astoria, where to my amazement when I arrived there, there was a man who was on my staff sitting there guarding the files. And this man was Howard Hotchner. He apparently had written down, jotted down, everything that I had ever said in staff meetings and so on and he had made–I had no inkling that this man had any political ideas. He was a stamp collector. He lived in the same little town that Gene Kern and I lived in, and we often went to work together and

came home together. And I never suspected that Howard had anything to do with this.

I went there and I was asked by Cohn and Schine and there was another one, I can't remember. His name began with S. But anyway, I was asked if I knew anything about communism. I said, indeed I did. I had in mind the fact that there was a public affairs officer in London who had been asked this question and who thought apparently that if he said he knew something about it that he would be accused of communism. So, he said he didn't. The interrogator said how can you be a public affairs officer when you don't know anything about communism?

So they grilled me and the worst aspect–I did not feel myself threatened because I had no, as I say, I had no fear of being labeled a communist or anything like that. The worst aspect of this was that anything you said could be used in a way to get at somebody else. For instance, the case of Mr. Reed and the information program.

Q: Reed Harris?

PUHAN: Reed Harris, Reed Harris. Now, I had opposed Reed Harris when he had ordered a cut in broadcasting to Israel. I opposed it on the grounds that I thought this was a poor decision. I didn't think that we should do this and I rather vocally opposed it. Now, this would have put me on the side of the angels as far as McCarthy was concerned, but I pointed out that it had nothing to do with Reed Harris' political views. I assumed it was a budgetary matter and that it was a decision to be reached in Washington and I said I had a right to oppose it and I opposed it. But this is the way it went, you see. That's why I say it was a miasma. It was one of the most dismal periods in my life. Time and again I had to defend–now, Robert Bauer was a good friend of mine. I had worked with him since 1942. I knew he had been supported by Otto von Habsburg when he first came to this country. I knew he was no communist. Indeed, all of his actions at the Voice were consonant with mine. I learned that he made a good presentation before the Committee.

But the net result of all of this was that I was invited to Washington. I was not invited to appear on television the way some of the others were. I went to Washington and there was the full committee with McCarthy presiding and Fulbright and–who was the Arkansas man?–McClellan, Mundt and the whole committee was there.

And there I found rather strong support from Senator Mundt, a conservative as you know from South Dakota, I believe. And he turned the whole thing around and asked me for some suggestions. He said, do you think the Voice of America should continue? Yes. Do you think that it should be moved from New York to Washington? Well, I said, that's a debatable subject. I can see how there would be certain advantages. In fact, I wrote him a long ten page memorandum on this subject. And that to all intents and purposes ended the pursuit of McCarthy as far as I was concerned, because the other Senators did not see it, I mean, they saw it the way it was. But it left a rather very unhappy recollection. One felt soiled by the whole thing. And indeed I felt so badly about it that I went to see Ed Murrow at CBS.

Now, I had met Ed Murrow in London in '44. He had had me on his "This is London Calling" show a couple of times. And I had seen him off and on socially. So I went to see him and I asked him if I could get a job at CBS and he said, sure. I'll give you a job. And I said, what would that be? He said, well, it would be in television. I said, oh, I haven't the faintest idea what television is all about. He said, neither does anybody else. But, he added, we need some people with ideas.

1953: Last Minute Foreign Service Assignment To Vienna Aborts Offer From Ed Murrow For CBS Job And Ends Government Information Work

Well, if it hadn't been for the fact that the very next day while I was still contemplating Murrow's offer, I received my first Foreign Service assignment, to Vienna, Austria. Now, it had never occurred to me that Vienna might be a post I could get. But here I was a German language expert. I spoke German fluently. And the idea of going to Vienna in the '50s under Four Power occupation–my wife and I discussed this and a decision was made and that was the end of my tie with the Voice of America and the information program.

Q: Before we go on to discuss what you did there, was Howard Hotchner a member of the so-called loyal American underground of which there were about a dozen or 14, I think?

PUHAN: I don't know that. I was never quite sure who was and who wasn't. I suspected a number of them. Howard Hotchner was certainly involved with that group of people. But whether he was in that I just don't know.

Q: You said that you didn't have any further difficulties yourself with McCarthy, but did you have any experiences with the people who were serving with you and whom you were supervising being caught up in that web?

PUHAN: Well, I knew a good many of the people who were caught in that web. Bauer was one. I think I managed to save him in Washington, DC. I knew, of course, the head of the English news section was. I can't remember his name now. It's so many years ago. Well, yes, there was one more thing that happened. I went overseas as a Foreign Service Officer. When I got to Vienna, I was told that my commission was being held up as was Bill Tyler's and as were a number of others who had come in under Section 517, because of the McCarthy allegations and charges. It wasn't until 1953–no, it wasn't until about 1954 or 1955 that we finally were confirmed.

Q: I had a somewhat similar experience with it. This is not my interview, but because of that, I can understand what you went through. When you went to Austria, in precisely what capacity did you go? What was your assignment?

