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

STEPHEN RUKEN

Interviewed by: Mark Tauber
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INTERVIEW

Q: Today is February 14, 2025, and we're beginning our interview with Stephen Ruken. Steve, before we get on to your story, are there any aspects of your ancestry that you want to mention?

RUKEN: I'll just be brief. Both my parents were born and raised in Chicago, as was I. On my dad's side, my grandparents—whom I never knew — immigrated from the United Kingdom and Russia. Then on my mom's side—I did know these grandparents — my grandfather was born in New York City in 1909 and my grandmother was born in what is modern day Latvia, and came over to the U.S in 1922 as a young child. We're not sure exactly why she came over. She didn't remember, she was a little kid, but it was either due to economic distress or possibly religious persecution. She spent her whole life in Chicago, too. We're a third generation Chicago family.

Q: When were you born?

RUKEN: I was born in 1967.

Q: Did you and your family stay in Chicago?

RUKEN: Yes, they lived in the same house for most of my life, until they passed away. They passed away recently, my mom in 2021 and my father in 2022, but they were in the Chicago area their entire lives.

Q: Brothers and sisters?

RUKEN: I have a younger sister, four years younger than me, and she lives in a nearby Chicago suburb.

Q: Tell us a little bit about your early life. Were your grandparents present? What was the neighborhood like, and so on?

RUKEN: I was mostly raised in Highland Park, which is a suburb about twenty miles north of the city limits. That's where I went to school. Originally, we were in the city

itself, and then—like a lot of people in the late 1960s and early 70s—concerns about the quality of the education led my parents to relocate to the suburbs, also to a larger house, which is what they wanted. I was five, so I didn't really have much of a say in it, and so I was raised in a comfortable suburb, north of Chicago.

Q: What did your parents do?

RUKEN: My father was an attorney, and my mom worked in a number of different jobs. She went to art school when she was much younger, was an interior designer for a while, worked at an art gallery for some time, and then in retail for many years afterward.

Q: You mentioned that the schools were better. I'm guessing that you went to a public school? Can you describe it – size, diversity, etc.

RUKEN: Yes, it was a large public high school. It had approximately 2,400 students over the course of four grades. Somewhat diverse. My suburb was mostly white but was very diverse in terms of its religions. We had large Protestant, Catholic and Jewish populations at this high school, and also Buddhists and members of the Hindu religion. And part of our school district included another suburb with a large Spanish-speaking immigrant population. We were also by a military fort, so there were a lot of military kids at our school whose parents were stationed there. They were more ethnically diverse and from all over the country.

Q: Looking back on elementary and high school, were there influences on you, teachers or particular subjects or other aspects of high school that were formative for you in terms of ultimately going into the Foreign Service?

RUKEN: I had a lot of really good, motivated teachers who made me enjoy learning. They weren't internationally focused, per se, but they gave a lot of attention to the students, especially my English teacher and my social studies and history teachers. As a result of that, I just enjoyed being a student. Obviously, like most students, there were some subjects that I hated and wasn't that good at but overall, and the social situation at the school could be challenging. But I liked it for the most part, and was able to excel, and also strike a good balance of getting good grades, but not to the point where I was stressing out or spending weekends in libraries. I sort of found that balance early on between excelling to the best of my ability, without burning out and still having some fun along the way.

Q: Speaking of fun, were you involved in extracurricular activities, sports, music, drama, that sort of thing?

RUKEN: So in middle school, I ran track and wrote for the newspaper and the yearbook. In high school, it was mostly the student newspaper. Back in those days, we actually put out a print newspaper. This was pre-internet — millions of years ago. Mobile phones back then were giant, sort of like the size of tennis rackets. The newspaper did old fashioned journalism, where you actually go in and do the story, then go into the office on

the weekends and give it to the typesetter, and they fit it onto the page, and maybe we'll take a photo or make sure the byline is correct. One year I was a reporter, then the second year, I was the sports editor, and the third year, I was the managing editor, not the editor-in-chief, but the next level down. And I also was a PA announcer for one of the sports teams. I sort of gave up on playing organized athletics by the time I was in high school due to lack of talent and my preference just to play pickup games, but the announcing was fun. I love sports, and so I was still able to participate by announcing and also by writing about it for the student paper.

Q: Were there other experiences at that time that exposed you to international affairs? Travel, or just even at home, news and that sort of thing, that piqued your interest in international affairs?

RUKEN: Not all that much. My background was a bit different from a lot of people in the Foreign Service, because I was not raised in the DC area. My parents weren't involved in foreign affairs at all, and we traveled somewhat within the U.S, but not internationally. In fact, except for one brief trip outside the U.S, I had not been outside the U.S until I was in college. But I was very much interested in the news, and in history. I remember when I was around ten, my parents got a set of encyclopedias. We had this beautiful edition of the World Book Encyclopedia from 1977. And I really loved reading the history articles on the different countries in there; so that sparked my interest to some extent.

Q: Alright, as you're getting ready to graduate high school, what kind of colleges are you thinking about? Were you thinking about a major?

RUKEN: I applied to a mix of public and private schools, and I actually started my first year at the University of Michigan. I soon realized that this was too close to home, and I wanted to experience something different. I transferred to the University of Texas at Austin, which at that point was a really up and coming public university. They were well funded due to oil money, and they were stealing a lot of the professors from the Ivies. It was an up and coming school with really nice facilities. They were trying to establish their academic reputation, which back in those days was decent, but not great. I went there and double majored in government and communications—radio, TV, film—so a mix of media and government. I had a good time there academically and met the woman who would later become my wife.

Q: Now, as you're working in college, you mentioned you had some exposure to international relations there, was it classes? Or did you travel abroad?

RUKEN: Both, actually. As part of my government degree, I took a lot of different courses. I remember a Latin American politics course, a couple of them, actually, which I really found interesting, especially one on civil-military relations. It was also the time of Iran-Contra and a lot of the so-called liberation wars in Central America. There was a lot of churn going on in Central and South America during this time, and that sometimes spilled over onto campus.

I also took a Middle Eastern simulation class, which involved role-playing. We would type statements into a computer simulation and make predictions. It was almost like a tabletop exercise, like we do in the State Department. We had to write positions for different government actors and predict how they would respond to certain events. I remember, because I was into Middle Eastern politics quite a bit back then, there was some fictional event pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that we had to role play. I remember arguing that the Kingdom of Jordan was going to stay out of it and assume a neutral position so as not to antagonize its neighbors. I remember the professor smashed me for those views, he thought they weren't realistic, and he gave me a C on this project, my worst grade as an undergraduate. And I remember being really mad. I thought, "No, this guy has it wrong. I'm right. This is what the Jordanians would do." And a few years later, something similar actually happened in real life, and the Jordanians stayed out of it and took the neutral posture I had predicted. I remember being still mad at this professor for my grade. I understood how they were thinking by trying to put myself in their shoes, and this professor was criticizing me, and I thought I had it right. Maybe I was overconfident, but I guess I don't forget those types of things!

In terms of travel, by senior year, the University started this program called the Normandy Scholars Program, which still exists today. It involved a semester of travel to the Normandy region of France, with study of World War II at a museum. I participated in the first-ever group that participated. It was kind of experimental back in those days, and it really gave me the travel and exploration bug. I had not spent any sustained time out of the U.S. To be able to go study this fascinating topic at a museum in a very pro-American part of France—visiting all these beaches and museums, historic sites, churches and towns, and to be welcomed really warmly by the local population—for me was very inspirational and definitely increased my interest in living overseas.

Q: Had you begun taking any foreign languages?

RUKEN: I already had taken Spanish and Portuguese in college. At that point I wasn't good at either one, and one could say I'm still not good at Spanish, but I think I'm pretty decent at Portuguese now. Anyway, I was spending a lot of time with those languages and trying to set myself up, at least in my mind, for future study in a Latin American country. And when I went to graduate school, I did study down in Brazil for a while.

Q: What were the years that you were in college?

RUKEN: I was an undergrad from 1986 until 1990, then I took a year off in between, and then went to graduate school starting in 1991.

Q: During the time you were in college, did you also work? Were there any work experiences that were valuable for you later on?

RUKEN: For sure. As an undergraduate, I got involved in student government and ran for a couple elected positions in student government and those were paid, actually. Those were fun, very challenging and interesting, I worked on people skills a bit, realized that I

had certain qualities that were helpful, and other qualities that were not helpful, and so became more self-aware as a result of those experiences. And then I worked in the summers for odd jobs just to make some money when I wasn't in school full-time. One of which involved working at a print shop, and I learned how much I absolutely despise photocopiers—this has lasted right up to the present day.

Q: Was there anything else about being in Austin, in the community that still sticks in your mind?

RUKEN: I just really liked the vibe of the town back then. I think it's changed a lot, it's more of a moneyed town now, but back then, this was before the IT crowd moved in, it was inexpensive and sort of a hippie oasis in an otherwise very conservative state. Austin back then was like Berkeley or Madison, Wisconsin. I think all three were a little more free wheeling and relaxed then than they are now. And a nice climate, good place to be outdoors and go hiking and swimming. So, I really had a great experience.

Q: And during your year off, did you travel? What did you do then?

RUKEN: By the end of my undergraduate years, I had a very serious girlfriend—we got married several years later. After undergrad we traveled and worked itinerantly, at whatever jobs we could find. I wouldn't call us hobos —we didn't try to board freight trains — but it was almost like that. We drove really beat up old cars, went to Florida, worked some odd jobs there, ran out of money, didn't rob any banks, but probably thought of it, and then eventually made our way up to Chicago to collapse on my parents sofa. We then got some more odd jobs, which made me realize I really need to go back to grad school because this isn't going to work over the long term. I had some really bad jobs. I think I realized that I didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do at that point, and I had a decent enough undergrad degree, but nothing that really led me into anything specific. After a while, I concluded I had to go back for an advanced degree, and my then-girlfriend concluded the same but would wait for me to enter school first. I got into the London School of Economics, which sounds really nice, but they didn't offer me a single cent, and we couldn't afford it on our own. I was rejected by a bunch of other schools, and then I was accepted into UCLA, and Georgetown in DC, and chose UCLA. I mainly chose UCLA based on affordability and because I really love California. So we went out to UCLA and I entered a PhD program at UCLA in political science, with the intent of eventually becoming a professor. We were out there for the first half of the 90s.

Q: When did you enter graduate school?

RUKEN: September of 1991. We drove out to LA in 1991, found an apartment in West LA, near the campus and Santa Monica beach. We experienced a couple of earthquakes there, some wildfires not that far from our place, and we were there also for the riots in 1992, following the trial of the cops who beat up Rodney King. We were in a kind of edgy, lower-middle class neighborhood, but it remained quiet. These were exciting years in LA, not necessarily easy ones for the city, but interesting nonetheless.

Q: Now, at the same time, of course, the Soviet Union was collapsing, the Warsaw Pact was collapsing. Did that attract your attention in any way, or did it have any effect on your studies?

RUKEN: I think everybody realized in my graduate program, we're going through some historic times right now. We all were interested in world affairs, but we all felt preoccupied with the more practical concerns of how am I going to get a job? So there was a mix of those two things. Even as an undergraduate, when I graduated in 1990, then-president Bush (President H.W. Bush) came and spoke at the commencement,which was held in the University of Texas football stadium, which, back then, only held 80,000 people. I remember we were all hoping he'd give us advice on how to get jobs or tackle the future, but instead he only spoke about foreign policy. It was in fact entirely a foreign policy speech, and even though it was very historic in terms of the events he was talking about, we were kind of disappointed. Aren't you going to give us advice? But no, this was all about Lithuania and the Baltics, and about Cyprus and the need to get the Greeks and Turks to the negotiating table. It kind of showed, even back then, old H.W. was a bit out of touch with his audience. Eventually, as we all know, the economy went into recession, and he was voted out of office. Anyway, returning to UCLA, it was definitely a time of awe in terms of what was going on in the world, and that increased my interest. At the same time, though, we were all still worried about the practical matters.