In Vienna, Assigned As Secretary To Allied Commission For Austria

PUHAN: It was an assignment that was not particularly sought after by Foreign Service Officers. You see, Lew, the problem I think ever since lateral entry into the Foreign

Service came into being, the problem has always been: what do you do with a man who has had 900 people working for him as in my case? Where do you put him, what kind of a job? Yet, he's had no foreign experience except with the Voice of America and he hasn't been a political reporter in the sense in which the Foreign Service use that or an economic officer. So what do you do with them? And I think they've always had a lot of difficulty. And I was assigned to what I thought was probably a sort of an ancillary job which most Foreign Service Officers didn't want. It was held at the time by Hal Ekern. It was U.S. Secretary in the Allied Commission for Austria.

Now, the Allied Commission for Austria, as you know, was in its eighth year when I got there. Two more years were to pass before finally the Austrian State Treaty was hammered out. Hal Ekern, I think he clung with his fingernails to that job because he came out of the military and eventually entered the Foreign Service through the Wriston program. But my coming sort of endangered his job for a while there. He went to the Political Section of the Embassy. I wasn't even housed in the Embassy. I was in the Allied Commission Building and the biggest drawback was that I really couldn't have any contact with the Austrians. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed working with the Soviet, British and French Secretaries.

And most important of all, it brought me into weekly contact with one of the finest ambassadors the United States ever had, namely Llewellyn E. Thompson. Thompson was a man who did not ask what was your background in the Foreign Service or what did you do? He was interested in people who could help him–and he found me very useful because he found out that I spoke German fluently. So I began to go with him on his calls to see the chancellor or the vice chancellor of Austria. And, of course, I always briefed him before the Allied Commission meeting. So this was a big plus for me. But as I say it was not a job which made use of my talents as a German language officer because I had no contact with the Austrians except when I went as interpreter, as reporter with the ambassador.

Q: This is just an aside, but going back briefly at what age did you come to the United States? And then I have a follow-up question.

PUHAN: Okay, I was twelve.

Q: You were twelve. Presumably at that time you spoke German more as a juvenile than you did an adult German. At what point did you feel your German developed into a more adult capability?

PUHAN: Yes, that's a good question. You're quite right. When I went to Oberlin one of the electives was a language course. Of course I signed up for German. The instructor told me after the first lesson to stop in and see him and he asked me where I had learned my German and told him my background. So he said, well, you don't belong in German I. He moved me up to more advanced courses. Indeed, I became a German major. This was more or less a promise by the head of the German Department that he would get me a job upon graduation, a teaching fellowship when I graduated. Remember that was the

time when we sold apples after you graduated from college.

Q: I also became a teaching fellow.

PUHAN: Yeah. Well, so I accepted that. Of course, it improved since I worked with German all throughout my college career. Working for the master's degree, reading German newspapers, reading literally the entire German literature, and I developed my German. Naturally in Austria it was polished because there I read the Austrian newspapers and eventually got in a position where I was able to act even as interpreter.

Q: I'd like you to make a few comments about what you think the mission accomplished in the years that you were there and do you think that you personally contributed something to those accomplishments? If so, what?

PUHAN: Well, the Allied Commission was in its last two years beginning its ninth year when I arrived there in June of 1953. It had been a very useful organization in that there was an article in the document which set up the Allied Commission which allowed Austria laws to become law even if there was one veto. It could not stop them from becoming law. It was sort of a shield behind which the Austrians could run their own country even though the four powers all had troops there in Austria.

When I arrived there the Allied Commission was marking time. There had been, oh, 300 or more meetings to try and get an Austrian state treaty and they had always broken down. It wasn't until its tenth year that we received a signal that the Russians were prepared to go for a treaty provided Austria would accept neutrality and pay certain reparations.

I learned a great deal about the Russians for one thing. I dealt very closely with the Russian Secretary, but not only with him but also with the top Russians in the Allied Commission because after every meeting we had a social reception, cocktail party if you like, and we showed movies to each other. I even took Russian language lessons at the time.

Well, my contribution to it–I don't want to exaggerate that. I think I probably helped Ambassador Thompson, and even more so after he asked me to become his political counselor there, because I was able to keep him abreast of what the Austrians were saying and planning. The biggest accomplishment was, of course, under the Allied Commission, the final hammering out of the treaty. As you know–you probably have heard from others, how this process worked. In the morning the American Ambassador or High Commissioner, as the British and the French also were called, would meet at our Embassy and we'd have a strategy session. Then in the afternoon we'd meet with the Russians. This is where Ambassador Thompson showed his great skill. When he saw that the Russian was unable to move obviously because his position was hard and he couldn't move beyond it, Thompson would suggest that we have a closed session with only two people from each of the four elements there. This gave the Russian a chance to select whomever he wanted to select from his element and you could find out what was the

sticking point.

I learned personally more than I undoubtedly contributed because I watched at close range, worked with Ambassador Thompson on this. He came to accept me sort of as his aide and eventually even though I was not the number two man, I was to all intents and purposes, the last two years I was there, I was the DCM, Deputy Chief of Mission.

1955: The Achievement Of The Austrian State Treaty

But the great accomplishment–the Austrian State Treaty of 1955–I think was still one of the finer bits of diplomacy since the end of World War II, because it got the Russians out of a part of the world that they had occupied, the little bit of Eastern Austria, something they haven't done again until Afghanistan recently where they finally had to pull out. And, of course, even more recently, out of Eastern Europe and East Germany. So I really think that that was a great accomplishment.

Now it was Thompson I believe largely, Ambassador Thompson, to whom the credit goes for achieving that treaty. As you probably know he had also been instrumental in the Trieste settlement, although Clare Booth Luce took credit for that.