Q: One other thing about your experience as a student in UCLA, since you're on the West Coast, there's a general interest in the Pacific rim countries, and what's going on there. Did that have any effect on your interests or your studies?

RUKEN: Certainly at UCLA, the Asian student population is large compared to what you might find at a lot of universities on the East Coast. And not surprisingly, there are many different clubs and organizations on campus focused on one Asian country or another. That alone didn't really impact my own interests. One thing I soon picked up on was there was a big difference between the West Coast universities and the East Coast universities at the graduate student level in international relations. The West Coast universities, at least back then, were way more theoretical in their approaches to studying trends in the real world. Whereas the East Coast universities, as I jokingly say, use more proper nouns. They'll look at specific countries, places, people, and are more analytical about events actually unfolding in the real time. I suspect these differences still exist today, to some extent. That impacted my interest, because I realized I was more comfortable with the east coast approach even though I was at a west coast school.

Q: I can confirm that because I went to Georgetown as both an undergraduate and a graduate.

RUKEN: Ah ha. So you understand what I am talking about.

Q: Any time there were major events in the world going on, the professors would simply stop and address it. To some extent, they used the opportunity to use it as an example of a

\theory or to apply risk analysis tools. The students welcomed this element of practical approaches.

RUKEN: Exactly. At UCLA, there were a few students who wanted that. I was certainly one of them. But a lot of the others didn't, and so it took me a long time to find my crowd there, to find professors who shared the interests that I had. It was a much longer process, maybe a bit more frustrating too. It took me probably a good year and a half to two years of being in grad school to really find people who intellectually had some shared interests.

Q: Now, as you're going through grad school, your initial idea was to get a PhD and begin teaching. Did that begin to change?

RUKEN: Later on in my grad school career, yes. I spent about three years doing my coursework and getting my masters. At that time, I threw in a study abroad in Brazil so I could get better at Portuguese and improve my skills. And then, when I started working on my dissertation, I found it slow going. And like a lot of PhD students, you get sick of it after a while, and it's always hanging over your head. You never go to bed knowing that, "Ahh, it's over. I don't have to do anything." No, you know there's always more writing you could be doing, and you're also worried about the money and making sure your funding gets renewed. It's still a nice lifestyle, and I still enjoyed it, but it's not so easy. And as anybody who went through that process would know, there are times where you just want to throw that thing in the toilet and flush.

My wife, in the mid 90s, had completed her master's in education. She landed an international school teaching job in Israel, and we decided to go together. It was at a U.S.-funded international school, the same school that the American embassy kids attended. We were happy to go there and shake things up. We were living in a town north of Tel Aviv, in a regular neighborhood.. This experience further increased my interest in working overseas. We got to know some embassy people and one of the Econ officers invited us to his house for dinner. So we went to his house, and my wife and I looked at each other and we thought, wow, this is a really nice house! He doesn't even pay rent! Of course, I didn't join the Foreign Service because of the money. However, it would be a lie to say that the chance of having an economically stable life had no sway with us. It appealed to us greatly because at the same time that we were in Israel with me working on my dissertation, my graduate student colleagues back at UCLA were scrambling around for jobs, often working at multiple universities, and not necessarily good ones. They had to navigate sixty, seventy miles a day on the LA freeways to piece together different part time teaching gigs, all so that they could just pay rent and feed themselves. We didn't want that, and we also wanted economic stability.

By the end of our two years in Israel, I knew that I really was interested in working overseas, and so I took the Foreign Service test at the then-U.S Embassy in Tel Aviv. I passed it and took the orals about a year later, once we were back in the States. I passed that, then returned to LA so I could continue on my dissertation research, because we didn't know exactly when we would join the State Department and I still wanted to finish my dissertation. A year after that, in 1998, the call came to join. At that point I was

between two thirds and three fourths done with my dissertation. Despite some starts and stops, I actually finished it while I was a Foreign Service Officer. During my first two tours, after work I would set aside between one and two hours to try and finish it. Sometimes I would just go to a nearby hotel and work in the lobby, because I knew once I was home, I wouldn't feel as motivated. I actually finished it during my second tour as an ELO officer. I never attended any commencement ceremony, which may be why I still have occasional nightmares that I didn't finish it after all.

Q: Just one quick question to go back. Were there any important outcomes in Brazil while you were there studying?

RUKEN: Well, the most important outcome was I really discovered how much I like the outdoors, and so this, in a very indirect way, helped guide some of our bidding decisions later on. I also realized that I very much enjoyed speaking Portuguese and had great interest in Brazil, so I made sure Portuguese was one of my languages that I kept in shape. I did a four year tour in Brazil during my career, and also used Portuguese during my last tour, which was focused on a Portuguese speaking country in West Africa. Academically speaking, Brazil as a grad student wasn't a great experience. I didn't think the university where I studied was a serious place, and I didn't know that going in. I also learned something about the challenges and inefficiencies of living full time in a developing world country because I hadn't done that. And Brazil, of course, is certainly much more developed nowadays in terms of economy, infrastructure and democratic institutions, but back then it was a bit rougher.

Q: Then your first assignment was Israel?

RUKEN: No, I've never actually had an assignment in Israel. We were in Israel because my wife landed a teaching job there. At that point, I was still working on my dissertation. We lived in Israel for my wife's job from 1995 to 1997. Then I joined the Foreign Service in '98. We made it back to the Middle East later in my career, for a tour in Jordan. My first Foreign Service assignment was Merida, Mexico, a consular tour, from 1999 until 2001.

Q: Because I wanted to ask you, ultimately, was your dissertation accepted? And do you have the letters PhD after your name?

RUKEN: Yes, thank you. It was accepted. It took a long time, I think too long, but then again people say that Martin Luther King took twenty years to do his, so I did mine twice as fast! I'm not sure if it was accepted because it was good or because they were just tired of me, maybe a little bit of both. I was happy to get it out of the way, but I still have the occasional nightmare of having forgotten to file the paperwork, or I didn't finish the last chapter, or it got lost in the mail. But in real life, I did do it. I received the paperwork from UCLA, so I should be sleeping better at night.

Q: I think many graduate students suffer from that dream now and then. Even now, many years later, I occasionally have a dream where I open the test booklet and the questions are written in semiotic symbols and I have no idea what I'm supposed to write.

RUKEN: That's a good one.

Q: Alright, so you're in Merida. Now, obviously you've discussed this career with your wife. How did she see it? Was she planning on working in the countries where you were going? Did she have ambitions to join the Foreign Service?

RUKEN: She really liked the international school teaching job that she had in Israel. And she was well prepared for a teaching career. While we were at UCLA, she had studied to become a school teacher, to go into education, and so she decided, once I got in, that she would become an international school teacher. And that's what she pursued at virtually every post we were at. We were at nine overseas posts, if I am counting correctly, and she worked as an international school teacher at eight of them. This was a rare case where the spouse had her own career that she could do in person, as opposed to online or telework. And so she made it work for both of us. Like anybody, she had her frustrations with having to move so often, which meant her starting over at a new school. I really appreciate that she was able and willing to do this, which allowed us to spend more of our time overseas, which in turn allowed for more adventure, greater financial savings, and more experiences overall.

Q: Then let's go on to Merida. This is your first tour. Had you ever had any experience with some of the decision making, or the kind of work that a consular officer does in the first tour? Did you get any Spanish training before you went?

RUKEN: I had absolutely zero experience with any of that kind of work. And I was coming from grad school, I was really green and inexperienced. Yes, I had had multiple jobs in the past for a short time period, but a lot of these were odd, strange jobs that you wouldn't necessarily want your kids to do. The work in Merida was quite a challenge, and it took me a while to adapt to it. The city was too small of a place, I think, for us for our first tour. We would have benefited from going to a larger embassy to get more exposure, to have a larger group of people that we could draw upon for friendship and camaraderie. Merida was just limited in this regard.

I should note too that we did not bid it high. Back then we had to rank our top twenty from the bid list of available positions. What we didn't know at the time was that anybody who put any post in Mexico on that list was going to Mexico, automatically. They needed bodies there to process visas. We didn't really understand that at the time. When we submitted our bid list, we discovered that we were the only ones in the A-100 class to bid a certain other post—I think it was Athens—number one. So we naively thought we're going there. And so it was somewhat of a rude awakening when we realized that we were going to Merida instead, when no one else had put Athens first.

There were some great things about the post, which I'll expand on later. The local employees were wonderful people. I really enjoyed speaking Spanish; the accent was fairly easy and straightforward compared to, say, Argentina or Cuba.. And Merida itself was a very pleasant town, easy to navigate, and with friendly people and great food. I'm very thankful for all of that.

Q: Did your wife take Spanish as well?

RUKEN: She definitely took some Spanish. We weren't in class together, at least not the whole time, but she also took Spanish at FSI.

Q: I ask because it would be easier for her to navigate the culture with even a small amount of Spanish fluency.

RUKEN: Yes, she had some. And it wasn't too hard to navigate the culture. People were friendly and open. The challenge there, I think, was that there was a very small group of officers there, only three or four. Sometimes when you're just with three or four people, if you don't click with one or two of them, then that can be challenging. The only other U.S. government agency at that post was DEA, and so we got to know them as well. Also, there were no third country diplomats there because most other countries put their diplomats in Cancun, which is a three-hour drive away. We kept ours in Merida for historic reasons, but Cancun is where all the tourists go. The only consulate in Merida back then was Cuba, and we were prohibited from socializing with their diplomats. As a result, it was a really isolated experience, and not a great start to the Foreign Service. To be honest, after that first tour, we weren't sure if we would stay in or not. We decided to give it a second or perhaps even a third tour, see how it went before we made a longer-term commitment to stay in.

Q: As a consular officer at a small post, did they give you opportunities to do other kinds of work?

RUKEN: Yes, I did a lot of visa work and also a lot of American Citizen Services work. And then toward the end of my tour, I did some political work also. This is perhaps an anachronism nowadays, but back then, there was no RSO (Regional Security Officer) or Marines at the consulate, and so I was also what they called the PSO, the Post Security Officer. I was, as a first tour officer, essentially the resident RSO. I supervised the local guard staff. That was kind of interesting and different, a really broad range of experiences there. That was a time when the narco trafficking organizations in Mexico had not established strong inroads in the state of Yucatan, which is where Merida is located. This is the very south eastern part of Mexico, the part that curls up into the Gulf. However, they were increasingly active in the neighboring state of Quintana Roo, where Cancun is located. And so the DEA guys who had to work that entire region were very concerned about maintaining their level of security due to the nature of their work. I actually worked quite closely with them on making sure that they felt safe coming to work, ensuring the car searches were appropriately done, and putting the surveillance detection team fully in

place. That took up some energy and time, and was really interesting. I really appreciated being able to do various kinds of work in Merida.

Q: Just to go back one second, RSO, Regional Security Officer, is responsible for the general security of the U.S. embassy, or, in this case, consulate. Did that work also give you a budget, or other supervisory responsibilities?

RUKEN: The budget was coordinated by the regional security office in Mexico City, at the embassy there, and I would just liaison with them. If we needed something in Merida, I didn't have the budget to make any decisions myself, but I would communicate to Mexico City what we needed For example, if we needed to replace some of the locks on the doors or the ballast or the blockers for the parking lot, I would communicate with the RSO team in Mexico City know. I did supervise the local guard force, and I do remember the local guard commander who was a very nice man, but very, very intense. I had to ensure he would carry out the policies and procedures we had established, but not go beyond that. Those kinds of experiences made the overall tour more fulfilling and enriching than it otherwise would have been.

Q: Sometimes consular officers in their first tour also work in the American Citizens Section. Interesting anecdotes sometimes result from these activities. Do you recall any particular moments that would give an example for the kinds of things you had to cover?

RUKEN: The American Citizen Services work gave me enough stories to tell to probably last me the rest of my life, stories that are very fun to tell, but not to live through. I'll give you some examples. First, I came to the realization that there were many, many ways to die while doing water sports. After the tour I vowed to enter the ocean only waist deep, and that would be it. Because we had people who died or were seriously hurt while doing the types of water sports many people take for granted. One American tourist was parasailing, and the wind took them and bounced him off the sixteenth floor concrete wall of a hotel. Another person drowned because the boat they were parasailing from ran out of gas. The boat came to a stop, the parachute fell, the person hit the water hard, the parachute covered their head, and he drowned. They just forgot to top off the gas tank.

We had two women who were just out for a snorkel, they got swept out to sea by a current and were never seen again. We had another person fall off a high rise balcony. And another two people died when their car ran into a cow on the road. And worst of all, on my birthday, I had to do my first death call. A death call is when you have to call the next of kin in the U.S and tell them that their loved one is dead. In most cases, somebody with the victim’s traveling party has already made that call for you. You still legally have to make the call, but usually, the person who answers the phone on the other end knows what has happened. They are still very upset, sad, shocked, and perhaps angry, but you're not the one actually breaking the news.

But on my first birthday in Merida, I had to make my first death call and we knew the family hadn’t found out yet. Imagine picking up the phone and knowing you’re about to ruin someone’s life. This eighteen year old student went to Cancun and was out partying

with his friends. They leave a bar and at 3 am he gets separated from them. He goes out to relieve himself outside in public, and he's hovering on a ledge of a big ditch or crater and urinating into it. He falls into the ditch, knocks his head on the ground and basically drowns in sewage. That's how he dies—just horrific. And at 4 am-ish, our consular agent in Cancun calls to inform me what has happened. We go over the information together on the phone, but it's my responsibility to make the phone call to the family. And of course, it was hard and it was miserable, and they were in shock and disbelief and screaming and crying and all the usual emotions you would expect. It was just an absolutely horrible experience for them, and I had to find some way to finesse the actual circumstances because I did not want to tell them the excruciating and humiliating details on that first call. I remember both the consular agent and myself wishing he were Canadian, because if he were, then their government would have to deal with the situation, rather than us. That telephone call was the most difficult of a lot of hard cases.

Often, I had to go to Cancun myself and work these cases, almost like a private detective. We'd have reports of an unidentified American in prison, and I'd have to go find the prisoner. The Mexican guards would enter the cellblocks and scream out, is there anybody here named so and so, because they didn't have a record of who was in their prisons! One time we heard in the background a voice echoing through the cellblocks, "Yeah, that's me, that's me, that's me!" We found a missing guy in prison!

Driving out to Cancun was fun. The Consulate car was this old 1980s Pontiac or Buick, one of these giant old cars that rocks back and forth like a boat when you make a turn. And we wonder why Detroit went downhill? So I had to drive this Buick or Pontiac, whatever the heck it was, to Cancun with this cheap briefcase, wearing my cheap suit, walking barefoot on the beach from one hotel to the next. And I felt like I was James Garner in The Rockford Files, that 1970s detective show, or maybe Barretta, or Starsky and Hutch. My wife and I used to laugh a bit about that, because I had bigger hair back then, it was rather poofy, and I really felt like I looked that part. But the work was pretty challenging, and heartbreaking and sometimes frustrating, too.

Q: One last question about the work. Often in Mexico, or actually any of the larger visa sections, you have to deal with fraud and the local police. Were there examples of these experiences while you were there?

RUKEN: Yes, and I got a lot of help with the LES (Locally Employed Staff) — the Mexican citizens who worked with us at the consulate. They were wonderful, because they would educate me on where the fraudulent regions were. They were very open in sharing information and advised me what to look for and what not to look for. You just don't know the geography at the beginning, the lay of the land, and then you pick up on that. You realize that everybody from this certain small town in Yucatan state is going up to Santa Rosa, California. And Santa Rosa, California is not a tourist town. So something's up. Or you have people from the poorer part of Merida going to Walt Disney World in Florida. Well, that's hard for people to afford. Now it's possible you will spend your life savings to go to Walt Disney World—but it's unlikely to be your ultimate intent.

Of course, it's not about how much money you have in the bank, it's an overall picture of what your lifestyle is and does your trip make sense. So you need to understand how people think, what they're trying to do and what their goals are. The LES staff were wonderful in educating me to that. Sometimes the chief LES visa assistant would see an applicant in the window, and she would tap me on the shoulder and say, can I talk to you for a second? If her eyebrows were arched, I knew there was trouble. We would go back to her office, and she would say, I know this person, I know their family. And she would give me that information about the family, which was very helpful. Other times she or the other LES assistant would say, "I don't like the look of this person." This was not based on things like physical appearance or skin color, but rather how they were dressed or suspicious behavior. Were they nervous? Why was their hand shaking? Why were they sweating so much above their forehead? I learned a lot, and this was my favorite part of the job. Two tours later, I bid for a fraud prevention job in Brazil, which turned out to be one of my favorite jobs of the entire career. I really liked doing that kind of work, because it was almost like detective work.

Q: I had forgotten one other thing. There are many American retirees in Mexico. They receive their social security benefits and any other federal benefits in Mexico. Did your office deal with this aspect of American services?

RUKEN: Not so much, because at that point, most of the retired Americans who were living in Mexico were up in the north, around Guadalajara or around San Miguel de Allende. As a result, the embassy in Mexico City and the consulate in Guadalajara would deal with those people. We dealt more with people simply vacationing down in Cancun or Playa Del Carmen or Tulum or Merida itself. Every now and then the retirees in northern Mexico would come to our region and do something that didn't make sense, like driving a large RV into some small town and getting stuck between two buildings. You think, well, maybe you shouldn't have driven your RV into that small hillside colonial town. Maybe you should have parked on the outskirts and walked in.

Q: This is a two-year tour. So sometime at the beginning of the second year you're thinking about your next assignment. What was going through your mind as you considered this?

RUKEN: We wanted after Merida to go to a large embassy. As you know, your first two tours are directed. At this point we receive a list of openings and give a list of preferences. Human Resources in Washington then decides and tells us. So we put a number of really nice places on the bid list. After a while, the Career Development Officer, our Washington-based contact in this process, calls me up and says, "Bad news. You didn't get any of your choices. Come up with an entirely new bid list." So on short notice, we came up with an entirely new list. A few days later, he calls back. "I'm really sorry, you didn't get a single one." No explanation. Now my wife and I are irritated and stressed. We go back to the list and see what remains open. One was a political officer job in Mexico City, the other a political officer job in Manila, Philippines. I had wanted to do political work next, so those were the types of jobs I was searching for. So I went back to the Career Development Officer and I said—and I'm paraphrasing—you know what, just

give us Mexico City. I already speak Spanish, you don't have to give me any new language training. It's a different job, and I'll be happy with it and gain more experience. And we like Mexico, so there won't be any issues with us not adapting to the country. And I told him, we'll just move our own personal belongings up to Mexico City. We'll pack our own car. All the State Department has to pay us for one night in a hotel and gas. It'll cost the taxpayer virtually nothing!

What was the response? They said nah, we can't give you Mexico City. You're going to the Philippines! Of course. Which meant a twelve day drive—I actually drove—back to Washington, DC; nine months of Tagalog language training at FSI; all the per diems and housing allowances associated with that; the cost of giving me the language courses; the cost of paying me my salary for nine months without me producing anything; and the flight around the world for my wife and infant son. When I asked why they just didn't give me the Mexico job, they told me they couldn't send me to Mexico for two straight tours. Ostensibly they were worried about me "going native", meaning that I would identify too closely with Mexico rather than the United States. I understand the idea, but I'm not going to identify with Mexico. I know what my job is. I know who I am. I know what my citizenship is, and I know who's writing the paycheck. They could have easily sent us to Mexico and saved the American taxpayer 200,000 dollars or whatever the cost would have been. Of course, I knew this argument would fall on deaf ears, so I didn't make it strongly. Well after the initial frustration of the bidding process, my wife and I resolved to make the best of the assignment. It was a large embassy, which is what we wanted. It was the kind of work I wanted to do. And it was a new part of the world for us, in a country that we probably wouldn't have explored on our own. I had no previous interest in the Philippines or Southeast Asia, but it was an opportunity, and we decided we would make the most of it.

Q: How well did the course in Tagalog prepare you? Did you feel at least comfortable?

RUKEN: It prepared me fairly well. It was a hard language, but not exceedingly so. Once I got to the Philippines, I realized just about everybody in Manila speaks English. Not only do they speak English, but they speak it fluently. Not only do they speak it fluently, but a lot of Filipinos actually speak it with an American accent, or at least use American jargon or vernacular. It's a very pro-American country, and they are familiar with our culture. When I would speak to them in Tagalog, many Filipinos would giggle and say, "Oh, you speak Tagalog" — and then immediately switch to English. For about half my tour I struggled to maintain my Tagalog, mainly thanks to a wonderful teacher at the Embassy. Then, about midway through the tour, they switched my embassy portfolio to cover events in the southern Philippines. Down in that part of the country, the population is mostly Muslim and speaks a different language. Tagalog is mostly spoken in the north, which is mostly Catholic. Southerners view it as the language of the colonial oppressor. So not only did they not want to speak Tagalog with me, they viewed it as offensive if I even tried. if they did. So by speaking the language FSI trained me to speak, I am offending the local population!

Q: To go back one minute, you arrived in Manila, you have one child?

RUKEN: Yes, we had our baby while we were posted to Mexico, the tour prior. My wife actually delivered in the U.S. due to the state of medical care in Merida at the time. Our son was just a toddler by the time we went to the Philippines.

Q: And did your wife find work, or was she staying at home with the toddler?

RUKEN: She started teaching full time at the American International School, and by the time we were out in the Philippines, our son was two and a half. He was okay staying with a nanny while my wife was working. The Filipino nannies are usually really nice. They love kids there.

Q: Now you mentioned they switched your portfolio, but let's go back a moment. Where did you fit in the political section there? What were your responsibilities?

RUKEN: I was on the domestic side, which meant that I would be reporting on domestic Filipino politics, as opposed to Philippine Foreign relations with other countries. I reported on different aspects of the Philippine domestic political scene.

Q: How many officers were there? In other words, who did you report to?

RUKEN: I reported to one of the two deputy political counselors. We were a pretty large section. I don't remember the exact numbers, but we had a political chief, two deputies. Each deputy had maybe two or three junior officers under them. So the total would be eight or nine people overall.

Q: And specifically, did they give you a set of social groups or parties? What did you focus on?

RUKEN: Political parties, human rights, religious freedom, and trafficking in persons. Also the labor situation, because my supervisor was also the labor officer, and he made me the deputy labor officer. I focused on a lot of labor issues, unions, strikes, working conditions, things like that. This was my portfolio for the first half of my tour.

Q: And what year did you arrive?

RUKEN: 2002. We left in 2004.

Q: I've lost track of who was the president at this point. And who was the leading party?