Theories As To Why USSR Allowed The Austrian State Treaty

Q: What in your estimation caused the Soviets to soften their attitude and come around to a decision that maybe it was better for them to get out of Austria if they could get the kind of neutrality they were looking for?

PUHAN: This is the question of course that has been asked many times and only the Soviets know what the reason was. All kinds of theories have been advanced. The most likely one was that after ten years they had not been able to communize Eastern Austria. This was largely due to the work of that energetic Socialist Minister of Interior Oskar Helmer who prevented the police from being–prevented the Russians from infiltrating the police in Eastern Austria. While the Russians had troops, of course, in Vienna and in Eastern Austria we also were there in Vienna and Salzburg. And as you know that salient stuck right into what became the Soviet Empire, that is Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

Another theory is that they decided, well, if we move out they'll have to move out too and that leaves Austria without the Americans, British, and French there.

There's also the theory, as you probably heard, that they were considering the idea of a neutral Germany and that the idea of Austria accepting neutrality might become a model for Germany. I tend to put less credence in that theory because the Russians probably knew and know today that a neutral Germany is sort of out of the question. It's not really feasible. Now, it's possible for Austria to be neutral. In fact, Austria profits from that, but I doubt if they would have thought that that would also work for Germany.

One more thing. You know that their interpretation of neutrality was somewhat different

than ours–neutral for us and against the other side. As it turned out they've learned the Austrians ideologically have always been on our side, but they have been very careful, like Finland, not to antagonize the Soviet Union.

So I think probably more likely than not the idea of getting us out of there, getting that salient out of the Soviet commonwealth there, was probably the dominant factor in accomplishing this. I might just say in 1980 the Austrian government invited me and my wife to come to Vienna to help them celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Austrian state treaty. I was a little nonplussed that they picked me and I asked why I was selected. There were other people who had higher rank than I did there. Thompson of course was dead but Jim Penefield is still very much around. And I was told that, well, when the academicians in Austria studied the files, the American files made available to them dealing with the making of the Austrian state treaty, they found my name repeatedly on cables. Well, that was because I was the drafting officer and of course the ambassador signed the cable.

So they decided that I was sort of a man who was on the inside, had the inside track. And in the discussions that followed with the Russians and British and French with Austrians... [End of Tape 1, Side 1]

Yes, as I was saying, the Russians gave no–this is 1980 now, 25 years after the treaty–gave no indication, no clear indication as to what motivated them. This is the pre-Gorbachev era and so there was no Glasnost at that time. They made all kinds of protestations that they were always for this treaty but the Austrians and we had not complied with what we should have and so on. That was their answer at that time. So there's no clear answer to that question as to what motivated them to do it. But it remains to this day from my point of view an excellent piece of diplomacy.

Q: You mentioned that Tommy Thompson wanted you to be his political counselor and that you ended up as virtually DCM. Were you dealing extensively with the Austrians outside the official Austrian government? Or were you primarily dealing with the Austrian government officials? And if you were dealing outside, with whom were you talking?

PUHAN: Both. I had, of course, contact with, I knew and they knew me personally–I knew Chancellor Julius Raab, the Vice Chancellor, Schaerf. I knew Oskar Helmer. I knew Poldi Figl, Foreign Minister. I knew them all from the top on down. But I had also a wide range of contact with Austrians outside of government. There were the party people I dealt with–mainly with the Christian–CDO–the Christian Democratic people. That's probably the equivalent of our Republican Party, whereas my colleague Alex Johnpoll dealt with the SPO, the Socialist Party–the Socialist Party of Austria. I knew everybody from the Chairman of both parties–the equivalent of the Chairmen of the National Committees here. Then I had a number of friends among the journalists, Fritz Molden, Oskar Pollock and a number of others. I knew a good many of the theater people because I knew German. We went to the opera once a week because you could go to the opera for $4.00 a ticket and sit in the first two rows. And I attended the theater a lot. I got

to know the artists, doctors, lawyers as well as the Parliamentarians and Municipal officials. The Mayor of Vienna was a good friend of mine. So I had a lot of outside contacts.

Q: I ask that question because I had a feeling that perhaps that also influenced the Austrian government in their giving you an invitation to come back for their 25th anniversary.

Evaluation Of USIA Effectiveness In Austria During Puhan's Period There

Since you said that you had a number of contacts with the journalists there, do you have any feelings or do you have any knowledge of what role the USIS played in the Austrian program and in the–well, I don't suppose they influenced the Russians any, but do you think that they were an effective element in the program or don't you know or don't you think they were?

PUHAN: Yeah, I think they were. After all, they ran the Wiener Kurier, which was the first newspaper in Austria under American auspices. Rot-Weiss-Rot, the network, the radio network in Austria was supervised and controlled by USIA operations. Although I didn't have as much to do with them in my Foreign Service duties, I always knew who the responsible people were and what they did. Yes, I think the answer to your question is: yes, I thought they did a very effective job in the post-treaty signing or even pre-treaty signing days in Austria.

Q: It's a well-known fact, of course, that by the time Hitler moved into Austria there was a very pro-Nazi feeling in a large segment of the population among the Austrians. Did you determine to what extent there was any residual of that feeling after–say during the period you were there? I ask this because it seems under certain circumstances to have resurfaced a little bit in recent years.