RUKEN: Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who went by the initials GMA, was the president the entire time. She was like a small "iron lady." She was very tough, very pro-American, friendly to us, but very tough with her political opponents, stern, and not particularly charismatic. But we believed that she governed quite effectively, actually. The prior president before her was known to be very corrupt. On issues of clean governance, I thought she was pretty much on target, which was not necessarily true for all members of

her family, especially extended family. She was very pro-American and aligned her foreign policies with ours. So relations between the two countries during my time there were very solid.

The Filipino population also is very pro-American. This dates back to World War II and the American-led liberation of the Philippines after the Japanese occupation during World War II. Of course, our relations go way further back than that, and weren't always good - the Philippine American War at the turn of the twentieth century, for example. A very brief but somewhat entertaining example of these complexities was that every now and then there would be protests from Filipino leftists in front of our embassy about whatever issues that they felt antagonized about—usually something human rights-related. But there was also a group of Filipino right-wingers that wanted the Philippines to become the fifty-first state of the U.S.— something that was not going to happen. Well, sometimes these two groups would protest on the same days and fight each other on the street outside the embassy gates. The far right group would come waving American flags and beat up the leftists in front of our entrance. Of course, we did not want them doing this. We had to quietly reach out to these right-leaning groups and tell them to knock it off. Yes, we appreciate your pro-American stance, but don't beat up the leftists on our behalf. I had not seen that anywhere else I had lived or worked.

Q: What were the other groups that you followed? Were there particularly interesting aspects of that part of your work? Otherwise, what were the aspects of being in that large embassy in that part of the world that were useful for you as professional development, or that would serve you well as you went?

RUKEN: The most interesting aspects, I think, happened when the Political Section and Front Office switched my portfolio about midway through the tour. They gave me Mindanao and all the issues related to it. Mindanao Island is a huge island at the bottom of the Philippine archipelago, beset by security problems. The population is mostly Muslim, in contrast to the northern part of the country. During our time there, there were two terrorist groups operating nearby. One was the Abu Sayyaf group, which was a brutal, violent group that would kidnap tourists and behead them. They kidnapped two American missionaries while we were there and killed one of them. They would use violence to attract adherents. The other group was more of a traditional liberation army. It was called the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, MILF, maybe an unfortunate acronym, but that was the acronym before the acronym came to mean something else.

The MILF had its own army, fairly large, 10,000 or maybe 11,000 people under arms at the time. They were simply fighting to break off from the Philippines and form their own country, and the Philippine army was fighting them back. This was a low scale civil war of sorts, a war of two armies drawn from the Filipino population fighting on Mindanao and on surrounding islands nearby. The Philippine Government, off and on, had engaged in negotiations with the MILF to get them to lay down their weapons. I was assigned to report on this, to report on the negotiations, to report on the Abu Sayyaf, and to report on Muslim politics and society in the southern Philippines—living conditions there, what the population was thinking, and so on. This was a fascinating portfolio. There was

high-level interest in Washington, and I heard that my cables were being read by the NSC and even at the White House. They told me that President Bush read at least one of them, and that the intel community had used at least one for the President's Daily Brief. I don't know if this was accurate, but it was nice to hear anyway.

I would go out and meet periodically with the lawyers of the MILF, with backing from the embassy. They weren't technically group members, so I wasn't breaking any laws in terms of meeting with terrorists. These guys were very open to talking and very friendly. We developed a close relationship to where they would call me and talk to me about various things that I could then report on. And it was relatively safe. I did go down to Mindanao a few times, with security, and met with people down there to see what was going on. The access you can get to people there is amazing, in terms of being able to meet with the President, the foreign minister, and all the key players. I am grateful to the deputy and section chief and also the ambassador and the DCM, because they all supported this. That front office wasn't always popular with everybody at the embassy, but in terms of what they allowed me to do, I really appreciated it. They treated me with a lot of respect and support, and I never forgot that.

Meanwhile, I learned a lot about how other embassy sections operated, what they did, how a larger front office operated. The ambassador was very high-profile, and so I got to see what his work was like and what ambassadors were like—you don't see that at a consulate. As an entry level officer, just to get to see how that works, or doesn't work in some cases, can be very educational. You can learn more about what sort of front office leadership you might want to work under, and what the effect of that leadership might be on your ability to carry out your own duties. In this particular case, that front office let me do a lot of things, and I really liked that autonomy. They weren't looking over my shoulder, and they weren't telling me how to do everything, either. I learned that having autonomy really mattered a lot, to me, and that was definitely a major factor through the rest of my career because I only pursued positions that gave me at least some autonomy. I'd bid for positions where I would scope out the leadership to the best of my ability and ask people what it was like working with the front office. If there were places where the front office had a bad reputation, I would de-prioritize them on my bid list.

There was one story from the Philippines that really encapsulated what it was like to work there. Our ambassador was called away for six months to serve as the deputy ambassador to Iraq. This was after we invaded in 2003. So the DCM became the Chargé d'affaires, the acting ambassador. Every year the Philippine president, GMA, the Iron Lady, would host a meeting with the foreign diplomats in which all the other ambassadors would attend, and she would brief them on the wars going on in the Philippines: the war against the communist insurgency in the north, the war against the terrorist Abu Sayyaf group in the south, and the state of play with the MILF Liberation Army, also in the south. This would be similar to a military briefing. We would sit in a horseshoe shape with her at the front, and seating would be alphabetical by country. That was the way the seating was designed, except that she always put the United States in the middle of the horseshoe so that we would face her head on and have the best view. She

would essentially rearrange the alphabet for us, and we'd wind up sitting between Israel and Italy, or something to that effect. We didn't ask for any of this, she just did it. Then you would have a second horseshoe behind the first horseshoe, where the aides-de-camp and the assistants to the ambassadors would sit. So I, as the political officer covering the south, would sit behind our ambassador. When I accompanied the Chargé to the briefing, about halfway through, he turns around and whispers to me, "This is boring! I'm leaving! You sit here!" He may have sprinkled an expletive in there too. So he gets up and walks out. I stood up and quickly scurried into his seat, right in the middle "U". The President is delivering her briefing and notices this, and is glaring at me a bit as she continues to speak. I felt like the little kid in class thinking to himself, please don't call on me. There were other instances in which Philippine diplomats at meetings would ask us straight out for advice: "what should we do?" I did not want that kind of question coming my way that day, and thankfully it didn't. Still, the entire episode illustrated the incredible access that we have in the Philippines, even as a junior officer, and the high esteem to which the Filipinos held us at the time. as an American. By the end of my tour, the president knew who I was, and would ask how I was doing as I walked into the meetings. I think that is pretty rare for a junior officer to have in a country of one hundred million people. The access was simply amazing there, and that was partly because of the Philippine culture and partly because of our good front office, I believe.

Q: You mentioned your wife taught in the International School and she was happy with the situation? Employment for Foreign Service spouses can sometimes be difficult.

RUKEN: Yes, it can be challenging for sure. The International School in Manila was a very good school, really high-level, high-caliber students, all in a spanking new campus. A lot of the students there are from parents who are very successful in their home countries, so there is a level of expectation that those students face. My wife did not have to deal with behavior issues there, in contrast to other regions of the world later on. Overall she really liked her job and her colleagues. Like all jobs, all schools, anywhere, there are frustrations that you have with certain things, perhaps the administration, maybe the other teaching colleagues, but In Manila she had very little of that.

Manila was hard for her, and indeed for all of us, in another way. Traffic was horrible, and sometimes involved massive commutes for short distances. Pollution was also a big problem. We didn't open our windows for two years. And that's why, back then, a twenty percent differential post. But there are other aspects that are very positive. The people were super nice. We made friends easily. The restaurant situation was ok, so you could go out for a nice meal, and there were nice places you can visit in the countryside. So overall, living there was a mixed bag, but the work situation there was quite good for both of us.

Q: Had you decided to stay in the Foreign Service at this point?

RUKEN: Thanks for following up on that. Our first tour was extremely challenging. We weren't sure after that first tour. The second tour was very good, so we decided, let's give it a third tour. And the third tour would be the deciding one. If it turned out to be great,

we were going to stay in. If the third tour sucked, then we would likely bolt. Not that we hated Merida. We didn't. Merida is a beautiful city. The Mexicans were really nice, the LES were fantastic, but there were just aspects of that tour that didn't work out well for us, as I mentioned before. Manila did work out well. So we thought the third tour would be the deciding tour.

Q: Had you reached tenure yet four years in?

RUKEN: Yes, by the end of the tour, I believe I already was tenured.

Q: Then how did you decide on where you were going to bid and did you receive any assistance or mentoring? How did you make that decision?

RUKEN: To be honest, I don't think I received much assistance or mentoring at all. I did not feel abandoned, but we just made decisions on our own. I wanted to put my Spanish or Portuguese to use, and I wanted to work in a political section again. The political job that was available that appealed to me most was in Havana. I had been in Havana before while visiting a friend posted to our Interests Section there, and I found the Cuban people to be super nice and the island beautiful. On the other hand, we were very worried about the isolation factor in Cuba and the petty harassment that a lot of the diplomats were undergoing back then. Then a colleague who recently had served in Brazil recommended to me an underrated job that he thought would be good for me. I researched it, lobbied for it, and got the position. This was a nation-wide fraud prevention job based in Rio de Janeiro. It came with a travel budget that enabled me to provide fraud prevention training to all of our posts in country, and to the Brazilian Federal Police and airlines in many other cities. It just sounded like a great position. I don't even remember if Havana accepted me or not. We went to Brazil.

Q: Let's turn to this tour. If I'm right, it began in 2004, correct?

RUKEN: Yes. The purpose of our fraud prevention program was to reduce and stop wherever possible immigration fraud to the U.S; in other words, not giving out visas to candidates who didn't qualify, ensuring that all of the documents that they gave us or supporting evidence for their applications were valid and truthful. This also included immigrant visas, of which there were a large number given out each year. We also had to root out fraud in our American Citizen Services program, too.

We also wanted to create a more holistic approach toward fraud prevention by training local law enforcement, airline personnel, and our own consular officers. In Brazil, their federal police force is a rough equivalent to our FBI, and they're well motivated. Airline personnel included agents at the check-in counter, airport security working for the airlines, and even the flight attendants. We would train them on how to recognize suspicious behavior, facial recognition techniques, how to see if somebody is an imposter, or looking at their documents, their U.S. government-issued documents, or any other kinds of documents. It meant,gauging their story, their behavior, to see if everything seemed to add up or not.

We even coordinated with Brazilian authorities to arrest and stop trafficking rings and alien smuggling rings. There were times where we'd have Brazilian officials come in, coordinate with our regional security officers and local law enforcement, and detain people outside our consulate—and sometimes even inside. It was a really interesting job, very dynamic, with a lot of travel involved. As I indicated before, part of the reason why I took the job was because it came with its own budget to where I could hire people and travel to train others, with the support of the embassy and Consular Affairs in Washington. It was a pretty empowered position, which was very appealing to me.

Q: *Now at this point for this job, where are you in terms of your grade as an officer?*

RUKEN: I was a tenured 03. This was a very dynamic range of responsibilities for an 03 position, in my view. I'm not saying it's that way right now. I honestly don't know. Positions seem to strengthen and weaken depending on how much support they have up the supervisory chain, but at that point it was a really strong position.

Q: *The reason I asked you about your grade is because it sounds unusually responsible for someone at a relatively lower level in the Foreign Service.*

RUKEN: Exactly. That was definitely part of the appeal. That's in part due to not just the way it was written, but also the supervisors, both in Rio and in Brasília. They were very supportive and let us do our thing. I headed a small team of myself and two full-time LES assistants who were LES staff. I had to make one staffing change, but once that was done, the quality of work on our team was first-rate, which led to more autonomy from the Front Office. We stole one guy from American Airlines and he was extremely talented, creative and fun to work with. As well as those full-time assistants, we had a whole bunch of other people who would coordinate with us and do part-time work for us, too. The infrastructural support in Brazil was really excellent.

I should note, the work was also very action oriented. We would go out to the airports and observe people checking in. And at other times, if we had a tip from somebody that a bunch of people were going from some small Brazilian town to South Florida or Washington, DC, or some other seemingly odd pattern, we would sometimes just go out to the airport and watch them. This was both in Rio and São Paulo. We observed groups of people who I'm sure were involved in, not necessarily trafficking, but certainly people smuggling. We would see, for example, a guy pass out passports and documents to people who were standing in a circle, in the airport terminal, and some of the passengers would obviously be very nervous. Some of them had way too much luggage for a five-day trip to the U.S. And then some others had no luggage at all.. Some of them would be traveling solo, which didn’t make much sense as these weren’t business people. We didn't have the authority at that point to do much about it, except to tip off other people at the airport, but we would gain knowledge on travel patterns, flight times, and other indicators. At that time, Brazilian airports didn't have a ton of security, so we could just walk in the terminal and go to the check in counter and watch. In São Paulo, one of our locally employed staff actually had some connections in the airport, and she could actually go behind the

check-in counter and look at passengers' documents and take notes. We were able to do things that most people would never be able to do. It bordered on detective work, and the Brazilians were cooperative. We would give training sessions to them and I think this was a way of reciprocating.

The Brazilian LES investigator and I would go in and give training sessions to the flight attendants and check-in clerks. We would play these games where they'd see two photos, determine if they were the same person, and if not they'd have to guess who was the imposter. We wouldn't tell them, we'd make them guess. The participants were mostly in their 20s and 30s and they really got into it. It was so fun. They'd debate it and laugh and razz each other, and my LES partner and I felt like game show hosts. Afterwards, over a milkshake at the airport, we would say to each other, "can you really believe we are getting paid to do this?" I felt like I was in one of those movies like "Catch Me If You Can," with Leonardo DiCaprio. It was a throwback to the early 1960s, the golden age of travel, when airports were fun, and sort of glamorous. It was entertaining and also fulfilling, because we were doing our best to help out their law enforcement — and enforce our own laws too.

We worked with DHS to measure the impact of all of this, and what we found was that over the course of several years, word got out that the Americans had tightened up their security. Fewer people were coming to us presenting fake documents. I don't think that the phony documents got better, it was that our own security got better at detecting false documents or false information on real documents. That eventually led to far fewer people trying to enter the U.S. illegally at the southern border with Mexico — far fewer Brazilians, that is. We were able, through coordinated efforts, to help reduce the number of people trying to cross illegally by something like 70 or 80 percent, over the course of my first three years there.

We also would help publicize busts. There were times where people would come into the consulate and the line officer would identify something suspicious. One way to tell, of course, is if somebody looks kind of sweaty or shaky. They may be nervous, but they also just may be hot. Our waiting rooms were crowded and Brazil is just hot. So sweating could be a red flag, but you can tell the difference between someone sweating because they're nervous and sweating because they are hot and irritated. If you ask a younger, healthier person to pick up one single sheet of paper and hand it to you, that paper will shake if they are nervous. It's sort of like an informal, very rustic lie detector type of test. For an older person, no, because a lot of older people have a shake anyway, and so you don't necessarily know. We would have people give us a sheet of paper, even if it was irrelevant to the interview, just to try and gauge their nervousness as a red flag.

Sometimes we would bluff applicants to see if we could get a confession. We might say things like, "hey, the police are right outside there. We're not going to call them, we're not going to do anything, if you just tell us the real situation here." If someone was innocent, they would react a certain way, staying calm and confident, even laughing, and saying things like "that's ridiculous." In those cases in which they actually confess, if we knew the documents to be false, we would ask them who brought them there and who

organized this? And every now and then, they would point someone out in our presence. Then we could call the Federal Police and have that person detained, and then publicize it. Our consular management and security officers allowed it. This would serve, we hoped, as a deterrent effect to other people trying to sneak past us. We were really, really aggressive and going all out to try and stop immigration fraud. But we were never rude or loud or abrasive—we were always polite and at times even quite friendly. I think our efforts and techniques brought us good results, which was very fulfilling.

There were things we did that probably wouldn't be allowed today. Back then, the Brazilians were using a form of social media called Orkut. It was like Facebook and very popular in Brazil — and in Turkey and India too. One of our LES in the Consular Section got permission from a woman friend of his living in Europe to essentially "borrow" her identity. Not to steal her personal information, but rather just her photo of her face. She was petite and attractive, and the photo she gave us had a sassy look to it. So we created a fake person around this photo. We developed a profile of a young, single Brazilian woman looking to go to the U.S. to overstay a visa. She would have conversations with other people who were trying to do it and she would give out basic and accurate advice. I should note it was a male Brazilian LES authoring her messages.

Her fake name, which was Ana Maria something or another, would write back with their own advice. Things like, "try not to get the officer in the third window, he's tough", or "try not to get the blonde woman who sits two windows to the left, she's a meanie." And sometimes they would reveal their true intentions—instead of going to Disney, which is what they confessed they were planning to tell us, their real plans were to go to New York to look for a job. We would take notes of these conversations and then devise a counter strategy. Sometimes these people would reveal when they were coming in and give their name, so we could find them in line. The challenge was to get them to admit their plans. If they didn't confess, we still had enough evidence to reject their application, if we were sure it was the same person. But if they did confess or pass us something fraudulent, we could render them ineligible for future visas as well.

Another creative tactic we used was to have our female fraud investigator and me go to travel agencies posing as an engaged couple. We were about the same age. I would be the American looking to get my Brazilian fiancée into the U.S. We would ask the Brazilian travel agents how to do this and carefully note their responses. This was a way to find out what people on the street were being told what to do, by other Brazilians. We heard a lot of interesting things—what sort of documents to bring, what to lie about, what sort of documents to fake, these kinds of things. I should note that many travel agents are very honest. We weren’t going to the reputable agencies in the wealthier parts of town. Their customer bases would be more likely to qualify for visas anyway. Instead, we’d visit the travel agents in far-flung towns where people didn't have a lot of money, where they were looking to work in the U.S. to earn extra money, and might be encouraged to cut corners. We weren't trying to get travel agents in trouble, we were just trying to gather intel in a robust and somewhat creative way. I think it gave us a broader perspective about the applicant base, and what sorts of tools they were being encouraged to use by those supposedly “in the know.”

Q: *I just have a quick question. All of the ideas that you developed and then the activities you took on outside of Rio and so on, were they also valuable to the political section or in other ways in the embassy?*

RUKEN: When possible, I would write up cables about what was going on. Talking to the Federal Police, the airline people, the travel agents, hotel front desk clerks, you would get a sense of what was going on in those towns, and to some extent what the conditions were. Where people wanted to go in the U.S., how frustrated they were living in these towns, or how happy they were, and so on. I would write up those reports based on those interviews, and also write up conversations I had with people who had been smuggled up to the United States. One time, I interviewed a young woman who flew to Mexico City and then went up on land through Mexico, and got smuggled into the U.S. She eventually got caught and was deported. But then she came in for another visa. She didn't qualify for it, as I recall, but of course that's a consular officer's decision, not mine. So, to return to your question, many of these cables may have been read by people in the embassy's Political Section and in Washington, but more as contextual information about conditions rather than about politics per se.

Q: *All right, go right on, because you also had mentioned briefing government officials and the Treasury secretary, U.S. House of Representatives, and so on.*

RUKEN: Yes, we would brief them on what we were seeing in terms of illegal immigration to the U.S. There were a number of official government visitors over the course of my four years in the position. Also, we would host a yearly fraud prevention conference. We held it in Rio once and São Paulo the other times. São Paulo is Brazil's business city, and it has better hotels, better conference centers, and in my opinion, better restaurants than Rio. We would try to fly in people from different U.S. government agencies, including law enforcement and Treasury. We would ask guest speakers to talk about immigration issues, security issues, all sorts of topics.

One year we brought in the mayor of Danbury, Connecticut, which is a town in western Connecticut filled with Brazilian immigrants, both legal and illegal. Back then—and probably today too, there were certain towns in the U.S. that had unexpectedly high rates of illegal immigrants from Brazil. Danbury, Connecticut was one. Framingham, Massachusetts, which is west of Boston, was another. Pompano Beach, Florida, just north of Fort Lauderdale, was a third. You hear a lot of Portuguese in these places. The Mayor of Danbury explained the impact of someone overstaying a visa or just arriving without papers. He described the cultural and economic impact on the city, and it was fascinating to hear. He talked about how the town generally welcomed immigrants. He was a moderate Republican, but today, the right wing would consider him a left wing radical. I mean, things have shifted so much in the U.S. The mayor talked about welcoming these communities, but that certain things made it more difficult for the locals and would breed resentment toward the immigrant populations. Street celebrations that would occur after Brazilian soccer matches, which were all fun and good until the streets were packed, people wouldn't disperse, and the older local couple wouldn't be able to get to the

pharmacy to pick up their medication due to a blocked street with 15,000 people on it and a giant screen TV. Often, the Ecuadorean community in town would host late-night volleyball games in people's backyards. It was a cultural thing, but this would include rented stadium lights, crowds of people drinking beer and a DJ well into the night. There would be tons of complaints. Maybe this was fine in Ecuador but it didn't pass muster in a small New England city. Just understand, the mayor told us, these are the issues that we deal with in the U.S. that you might not be aware of. These kinds of exchanges, I think, were really helpful to broaden our understanding.

Q: *Great. Now, these local officials, did they also talk about the stretching of local provisions for schools and hospitals and so on?*

RUKEN: Most definitely. If somebody's injured and they're going to the emergency room, they're going to get treatment, but payment is very much up in the air. Who will pay, and how? If this is a life-threatening thing, the public hospital is not turning you away. So the cost is passed on, eventually to the taxpayer, and this generated frustration. In the field of education you have a similar dynamic. My wife, who as I said is a schoolteacher, used to explain to me that educators tend to want to take in any students who show up at school. But the problem is, if you're teaching everybody and they don't speak English, and the classroom is suddenly much more crowded, this will detract from the time teachers spend on the students who are in the country legally, and who are English speakers. This is just a fact of life. If it's an immigrant family who has a lot of kids and are wedged into smaller apartments or homes, then their property taxes aren't funding the schools to the same extent as property taxes are for families who are there legally. This is not about ideology, these are just facts, and the local officials we spoke with thought that it was very important to communicate those facts to us. Even though the undocumented person is not in the U.S. to necessarily cause problems or commit crimes—we know through multiple studies that the crime rates among immigrants tend to be lower than that of native born Americans —there is still an impact in areas we might not think about that much, I was very receptive and willing to spread that message around even though I am staunchly pro-immigration. It's just an exchange of information and important that everyone hears it.

Q: *You haven't mentioned your family and adaptation. Was that all fine for you? Were there any problems in that regard?*

RUKEN: Rio was a great tour for us. My wife felt very welcome in Brazil and enjoyed the warm weather tremendously. We had an apartment in an older building but a nice high rise building that was located one block from Ipanema Beach, and so when we weren't at work, life for my family was great. My wife's commute to the international school where she taught was a bit on the long side, but it wasn't awful, and her school provided a very nice work environment. The school was located at the base of a tropical rain forest—they actually had small tree monkeys swinging around campus and numerous tropical birds. There was a waterfall, a natural one, and a really sweet smell from all the luxuriant vegetation.