PUHAN: Absolutely not! I say this sarcastically. There were no Nazis when I was there. I can still remember the first time I ever crossed into Austria and that was into Innsbruck in 1945 when I was at Luxembourg. When you crossed the border the Austrian flags were flying and everybody had been in the Austrian underground, and there were no NAZIS! While we all knew the acclaim which Hitler received when he entered Austria–when was it? In 1938. The Austrians thought Anschluss was the best solution for them. There was none of that in 1953 when I got there. There was no antisemitic feeling although antisemitism had been endemic in Austria going back into the 19th century. No, there was a complete denial of that.

1957: Assignment To Washington: Office of International Administration
In Bureau Of International Organizations

Q: Where did you go after you left the Austrian assignment?

PUHAN: Well, as usual I was assigned to Washington and to an office I had never heard

of, the Office of International Administration, OIA, in the Bureau of IO, International Organizations.

I was sent as deputy to Jack Fobes who was the Director of OIA. It was again one of those jobs that was not sought after by Foreign Service Officers. In fact, once again we were not in the main State building. We were over in a garage in Rosslyn where the temperature in the wintertime was ten degrees colder on the floor than it was on the top of your desk. But it had its interesting moments because I learned a great deal about international organizations. I went with the Surgeon General to the annual meeting of WHO (World Health Organization). I went to Vienna, returned to Vienna when the IAEA, International Atomic Energy Agency was formed with John McCone as head of the delegation. I went to a UNESCO conference and I was frequently at the United Nations. But it was not my choice of a job. When I complained to Francis Wilcox who was the very capable director of the Bureau that I didn't have much to do, he removed Jack Fobes, made him his aide and made me Director of the Office of International Administration.

Q: Before you became the Director of the Office, what were your duties in the organization?

PUHAN: Well, I don't know. I think we had a staff of something between 15 and 20 people and essentially the duties of the director and the deputy director–I was the deputy director until Jack Fobes moved into the front office up there with Fran Wilcox–was two-fold. One was to prepare the budget for U.S. participation in the International Organizations, prepare the budget and assist the Assistant Secretary for International Organizations in the presentation of the budget to the Congress.

The other one had to do with the selection of personnel although there we were sort of handicapped at that time because it was still sort of thought that, well, people who worked in the United Nations Secretariat were international civil servants and they should not be vetted by us. As a result, of course, the Russians were all part of the Russian element and were working for the Soviet Union. And our people in the UN, our Americans there, often disagreed with Administration policy. But we had a certain amount of say in trying to recruit people to go into the Secretariat. So those were essentially the duties.

Q: Did you have any role whatsoever in the decisions and determination of the policies that would be supported by the U.S. delegation to the United Nations? Or was that all handled at a different level in a different area?

PUHAN: It was handled by a sister office headed, I think later on by Joe Sisco and probably also–let's see, no Joe Sisco. I can't remember now but policy was not–no, we did not advise a delegation on what position to take on issues that appeared before the security council or the general assembly. That was not our purview.

Q: How long were you in the international organization area and where did you go from

there?

1959: Foy Kohler, Then Assistant Secretary, European Affairs, Brings Puhan Into EUR As Executive Director

PUHAN: I spent two years there. I was there from '57 to–well, '57 and '58 or '59. No, '57 to '59 and then I was rescued, as it were, by Foy Kohler who had become Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs and he called me up and asked me to come and see him. He asked me if I would like to become Executive Director of the European Bureau. Well, I jumped at the chance with alacrity and had two years in a job that I liked very much because it called for administrative experience. While I had basic political interests, I also liked the idea of administering the European Bureau, which was then and is now a big bureau and a very important one. Here again you had the budget for your bureau as well as your embassies, all your embassies in Europe and I had a chance to visit practically all of the embassies while I was there during the two years.

Q: I don't know how it was in the Department of State there. I started out in the Department myself when I sort of by accident got into the information side. And when the USIA was separated I elected to stay with USIA. I found that in the Agency there was a great tendency I think to bring the administrative side of the effort much more closely to the policy side than I noticed at State, at least at the time when I was at State. State, during the time I was there, which terminated at the end of 1956, displayed a tendency to think that the administrative people were sort of a different breed and not quite of the same caliber as the economic or political officers. Thus, they were kept pretty far away from any substantive work in the policy determination. Did you find that to be true in your role as the Executive Director for the European Area? Or did you find that there you got closer to the policy issues than you did in other assignments?

Although State Tended To Consider Administration As Beneath Policy, Puhan Feels His Administrative Experience Helped Him In Future Assignments

PUHAN: Well, your findings are quite correct. I think this has been a problem for the Foreign Service. You know, they said either you were in substantive work or you were in administrative work. As a result, jobs like executive director were not sought after by Foreign Service people. Officers wanted to be Director of the Office of German Affairs or Soviet Affairs or Western European Affairs or whatever. This I think has hurt the Foreign Service in the past. Because as embassies grew by leaps and bounds, ambassadors and DCMs were asked to head staffs representing 30 or 40 organizations with very little administrative experience–I think it hurt them.