Rio was also momentous for us because we had our second there midway through the tour. The hospital and prenatal care in Brazil were excellent, and so we had no qualms about having the baby in Rio. My older son was in elementary school at the time, and he liked the school and absolutely loved the beach. And my job got me home at a normal time, so we could easily spend our evenings and weekends together. There were no missed birthday parties, school events, or things of that sort. We spent a lot of family time together, which was great.

Q: *By the time of your arrival in 2004, we are now beginning to become more reliant on the internet, on cell phones, on much faster tools for information exchange, storage and so on. How did that have an effect on your work, if at all?*

RUKEN: By that point, by 2004, we were able to leverage some of the spreading technologies. I already mentioned, for example, how we used the Brazilian version of Facebook to get information about fraud trends in Brazil. Of course, technology also improved for people who were faking documents. They were able to get a hold of a real document and then more easily go onto a computer and create a fake one. Back then we were looking very carefully at inkjet things, and what kind of printer might have made this thing, and comparing it to a real form from our office computer. We were able to obtain real-life samples from the FBI of American documents and put that up on a PowerPoint much quicker than we would have if they would have had to send us stuff through the mail. We were able to do things a little bit faster, but in 2004 we're nowhere near the situation where we are today with AI and where you can find any information you want on the internet really quickly. Still, there are classic, old school analytical tools that are still useful, like trying to gauge if someone is nervous or acting strangely, for example.

One little sidebar on cell phones is that, interestingly, back then, cell phones were spreading like wildfire in Brazil. Smartphones hadn't really come out yet, so people were on Nokia's, but they were still texting. A phone became an item that was in fairly high demand, and it used to be that if you were going to get robbed in Brazil—high crime rate there, especially in the cities — you would mitigate the damage by simply carrying around a little bit of money, and nothing more. We actually called it mug money. No credit cards, no jewelry, no electronics. But once cellphones and eventually smartphones became prevalent, people feel that they have to have their phone with them, otherwise you're cut off. If someone comes up to you and says, "hey, I have a knife. Give me that phone," you're not supposed to resist. If you do, you increase the risk of a violent encounter. So having phones upped the stress level of walking around, because, by choice, I would prefer to have nothing on me. My wife was robbed there. We lived in this great atmosphere, but there were significant downsides, too.

Q: *Yes, whenever you want to bring that in, sure.*

RUKEN:The people are friendly, the weather is warm, the food's great, but crime is high. The only person I knew who didn't get robbed during our tour was myself. Everybody else I knew got robbed. Locals, Americans, family members. I think it was 80 percent

luck, and 20 percent that I looked like a bum and didn't have anything that anybody would want. I would put my cash and ID in a back pocket, and dress down.

My wife got robbed at 3 p.m. on a Friday afternoon while driving back home from school. She was in a traffic jam, in broad daylight, when a couple of young kids, shirtless with slippers, came up to her in the intersection. They tapped on her window, which wasn't rolled up all the way. One pulled out a gun and pointed it at her, and rather politely told her to give up her purse, phone, and wedding ring, and they just took it all. There were people all around her but no one did anything. She didn't resist, and no one got hurt.

One of our Brazilian friends, who worked at the Consulate, was robbed on a bus. Her bus was hijacked on the way to work. Armed men went down the aisle and took things from passengers sitting in each row. This was in our neighborhood, broad daylight, during the morning rush hour. The police did not show up, not that they had time to arrive. Separate from that, my supervisor, who also lived in our neighborhood, got robbed while he was on his bike and stopped at a red light for traffic.

The poorer hillside neighborhoods, called favelas, were mixed in with the wealthier areas. Some of them were and still are ruled by narco trafficking gangs. Every now and then the cops would go on a raid and there would be shootouts. Occasionally stray bullets would enter the American School campus, which was located on a hillside right next to one of the more notorious favelas. Kids would have to take cover in the classroom when these things were happening. Every now and then, when the violence really flared, the school would have to close. This once happened for the better part of a week while we were there. The Federal and State Police were hunting down gang members in the favelas.

Even from our living room window, we could see a favela on a hillside a couple of blocks away. When we heard gunfire, we would get our kids away from the windows. We'd hang out in the back bedrooms, which were better protected. This happened only occasionally. Sometimes at night, we would hear machine gun fire on the deserted streets. That felt a bit eerie. You're living in this beautiful tourist city in a wealthy neighborhood, a big party city, with lots of fun during the daytime. Then late at night, you look down from your window and see empty streets below, and you hear machine gun fire. You know that there could be bullets entering the kids' school. You know that there is nasty stuff going on nearby.

The crime was actually the worst I've ever seen. A guy was killed right outside of our building. I didn't see it, I just read about it in the newspaper the next day. But I did see a guy who had just been shot in the head outside the consulate during lunch time. The RSO said, "everybody, sorry, but your lunches outside of the building are canceled. You have to remain inside." I could see the victim laying motionless out on the street, flat on his stomach, with a pool of blood oozing out of his head—it was one of these images you don't forget. Apparently he had been shot in a drive-by right outside the consulate, just as we were about to go take our lunch. Who knew what this was about? It could have been a drug deal gone wrong, a vendetta, anything. We just didn't know and never will know.

These things were a fact of life there, and they definitely cast a pall. You have to be willing to tolerate that stuff as part of the downside of living in Rio.

The beach in Brazil was the great democratizer. The wealthy people from the ritzier neighborhoods go to the beach, and the poor people from the favelas go to the same beaches, because these neighborhoods are side by side with one another. If you look at a map of Rio you would have a wealthy neighborhood with a giant mountain in the middle of the neighborhood with a giant favela climbing the hillside. People from each of these areas are on the beach together. They aren't necessarily talking to each other, but they are on the sand side by side. There would be rumors of drug fights, drug-related gang wars on the beaches, or mass sweeps in which gangs would run down the beach and just steal people's belongings. These things didn't happen very often, but they would lead to mass panic whereby all of sudden, crowds of beachgoers would flee the sand for no apparent reason, sprinting to the sidewalk by the street. It was a strange thing to witness. You never knew if there was a genuine attack happening or if it was a sort of mass hysteria.

When you see people around you running for their lives, your inclination is probably you're going to run for your life too, because you have no idea what's going on. You're thinking, "maybe these people know something I don't." You're probably not going to just sit there. Everybody else is running for their lives, sprinting away with their belongings. I was involved in one once, where I was there and I, too, just ran. I didn't know what was going on, and I had to leave my towel and sandals on the beach. I wasn't sure if it was going to get stolen or not. As it turns out, it probably was a false alarm. My things were there when I went back. Anyway, we had a great time there, but a great time with an asterisk, because we had to be on guard all the time.

Q:*Those sorts of uncertainties definitely add a certain amount of anxiety to the job.*

RUKEN: Lots of Foreign Service Officers go through such things. We weren't unique. We didn't pay a higher price than anybody else. It's just for somebody who might not be used to it, it's something you have to adapt to. These are things that you don't see as much of in the U.S., but we have our own problems with violence.

Q: *Now, in terms of personal security, over time, did the fact that you were an anti-fraud officer and you were sometimes breaking up fraud rings and so on, did that add to your sense of personal insecurity? In other words, a fear of reprisal?*

RUKEN: Yes, it did. I coordinated some of the things we were doing with the Regional Security Office, and sometimes I would stay in the building longer and have the local guards keep an eye on me so I could get on the bus and go home. We also had the surveillance detection team that would report back if they were seeing anything. I would also vary my times arriving at work. Fortunately, nothing ever actually happened.

About one year into my tour, we had to fire one of the locally employed staff on the fraud prevention team. He had been there a long time and was in a difficult family situation. We had to dismiss him because of his performance. It was my decision. The guy did not

take it well. He called me a snake, threatened to sue me, and threatened to sue the consulate. I think he did sue the consulate, actually. It was not pleasant. On another occasion, about a year later, we had an American officer get kicked out of the Consulate for corruption and subsequently arrested for illegal acts that he had committed while working in Rio and at a prior post. I didn't have a role in that, I actually got along ok with him, but he perceived that our staff was not friendly to him. The day he was escorted out I told the LES, "just stay in your office and lock the door."

Overall, while the possibility of reprisal was in the back of my mind, I never walked around scared. I really liked Rio. But I would not buy an apartment or retire there because of the crime situation. Some people curtail for reasons like that. We actually extended. We stayed a fourth year, but there were issues there that made it very challenging and would constrain us living there as private citizens.

Q: *Sure. Now, okay, in the third year, you decide to extend, but even extending, you're also starting to think about where you're going to go next. Did this tour result in a promotion?*

RUKEN: Well, I was promoted during my next tour, but it was early in the tour, so I think my work in Rio helped.

Q: *That's not uncommon that you complete a tour, maybe you have an award and you have excellent evaluations, and then you go to your next tour, and within that year, you're promoted based on so many years of outstandings.*

RUKEN: I think something like that, yes. The promotion came when I expected it, more or less. I don't remember thinking so much about it while I was there. I've never been one to really focus on promotions. I think there are two types of people in the Foreign Service. There are people who want to climb the ladder and be promoted frequently, and they pick jobs with that in mind. And then there are people who barely care and want just to have their career be a little more fun, maybe a little less directed, or they have some other incentives, like keeping their families happy or something else. I am firmly in the latter category. I never had a clear theme to my career. It probably was humanitarian work and refugee work, because that occupied more of my time than other positions. But I did not have a geographic or cone concentration. We went all over the world and I did all sorts of different jobs based on whether or not I thought those jobs would make me happy, and whether or not the living situation would make my wife and kids happy. Could she work at the International School? Were the schools good for my kids? All of that dictated our bidding choices.

Q: *Once again, one of the reasons I mention, did this result in a promotion, is because you undertook so many initiatives that were successful, and not just successful in your own consulate, but things that you shared and helped other consulates or embassies use as well in improving their ability to detect and prevent fraud.*

RUKEN: Thanks, I think that's accurate. It was a very high-energy tour. I was working with high-energy people in a place where we were all highly motivated and that's why it was a fantastic tour. It was one of my best tours. Later on, toward the end of my career, I think maybe my energy levels lessened just a bit. I think this is true of other people, too. It wasn't to the point where you have no energy or even low energy, but maybe some of the hurdles that you face get higher, or maybe you've got family issues or health issues to deal with. I think the constant moving around might have a cumulative effect, too. I hadn't felt that while we were in Rio.

On this subject, it's those middle years where you're an 03 or 02 level officer, and when you are in your 30s, 40s or perhaps early 50s — that's when I think you really max out. Then, as you get later into your later 50s, a lot of people—experience a bit of a decline. Perhaps you get a little more cynical about how the system works, or maybe you tire out more easily. The bouncing around, as I said, takes something out of you cumulatively. I never felt the exhaustion on a daily basis, but I did feel it cumulatively. And then there's the moment your kid says, "I don't want to be the new person again." That's hard to deal with, and that's often a difference from what someone in the private sector has to face.

Q: *I agree. Then how does your next tour come about?*

RUKEN: At this point, it's becoming a very competitive bidding process. Both my wife and I agreed we wanted something different from Brazil. We loved it there and had a great experience, but I wanted to do a different tour in a different region of the world. There were two jobs open that really interested me. One was Burma, a political officer in Myanmar—now, Burma—and the focus was human rights. The other was a political officer job in Romania, in Bucharest, that also dealt with human rights. Back then, Romania had not been in the EU for very long, and it was still an edgy place. It seemed like a way to get into Europe and still work in an interesting, challenging place. I didn't have the connections or strong desire to go to Western Europe, because I thought the work would not be very interesting at all. Romania back then had a pretty bad reputation and was not heavily bid, so I thought I could sneak in. Burma was more heavily bid. The way it came down was Burma told me no, and Bucharest yes. Then Burma came back the next day and said the job was back open again, and it was mine if I wanted it. So I had a choice after all.

I talked to people who had been to one place or the other, and most people advised me to go to Burma because it would be far more interesting. But other people said Bucharest would also be interesting. We looked at pictures of Burma and imagined what it would be like to live and travel there. We looked at climatic charts, travel options, and whatever info we could get our hands on. And frankly, Burma seemed just so hot and far away, and we felt we needed a change after three consecutive tropical tours. We were just so tired of sweating! It might sound superficial, but this was the only time in my career where we made the decision based mostly on climate. Both places were going to be interesting. We just needed a change, a chance to invigorate, cool off and experience something completely different. We felt Bucharest would provide that.

On our last day in Rio, we had my kids' nanny over to our house for a goodbye party. She brought her family, who we knew well. Everybody was crying. We looked down and there was a street party going on at the beach right down below our apartment. It looked as if everyone were having the best day of their lives.

Fast forward. On our first day in Bucharest, we went down to the Bucharest Metro to take it into the center. Everyone on the train looked so glum, as if they were all having the worst day of their lives. It was quite a transition. Bucharest itself is not the most attractive of the Eastern European cities. It was very Soviet looking in a lot of the neighborhoods, because Ceaușescu, the dictator, bulldozed much of the beautiful old city and built the usual communist housing blocks. By the way he was the only Eastern Bloc dictator violently overthrown at the end of the Cold War—he and his wife were shot in the face on Christmas Day. You used to be able to see the video on YouTube. Their executioners filmed it so there would be no question they were dead. This gives you an indication of how the Romanians felt about their communist leaders. This guy destroyed about half the city and built communist-style housing blocks. It takes some visual adjustment after the sensuality of Rio, with its blue, tropical sea and green jungle-covered mountains everywhere you look. Yup, it was an adjustment.

Q: *Full transparency, I was in Bucharest from 2002 to 2005, so not very long between the end of my tour and the beginning of yours. So trust me, I know it very well.*

RUKEN: You get it. What you saw was three years before our arrival. Some things probably improved, and I'm sure a lot of things didn't. But you will clearly understand what I'm saying. I hope you don't find this part of the interview boring, because you lived it yourself.

Q: *I am curious to hear if some of the environmental problems were reduced. Burning brown coal that produced coal dust, filtering poisons out of the water, and so on.*

RUKEN: That was not so much of an issue by the time we were there, the air quality had improved. You still had the winter haze, but the air quality was better overall. We were in a new apartment building. It was clean and spiffy. What I don't think changed so much were the attitudes of the people, and how those attitudes would play out. As you know the population went through a lot of trauma at the end of the communist era and the early years of the transition.

I remember there was one time where I went with an LES and our embassy driver up to a hotel in the northern part of the country. This was for a reporting trip. We entered the hotel, and the driver looks at me and says, "I can't stay in this hotel. I don't want to be in this building." And I asked, "Why not?" He replied, "It smells like communism." There was an odor in the building that brought back his personal memories of communism. I think it was a cleanser that they used in the lobby. He didn't want to sleep there. He didn't want to eat in the restaurant there. He wanted to go to a different hotel. We let him go to one of his preferences nearby.

Q: *Did they still have the problem with feral dogs?*

RUKEN: Yes. It wasn't as bad as it was in earlier years, from what I understood. We lived near Lake Herăstrău, which is a lake in the middle of the largest park in Bucharest. We lived on the north side of the park, and to get to work I would take a fifteen to twenty minute walk through the park to the south side, where I would catch a metro four stops downtown to the embassy. It was a very pleasant commute—maybe a half hour door to door, but more than half was this walk through Herastrau park. If it rained or snowed, it didn't matter, since traffic wasn't part of the equation. However, the feral dogs would hang out in this park. They never bit me, but sometimes they would look at me and maybe growl a little bit, so I would have to walk with a rock in my hand. If the dogs were coming, I would pretend as if I was going to chuck a rock at them, and the dogs understood my pantomime. They knew what a guy picking up a rock meant, and they would skedaddle off. Luckily I never was bit.

Q: *I was bitten, and I had to go through all the rabies shots.*

RUKEN: Oh, my goodness, that's terrible.

Q: *It was probably worse while I was there. But it sounds like it got better.*

RUKEN: Where did you live?

Q: *I lived initially, right across the street from the Charles de Gaulle circle, where the little copy of the Arc de Triomphe is.*

RUKEN: Oh, that's a wonderful location.

Q: *Yeah, but then they had to move me because there was construction going on all around the apartment building and it became untenable, so they moved me a little further out. It ended up being a longer walk to the metro. It was a nice new building, and not near any major landmarks. The only thing about it, I mean, a very pleasant apartment and so on. The only problem was that right next door, even though this was a city block, there was a guy who had a chicken coop. The rooster would take it upon himself to wake me up at 5:30.*

RUKEN: Oh, my goodness.

Q: *That was Bucharest. It was growing and changing, and yet there were lots of bits and pieces that were still the old Bucharest, where you kept a vegetable garden, or you had a goat maybe, or something like that.*

RUKEN: I found that looking at the old Bucharest and seeing a transition to the new Bucharest was actually pretty fascinating. Our neighborhood near Herăstrău Park had been developed right before we got there. They put up a bunch of new town homes and

condos. Then came these giant, ultra-modern cafes right on the lake in Herastrau Park. Were those there when you were there?

Q: *No, the lake was very nice, and there was more or less upkeep. It wasn't perfect, but you could still enjoy the lake and not feel that there were pits that were not filled in and that kind of thing. But no, it hadn't been developed yet.*

RUKEN: They had developed it by 2008 when we arrived. They put in all these trendy cafes with giant aquariums on the inside, and very sexy female hostesses to seat you. Many had decks that extended out over the lake so you could eat over the water. But they'd play a lot of techno. The filthily rich sons and daughters of the nomenklatura, or the communist apparatchiks who had stolen all the money when they privatized the economy, were the clientele. They had money to burn, and a lot of it was probably accrued illegally, stolen from the Romanian treasury. They'd drive up in these super deluxe sports cars. I don't know that much about sports cars, but they were the type where the doors would open at weird angles, or maybe you could push a button and the car would turn into a boat. This wasn't what we would call old money. And these people would act in the most obnoxious ways imaginable, blasting their car stereo, driving on sidewalks, and so on.

One time we were walking our two-year old in his stroller. We're strolling around the lake path, and these thuggish teenage kids just ride by on these expensive bikes, and smash into his stroller. They could have gone more slowly and gotten out of the way. He's not injured, but the stroller flipped over so he's on the ground. And I'm like, "What the heck—" I used some four letter words—"what are you doing?" I think they smarted off to me. So I took one of their bikes and I dragged it to the shore of the lake. It felt really good to do that. One of their friends stepped in to try and serve as peacemaker. I was really hot and chewed them all out, but that was about the end of it.

Another time, I was walking to work on a pedestrian pathway parallel to the park I mentioned before. I hear something behind me, and I look around, and it's an SUV driving on the sidewalk, going pretty fast, barreling toward me. I'm going to get run over if I don't get out of the way quickly, which of course I did. Behind the wheel was a fashionable woman driving this big, souped up expensive SUV, and I was furious at her. I sprinted toward the car after it passed me. She stopped the car perhaps four hundred yards in front of me, and disappeared into a crowd of people. I think I might have gently keyed her car, but I was so furious, I wanted to slash her tires. I went to work and dropped into the RSO's office. He was a friend of mine. I told him I wanted to go slash her tires. He said "my advice to you is not to slash her tires," but he said this with a twinkle in his eye and a grin, and didn't say anything beyond that. I thought about it for quite some time, and it took me a while to calm down and forget about it. But it wasn't an instantaneous decision.

Q: *The only thing that happened to me that way, other than the feral dog, every now and then, I'd take buses for various reasons, not typically, but whenever I got on a bus, there were Roma or Gypsies, however they want you to call them. Some are perfectly happy*

with Gypsy, other ones want Romas. At least when I was there, it wasn't entirely clear. They were nasty. They would harass you, and make gestures that look like they were going to attack you. At the same time, I was a public affairs officer, a cultural officer, I was working with Americans and others who were documenting the Roma holocaust. We were trying to be as solicitous and reaching out as much as possible to the Roma population, and dealing with them as a human rights issue. I have to say that I can understand why they had a negative reputation in the city. Now that's not true of all of them, obviously, but it was because they're visible and because there were enough of them who were like this to an average Romanian, who encounters this kind of thing is going to develop a negative attitude.

RUKEN: Right. I noticed hostility among them toward Romanians and vice versa. Through the course of my human rights work, I had to work with a lot of Roma NGOs. These people were perfectly lovely, super nice people, and there were no issues whatsoever. We met Roma in the countryside who also were very nice, but the Roma in the cities tended to be more aggressive in terms of pan handling and just expressing hostility toward non-Roma. If I was in Roma areas, I definitely got dirty looks. On a couple of occasions I even was yelled at. They were quite aggressive. They're angry at how they're treated, and the Romanians are angry, and some Romanians, at least, are very prejudiced. It wasn't a good dynamic at all.

Q: *No. Since we're talking about street safety and so on, the last thing that I noticed while I was there was the lost generation of young people on the streets sniffing glue. They were probably orphans, never taken care of properly, and were visible. They hung out at subway stops or locations where they had some modicum of cover. Not so much that they were dangerous, but it was a real city problem of how to even deal with them.*

RUKEN: I recall seeing some kids sniffing, but their numbers did not seem overwhelming. But my perceptions might have been influenced by what I saw in Brazil, where glue sniffing was an enormous problem. Street kids were everywhere, in wealthy neighborhoods, poor neighborhoods, all over the place. It was a national disgrace, actually. Whereas in Romania, I noticed it less. Maybe had I not been in Brazil beforehand, the problem in Romania would have seemed more severe to me.

Q: *These were not armies of homeless young people, but they were visible, and you remembered how it happened and the terrible background of those orphanages.*

RUKEN: I had to do occasional prison visits in Romania for my human rights reporting. I went into some youth prisons and a lot of them were almost like orphanages. There were so many kids in there who were orphans that I was not 100 percent sure they were even criminals. Some of them might have been charged with things like vagrancy or panhandling. They were just put there. These places were really sad and depressing. There's no way to mince words about it. It seemed like a lost generation. Nowadays, that lost generation are adults now, and so I have no idea where they are or what they're doing with themselves.

Q: *Well, I've chewed your ear off on Bucharest, and haven't given you a moment to begin. You arrived in 2008. The Embassy has moved by now from the center of the city, out to the outskirts?*

RUKEN: Not yet. The embassy, the entire time I was there, was downtown, in an old French chateau-like building. I had an office that was originally a bathroom. That was a first for me. I shared the office with somebody else. We had a porcelain fireplace, a parquet floor and a chandelier. The embassy had removed the toilet of course, but the original occupants certainly went to the bathroom in style. All that and we had windows you could actually open. It was really cool.

Q: *Very rare. But then, where did you fit in the political section? In other words, how many people and where were you in the pecking order?*

RUKEN: We had a political chief. Below him we had two 02-level officers. I was one of them. I covered domestic politics, and then we had a political-military person who was a more senior officer but still at my 02 level. That person wasn't my supervisor, but if the Section Chief were absent for any reason, he would take over, not me. I was fine with that. We had a few junior officers below us, maybe three or four. We also had three LES working under us in our section. I directly supervised one who was the domestic politics person. We were like teammates, partners. There was another guy who worked for the political military officer. The junior officers asked us if they could borrow the LES from time to time for their own work, which was fine. Overall it was a nice setup, very cozy.