Now, it didn't hurt me particularly because as I say I've always been a rather aggressive officer. And when we had bureau staff meetings, much, I imagine, to the chagrin of my colleagues in the so-called substantive field, I voiced my opinions if the officer said something that I thought was rather out of line in Western or Eastern Europe. I felt free to speak my mind. And I was not stopped either by Foy Kohler or by Bill Tyler or finally by John Leddy. I mean, they allowed me to do this. But as I say, it probably caused some

heartburn among the officers who thought I ought to stick to my budget and that sort of thing. So I wasn't hurt by it at all. I rather enjoyed it.

Q: Well, I think you were fortunate also in having had a rather remarkable substantive experience not only by educational background but also in Austria before and therefore you had credentials which could be brought forth to supplement what you were trying to say and reinforce what you were trying to give as an input from your position as the administrative area officer.

PUHAN: Yes, I would agree with that. I think that I had–I felt that I knew as much about Central Europe as the substantive officers there did and felt I was well qualified to voice my views. We had some very timid souls running offices there at times and it sometimes seemed ludicrous to me, some of the things that were discussed that when an Assistant Secretary was sitting there and bringing up little things about somebody drowning in the Danube or something like that. And I thought that I was qualified. But as I say I've never been one to shy away from that sort of thing. While there were undoubtedly people who said, well, this guy is never going to become an ambassador, I fooled them.

Q: Did you ever feel in subsequent assignments that being in what was definitely recognized in the Department as being essentially administrative had any adverse effect upon your future assignments?

PUHAN: Well, I think once I became Executive Director of the European Bureau, you see what happened; Ambassador Thompson told me in 1957 when I sort of complained about this assignment, the Office of International Administration in the Bureau of International Organizations. He said, Al, don't worry. You're going to go to Washington and you will get known. That's all he said. I did not get known in OIA, but I did get known as Executive Director of the European Bureau. And as a result of this when my two years came up I was nominated to become DCM to George Kennan in Belgrade. I was elated at the thought and I realized, of course, that I was probably going to–if he accepted me–that I was going to work for one of the finest diplomats we've produced. Foy Kohler or Bill Tyler sent me out to Belgrade by using that as part of the inspection of our embassies to meet with George Kennan. And we had about three days of talking. And I realized, of course, I had no desire nor ability to advise this man on Soviet or Yugoslav affairs, but that I could probably help him with running the embassy which was gaining in strength, in numbers.

1962: Expecting Assignment As DCM, Belgrade, Puhan Becomes DCM Bangkok

So this was to be a substantive job. But to my astonishment when I got back I was asked to go to Bangkok as DCM. The reason I think was that we had a political ambassador there and they wanted someone to ride herd on him which is very difficult for a DCM to do.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

PUHAN: t was Kenneth Young.

Q: He was a pretty good ambassador.

PUHAN: Kenneth Young was a friend of Chester Bowles. He had some credentials for being out there. His problem was–he's dead now as you know–his problem, I think, was mainly that he sort of, well, I've never seen any ambassador call as many press conferences as Kenneth Young. And during his press conferences he had his small children climbing all over him with Thai journalists around. He never could keep an appointment on time. I immediately voiced some objection to going there when it was proposed to me by saying, well, I don't know anything about the country and it's not my field. And I was told, well, that's all right. We want you to take over there and Averell Harriman wants this done.

Well, Kenneth Young was in Washington and I got an appointment with him. And the first question he asked me was why do you want to go to Bangkok? And I said, I don't. I said, I want to go to Belgrade where I know something about the area. I don't know anything about Bangkok.

Q: Oh, you mean you never got to Belgrade?

PUHAN: Never got to Belgrade, no.

Q: Oh, so this came up in lieu thereof.

PUHAN: They just changed it after I had been told, yes, get ready. My wife had even measured for curtains in Belgrade and the house. Anyway, I went to Kenneth Young, who liked my frankness and I think was relieved that I was not an expert on Southeast Asian affairs. We got along very well. And as you may remember, he and his wife and my wife all had hepatitis at the same time and I was Chargé. He never returned. His case was complicated by some gastrointestinal ailment and I was Chargé for six, seven months in Bangkok. So you see after that, of course, then came Director of the Office of German Affairs and then finally Ambassador to Budapest. So by the time I finished my job as the Executive Director I was in a substantive job, but known as a man who could also administer. I was sent out by Katzenbach, for example, to implement both the BALPA (balance of payments reduction program) and OPRED (overseas personnel reductions) programs. You remember those cutbacks?

Q: Yes, I remember those cutbacks.

PUHAN: I was sent out to do those because, I guess, of my administrative experience.

Q: What years was it that you were in Bangkok?

PUHAN: '62 to '64.

Q: '62 to '64.

PUHAN: Yes.

Q: I guess there was not a coup at that particular time was there?

PUHAN: No, there was not.

Q: And there'd been one not too long before that. And the next one came in the early '70s.

PUHAN: Yes, Sarit was in power when I was there and died in bed while I was there. He was succeeded by Kittikachorn.

Q: Thanom.

PUHAN: Thanom Kittikachorn, yes.

Q: He was the Premier when I was there.

PUHAN: Yes, very genial man. And Thanat Khoman was the shrewd foreign minister. I got along with him very well.

Q: I got along with him very well too.

PUHAN: Yeah.

Q: What would you think or what would you consider to have been the principal political developments in Thailand during your period there as far as the Thai government itself was concerned?

PUHAN: Well, as far as the Thai government was concerned I think the principal development was already in progress when I got there. That, as you know, you were there, Thailand had until World War II a policy of neutrality. All the roads out of Thailand ended at the border and they had nothing to do with the outside world. And they kept pitting France and Britain against each other. Then when the Japanese came in there and were ousted they finally opted to go with the Americans. When I was there the buildup for the subsequent war in Vietnam was beginning. I knew General Harkens, Paul Harkens, who was the predecessor of Westmoreland. And I knew Westmoreland. They used to come to Bangkok and sit in my office. I used to have long conversations with them. That was the principal development.

I think one of the problems in Thailand was that the capital was full of talented people, Thais, as you know, but none of these talented people wanted to go out and work in the boondocks. So the communists agents could go in there and tell the people that when we take over you won't see the tax collector, you see, and this was a real danger that was

developing in Thailand. But I think Thailand having opted to ally itself with the United States caused some regrets later on in Thailand.

Q: Did Graham Martin come in as ambassador before you left? Or had you left by the time?

PUHAN: No, he came in. He came in after this long hiatus when I was Chargé. He came in in the Fall of 1963 or maybe October, November. In any event, I spent six or seven months with him.

1964: Back To Washington As Head Of Office of German Affairs

Q: He was still there when I came in. He was succeeded by Leonard Unger. So from Bangkok then you went where?

PUHAN: From Bangkok I went back to the Department of State to head the Office of German Affairs which I did for four years and then really five because the fifth year John Leddy made me an Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State.

Q: What would you say were the principal problems that you faced at the time of your incumbency there?

PUHAN: Well, first of all when I got there the Berlin Task Force which had been formed in 1961–I got there in 1964 in Washington–the Berlin Task Force had virtually taken over the power that should belong to the Office of German Affairs. By the time I got there in 1964 it was the tail that wagged the dog. And I said to Bill Tyler, after looking at this, I said, I don't think this makes any sense. You can't expect me to recommend policies for Germany if the men and women in the Berlin Task Force who have nothing to do now since there aren't many crises anymore are beginning to assume more and more of the powers of the Office of German Affairs.

Bob Creel, my predecessor, I think was most reluctant to do that job. I told him, I said, I thought this ought to be our organization. In fact, the Berlin Task Force was turned over to me. And after this I chaired the Berlin Task Force when it met.

Well, the problems of course were many. As you know, our policy towards Germany has always been a very complicated one. On the one hand we were interested ever since 1947, '48, in containing the Russians. This required in time a strong Germany in NATO and the planting of nuclear weapons in Germany. It called for subsidization of our troops by the Germans and by us too of course. And also there was a conflict because Adenauer was interested in developing a close relationship with de Gaulle and did. This, however, put the Germans in conflict with us because, as you know, in the days of Lyndon B. Johnson, you couldn't mention de Gaulle's name in his presence. And this caused a rather tricky situation. Then the question of German reunification. Yes, we're for reunification, but thought that it probably wouldn't take place.

So it was a very complex situation, for me probably the most interesting of my entire career. Because for one thing having the language and having the knowledge of Germany and having the knowledge of their literature and their background, I had access to anybody. I knew every chancellor from Adenauer through Helmut Schmidt. And I was able to see them in Bonn. I was able to talk to Theo Sommer, Editor of Die Zeit in Hamburg. I knew these people. I saw a German delegation almost every week in my office. Their backs had to be stroked or they had to be assured that what Mansfield was trying to do, reducing our troops in Germany, wasn't going to happen. Of course, I had a big advantage over my colleague who ran Soviet affairs. As you know, usually there has been a senior, very senior officer on the seventh floor close to the Secretary who is a Soviet expert. It was either Foy Kohler or George Kennan or Llewellyn Thompson, or Chip Bohlen.

In my case in German affairs there was no German expert between Dean Rusk and myself. Dean Rusk frequently called me directly on the phone and asked me to come up, especially on matters pertaining to Berlin or certain things that the West Germans were contemplating doing, and to listen to his complaints –justified–about German failure to back us on Vietnam and that sort of thing. It was a most challenging job and one that I thoroughly enjoyed. I worked hard, it was a six day operation and sometimes even on Sunday. But it was a most challenging job. The most challenging job in some ways I ever held even though as ambassador, of course, you have certain prerogatives that you didn't have there. But it was the most interesting job of my career I think.

German/American Relations In This Period Were Turning A Bit Sour

Q: Again, what years are those?

PUHAN: 1964 to 1969.

Q: That was a period during which the opinion of the Germans with regard to the United States began to turn around a bit and become sour, wasn't it? What are your comments on that?

PUHAN: That is true and it was caused partly because of the fact that we were bugging them constantly for more money. We had very little to offer them except possible quick death with our nuclear weapons, our constant changes in policy from massive retaliation to flexible response to whatever they were called at the time, had them in a stew. At the same time the Wirtschaftswunder, the miracle of their economic recovery made them a power to be reckoned with. Yet Germany was a big economic body with a small political head. They had no say in foreign affairs. They rather resented our asking them to do things which they thought they had no business doing like backing them up on Vietnam and so on. And so relations did sour. I had very good relations with the ambassador, Heinrich Knappstein, and his brilliant political counselor, Berndt Von Staden, who later on became ambassador to Washington and I think somehow maybe I helped a little bit to keep American-German relations on an even course.

And then our top people in State, as you well know, were preoccupied with Vietnam. Germany could under the circumstances only be a nuisance. I think the Germans felt this. And their leaders, Adenauer, Erhard, Kiesinger–were all fairly submissive. Adenauer knew he was head of a defeated country, a divided country and Erhard was a specialist in economics. When we got to Willy Brandt, you got a different personality and a man who, as you know, when he became Chancellor was the one who actually preceded Nixon in detente, I mean, in settling the Berlin situation, settling it more or less.

But, yes, it was a fascinating period. I saw Germany struggling from impotence, total impotence, in the political international arena, to a role of some significance, and of now much greater significance with an army of nearly 500,000 men and an economic structure that is not rivaled in Europe today–with the reunification of 80 million Germans in the offing. But in the '60s the Germans became more assertive. I can remember walking with Helmut Schmidt from the Sheraton–I don't know, one of the hotels downtown Washington–to the Golden Parrot for lunch and he was quite sarcastic about American policies and American leaders. The Germans began to feel they were being used and they were not allowed to play their proper role. So it was kind of a touchy situation.

I was asked one time what do you do with these delegations? We had a delegation of mayors this week, a delegation of Bundestag members the next week, a delegation of journalists the following week. And one of my friends said, well, what do you say to them when you have these sessions? I said, well, I welcome them and then I listen. And that's what they wanted, someone to whom they could sound off. And our people–there was a man who was very helpful to me in this case. You see, Johnson was too busy. Rusk, too, was busy as was McNamara. But Hubert Humphrey–I could always count on Hubert Humphrey to meet a delegation of Germans, to meet the Vice President of the United States. He was always very jovial and of course patted them on the head and made them feel good when they left the office. So he was a real help.

Q: This was also the period I think in which the real radicalization of the German student group came into full flower wasn't it?

PUHAN: Are you talking about the Greens?

Q: Yes, the Greens began moving into Berlin very extensively and finally just virtually ruined their free university at Berlin.

PUHAN: Yes. This is the time when this began. Now, you know, radical movements, of course, exist in every country. I got a lot of questions about that when I was in Hungary. The Hungarians knew, of course, of my past as Director of the Office of German Affairs. So I became sort of their unofficial consultant on German affairs. And they were always concerned about radical movements in Germany, both of the left and of the right. And I had to point out to them that, look, you can't expect the country not to have–in a free society you've got to expect this. I always told them I thought it would remain rather small. I didn't think they had to be too concerned. But this added a little spice to the whole operation, yes.

1969: America's Second Ambassador To Hungary

Q: Then from your assignment as head of German desk, the German country director, you went to Hungary?

PUHAN: Yes, in 1969. In April or May of 1969 I was nominated to become ambassador to Hungary. My predecessor there was the first ambassador to Hungary, Martin Hillenbrand. He'd been there only about 16 months, I think, something like that. And I was the second to go and remained there over four years. Fascinating country, fascinating people and tremendous job.

Henry Kissinger said to me when I left, he said, I'm very glad, Al, that you're going as ambassador. But I wish you were going to a country more important to us than Hungary. And I said, well Henry, you know, I've got to get some experience. Perhaps when I come back you can do something about that. Of course, it never happened because by that time Watergate–when I finished, Watergate was bubbling and I retired. But it was a fascinating job.

Q: Did you learn the Hungarian language?

PUHAN: I took lessons but I found that the Hungarians really didn't want to talk Hungarian to me because obviously my vocabulary was limited. And as you know it's not an Indo-European tongue. It's extremely difficult. And I recognized the fact that I had probably two years in Budapest when I first started. And I would never use it again. Besides I had four young officers there including the PAO, Clem Scerback, who all spoke Hungarian. And so if I needed any help with someone to accompany me I had my choice of four people. I used German a lot. As you know the legacy of the Austrian-Hungarian empire and what Hitler left was the use of the German language. When I was in the villages, I'm talking to priests or mayors or industrialists or something like that, I always used German. And with the young people it was English. But I had enough Hungarian so I could say when we had a reception or Hungarians were present, things like–How are you? Come on in. How are things? You know, a smattering of Hungarian.

Q: At what stage do you think the Hungarians began to get into what in a small degree is a market economy?

PUHAN: I believe it began in–I went there in 1969. I think the germ of that thing was sewn in 1968, one year before I got there with the so-called New Economic Mechanism (NEM). Janos Kadar, the man who was imposed by the Russians on the Hungarians in 1956, turned out to be a man who led them out of the wilderness. Until last year. He was finally forced out and then died in 1989. But he told me one time that he had a kind of agreement with the Russians that in return for having his own way in running the Hungarian economy he would be willing to go without any hesitation along with any political or foreign policy decisions the Russians were making. He developed this New Economic Mechanism which became known as Hungarian goulash communism. As you

know it was the dissolution of centralized management and bringing it down to the factory or farm manager. You're the one who decides what to produce and how many and so on, and we'll tell you if it's not right or so on.

Hungary's Quiet Revolution Toward Capitalism In 1970s

So this quiet revolution in Hungary has been going on since 1968. When I got there in 1969 relations between our two countries were very chilly still. There were reasons for it. Cardinal Jozsef Mindszenty was in our Embassy and had been there for 13 years when I got there. And diplomatic relations were extant but that's about all you could say for it.

I arrived there in June. By August we had already managed to agree upon an agenda that we would discuss. And we had resolved four rather small impediments to better relations which caused the New York Times–read my book coming out in 1990–to praise this action and call it not the sort of stuff that international diplomacy is made of, but sometimes the symbolism was more important than the actual action and it's a good indication of how things are developing between the two countries and it speaks well for our American ambassador there, Alfred Puhan.

So, I saw over this period of four years plus what I would call a development of relations from abnormal to normal between two such different countries, a little country of 10 million people, communist, and the mighty United States, capitalist. And we had free movement and so on. The Cardinal was out of the Embassy at the end of my second year and that made it possible for high ranking officials of the U. S. government to come there. So I was there at the beginning of this.

Q: Do you think that the cultural background and the temperament of the Hungarian people also made them more predisposed to follow that kind of an economic development than say some of the other people like the Czechs? From my short experience, very short experience–just a week or two between the two countries–seemed to indicate to me the difference between night and day in going from the Czechs to the Hungarians, although there were other reasons for that. But I just wondered how you felt about it.

PUHAN: There is no question, no doubt about that at all. The Hungarians are a very talented, clever intelligent people. They have demonstrated that by contributing to our civilization in the United States everything from George Solti and Eugene Ormandy and Joe Namath and Zsa Zsa Gabor and anyone you want to name. All these have done very, very well in their own fields.

By the way, I saw this at the Voice of America because you know we had there a little bit of each of these countries at these desks. And you could always tell the Hungarians were far more aggressive, far more willing to go ahead. The Czechs perhaps because the long domination by Russians or by Germans and Austrians has produced a kind of timidity in that, you could have knocked me over with a feather when I learned that the Czechs threw out the communist government. Really, that was something because I expected

them to be pretty much next to Ceausescu in Rumania–to be last.

Q: Yes, I thought so too.

PUHAN: But instead they did it. Well, the Hungarians are–they have a talent for this. I could tell you story after story. They were practicing capitalism when I was there. I had a white Lincoln Continental as an official car. And of course it was not only the only white Lincoln, but it was the only Lincoln in all of Hungary. And when something went wrong with it there was no point in taking it to a state garage. They couldn't do anything about it. But you could go up to a third or fourth floor office where a little man sat with an eyeshade. He took a look at the part that had to be produced and he produced the part. This was going on all over the place and the government knew it and backed it in fact quietly. At the same time having learned their lesson in 1956 because of the clobbering by the Russians, the Hungarian insurgency, they were careful. But they kept pushing as one of them told me one time. I don't remember whether it was a journalist or a doctor. He said we always push just about as far as we think we can go and then we push a little bit further. And if nothing happens then the next time we push again a little bit further and that's what they've done.

So they have the disposition. Now, I look forward to–they're going to have a lot of trouble of course because they have a big national debt. They're going to have a lot of small parties and the communist party has changed its name. That's not going to fool them of course and I suspect they'll get less than 17 percent of the vote in this spring's elections that they've going to have. But, yes, it's absolutely true. There's even a contrast as you know between the Czechs and the Slovaks. The Slovaks are more like the Hungarians. The Czechs are quite timid.

Q: They seem so much more bullying to me.

PUHAN: Yes.

Q: Do you have any anecdotes about the Hungarian situation that you feel you'd like to put on tape here? Or would you care to comment further?

PUHAN: Well, of course, they'll all be in my book.

One of the stories–I heard later–concerns the fact that the Hungarian communist party was losing members year after year. So they finally decided to give some incentives and they said that any member of the Hungarian communist party who brings in a new member is relieved from attending party meetings for a period of one month and does not have to pay his dues for a year. And any member who brings in two new members is relieved of attending all party meetings for a year and doesn't have to pay any dues for a year. And any member who brings in three new members will receive a certificate saying that he never was a member of the communist party.

1973: Retirement

Q: Was Hungary your last assignment?

PUHAN: Yes, I retired after I came back in '73. As you know at that time 60 was the mandatory retirement. The only way I could have remained on was for the President to nominate me for another post which might have happened if Mr. Nixon hadn't been involved in Watergate at that time. I imagine the thing farthest from his mind was the making of ambassadors. So I decided that I might as well retire. I didn't relish the idea of staying on even if they'd asked me in the Department. So I quit in August of 1973.

Q: Well, do you have any general comments now before we close, any comments on your attitude and feelings about your career or anything else that you'd like to say in conclusion?

PUHAN: Yes, Lew. I think I've had one of the most fascinating careers that any man could have. I started out by accident in the Voice of America. In the short period of 11 years I rose to be Program Director. I had a career as a Foreign Service Officer which ended up with what every shavetail coming out of West Point would hope would happen to him–becoming a general. I became ambassador and how many people become ambassador anyway? Along the way I had interesting assignments like the ones I described–the Department's Office of German Affairs, Executive Director, Bangkok. And in looking back I'm most grateful. I have nothing but praise for what people like Foy Kohler and Llewellyn Thompson and John Leddy and others with whom I've worked and for whom I worked and worked with, accomplished. So I have no regrets and am most happy, and that's why I sat down and decided one day to write for my children and grandchildren what has become a book which is coming out presently. [It was published on December 13, 1989]

Q: Well, I thank you very much for giving me this time this afternoon, Al. It's been a most interesting interview.

PUHAN: Thank you very much. I enjoyed talking to you.

Q: Thank you.

End of interview