Q: *Okay. And then your particular areas of expertise or the areas that you followed were political parties, social movements. What did you all have?*

RUKEN: I had mostly everything with an emphasis on human rights, broadly defined. I also covered ethnic party politics—for example, there was an ethnic Hungarian party in Romania. I also covered the different ethnic groups, especially the Roma.

We had a strange situation my first year there. The political chief who I worked under was a nice guy, but he was what a basketball fan would call a ball hog. Rather than delegate out the portfolios, he kept as much as possible for himself as political section head and let everybody else divide up the rest. He focused a lot on his own reporting, but as a section chief, you need to run the section and liaise a lot with the Ambassador. . The front office eventually cracked down on this, and I think they may have asked him to leave early, because we weren't able to produce as a team what we should have been producing, I suppose. My sense was that he was holding too many of the cards and doing too much of the reporting work himself, and not looking to develop us as reporting officers. That was a little bit of a lesson learned for me about how to manage people, because later in my career I managed sections, and I made sure the people under me felt like they were able to max out their potential.

The next section chief empowered us much more in terms of giving us meatier portfolios and to do more reporting. Romania had a really interesting human rights situation with

the Roma, which we've already talked about, but also with religious freedom. They had a religious minority that was getting repressed by the religious majority there. Also, it was an active country on Holocaust and Jewish issues. There was still some lingering anti-Semitism there, and our goal was to build the first Holocaust memorial in Eastern Europe, outside of Germany. Working with the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, as well as with some Jewish organizations on the ground in Bucharest, we actually got it built. Romania had a Jewish community who survived World War II. It's not big, but it was active.

People might not know that Romania was one of these countries during World War II where the ruling authorities actually did the Nazis' work for them. The Romanian authorities, not the Nazis, actually killed 800,000 Jews in extermination camps in Romania—without the Nazis actually setting up the infrastructure themselves or even directing them to do it. There were even a couple of instances in the historical record in which the Nazis actually scolded the Romanians for being too harsh on the Jews—imagine that irony. As a result of all this history and the current situation when I was in Bucharest, there was interest in the U.S., including in the government, to make sure that Holocaust education was given to young Romanians and that Holocaust denial would become a thing of the past. So it was very fulfilling to work on this project, to oversee something being built, rather than just writing reports.

Q: *Now, in working on that, did you have assistance from the Public Affairs section or any of the other government agencies? I don't know if USAID was still there.*

RUKEN: Peace Corps, I think, was in the process of winding down their time there. But yes, I had a lot of assistance from the Public Affairs section. I've always liked their work, especially in terms of their Cultural Affairs activities. I actually gave a lot of presentations there on various aspects of U.S. politics and culture to Romanian audiences. This was during the time of Obama's rise and election as President, and so there was a lot of interest in Romania, in part because there's a history of racism there. Obama's election garnered a ton of interest in Romania, especially among the young. I was able to serve as the local expert on our elections for a Romanian news channel come election time. On election eve, I went to a TV studio and sat on the panel as the results came in from polling stations across the United States. Of course it was the middle of the night in Romania. Completely robbed me of a decent night's sleep, but super fun!

Public affairs back then had their own separate building, which looked like a small castle or large manor house. It was a few blocks from the embassy, and they had this wonderful library. I've always enjoyed taking a break at lunch and reading for twenty or thirty minutes after eating, if I had the time. I went there often. The Public Affairs ladies, the LESes, were super nice and we enjoyed chatting. I loved that building. I did a ton of work with them during my tour and really enjoyed it.

Q: *You're doing a lot of work with human rights, ethnic minorities, other minorities. And what ended up being exactly the Holocaust memorial that you completed? Was it a statue or something else?*

RUKEN: It was an abstract statue in a square. I forget offhand the name of the square. It's a historic square, and there had previously been some opposition to the memorial being put up. When I got there, we were working to ease that resistance and work with the Romanians to make sure it was something everyone felt would be tastefully appropriate and educational. The U.S Holocaust Museum was helping to fund it and really the driver of the entire process. They even developed some curriculum programs for teachers so they could teach what happened there. The survey data would show that high percentages of both students and adults did not know what happened in the lead up to and during World War Two. Romania during this era has an absolutely fascinating but extremely dark history.

Q: *Sure. Are there stories or examples of how you used your networks and brought the stakeholders along on projects?*

RUKEN: The most enjoyable parts of any job for me are getting out into the provinces or the countryside and just meeting people out there. That's how we would build our networks. Rodica was my assistant LES, a wonderful person and one of my all time favorites. She knew everybody, and she was not afraid of anybody. She would set up meetings with people she didn't like, and tell me things like "you watch out. This woman is a viper, but you need to meet with her." She would sometimes argue with the person we were talking with, and at other times she would side with them against me! Rodica was smart and energetic—and fearless.

One time, we went to a Greek Catholic Church whose priests were having a land dispute with the majority Romanian Orthodox Church. The Greek Catholics are a minority religion and they aren't part of the Catholic Church, they actually are an offshoot of the Orthodox Church. But the majority Orthodox Church didn't like them. So we went to visit this small Greek Catholic Church in the countryside to see what the land dispute was all about. The Church actually sat right inside the middle of an active construction site. We had heard that the Orthodox Church was building a new church AROUND the Greek Catholic building—essentially trying to swallow it up! Imagine if you and I had a land dispute and I simply tried to construct my new larger house completely around your smaller house, with your house sitting inside my living room. That's what it was like. I wanted to see this in person.

After driving a couple of hours into the countryside, we arrived at the site but could not find anyone to let us in. So we just entered the construction site on our own by climbing a short fence. The Orthodox Church was still under construction, but the structure was mostly finished, just not decorated or occupied. And inside there was the Greek Catholic Church, an older building made of stone, but very dark and hard to see. As we walked into the inner church, we noticed an awful smell. Something really horrible. We look down and discover we are standing literally ankle deep in a sea of human shit, both of us. The Orthodox Church or someone, had unloaded shit all over the floor. This must have taken some effort. This wasn't like stepping in poo at the park. It reeked horribly and it was all over my shoes, socks and the bottom of my pants. It was absolutely revolting. I

felt as if I would puke, and we just ran out of there and tried to clean ourselves up and go back to the hotel. I think I wound up throwing out my pants or my shoes, because they weren't salvageable.

So this type of disdain, it's something that you don't really understand unless you're on the scene, walking around. You're not necessarily going to fully comprehend it by sitting in a meeting with someone, or by reading newspapers or watching TV shows. I think a lot of ambassadors and State Department officials don't understand the value of driving for hours so you can actually see and experience this stuff and understand the hatred and disrespect that these groups have toward each other, or at least one group for another. It definitely colored our perspectives of the various stakeholders at various times. I always thought that time spent away from the embassy was the most valuable. So, yeah, the experience was pretty amazing.

Q: *Let me ask two other questions that relate to human rights. First, you secured all the permissions and created the Holocaust memorial statue in Bucharest. Were there any other regional markers or ceremonies to memorialize the Holocaust?*

RUKEN: There were historical markers, but, at the time I was there, there weren't many ceremonies. There were trains to deportation camps, and the remains of those places still exist. The U.S Holocaust Memorial Museum had a first-rate researcher and archivist, and I worked with him quite a bit. He would lead tours to these camps in the northeastern part of the country, and I would join him on from time to time, to talk to these people on the tours about how to better memorialize this experience. I remember he brought along survivors who were still alive at that point and could still tell their stories to the group of travelers. This was a way for us, along with the museum, to reach out to interested people, some of whom were in a position to fund or contribute to the efforts to properly memorialize the Holocaust in Romania. The sites in Romania don't get nearly the attention that, for example, the memorials and camps in Germany and Poland receive, so the history needs to be kept alive. That's another example of trying to leverage networks.

Q: *The Romanian-American who led you, was he also an author of a book on Romania?*

RUKEN: Yes, his name is Radu Ioanid. He has written a couple books on Romania. He wrote the Holocaust in Romania, one of the definitive accounts of what happened.

Q: *Then the other question about human rights in Romania is the LGBT community. When I was there, it was still quite closeted and the environment was still very negative towards them. What was it like while you were there?*

RUKEN: Pretty much the same. It was pretty closeted. We did meet with LGBT groups. We'd go to their building and talk about the challenges they were facing, but you wouldn't know from the outside of the building that they had an office in there. You wouldn't see a rainbow flag or a plaque identifying the purpose of the NGO. They were facing lots of prejudice. They wanted to have a pride parade, and the city would keep negating the permit. They were also worried a bit about their safety—not necessarily as individuals,

but as a group holding a parade, for example. Nowadays I think the society is more accepting, but I'm not sure.

Q: *Sure, yes, it was the same while I was there, because I was in public affairs, and we tried to work with them, just in terms of having some kind of public activity. I don't recall a single one ever happening. Maybe we got an article into a newspaper. I neglected to ask you, did you speak Romanian while you were there?*

RUKEN: The position was a language designated position in which the language was waived. They wanted me to go out there sooner rather than later, because of a staffing gap. I agreed that I would just take the post language program at Post and forego the training at FSI. I did learn some Romanian when I was there, and already having Portuguese helped a bit. The two languages, especially in written form, are similar. So having been able to read written Portuguese allowed me to read some Romanian, maybe 30 or 40 percent. In terms of speaking, it was way more difficult. The pronouns in Romania are the same pronouns as they are in Portuguese, but they mean different things, so that will screw you up. Eventually it got to be frustrating, because my Portuguese kept interfering with my Romanian. The level of English, even back then, was very high in Romania, so I could say the introductory comments in Romanian and then either switch over to English in the conversation without really causing much offense, or if I thought it would cause offense, I would just ask Rodica to translate for me. We actually got through it okay. A lot of Romanians enjoyed speaking English, and wanted to practice. Often we were the ones buying the drinks at the meetings, and so everyone was happy.

Q: *I did receive the full six month course, even after learning French and Spanish, and it was difficult.*

RUKEN: Did you actually speak it a lot while you were there?

Q: *I tried. I was able to read pretty well, and could ask questions, but often the replies were too complex to understand.*

RUKEN: Did you feel that your Romanian at the end was better or worse than when you got there?

Q: *I think it was about the same because it was just in terms of struggling with it. I had a tutor who periodically worked with me. But the old saying that Romanian is a romance language is really not true. It's an amalgam of old street Latin and subsequent slavic overlays.*

RUKEN: Right, it seemed challenging. I basically sailed through Spanish and Portuguese. French was way more difficult for me, and Romanian was maybe even more difficult.

Q: *The last question veers into public affairs. There were many American Corners created over the past several years. These are small, single room locations where the*

embassy would provide a couple of workstations, laptops and some books. The great thing about them was they were usually housed in community centers or libraries that had locations where you could hold an event. Were those valuable to you?

RUKEN: Yes, they were wonderful. Absolutely. I went to Timisoara which is their second biggest city, and did events at our American Center there. They were great ways to meet people who I otherwise wouldn't have met in a friendly, relaxed environment. At one, I met a bunch of college age students. They were able to speak more freely because they weren't on their campus. The Romanian Securitate, their secret police, were still very active and at times, maybe a little bit intimidating. At the American Corner, these students felt a little more open. We could talk about various issues, and it was a discrete grade for me to make contacts with people. I really enjoyed that aspect of it a lot.

Another aspect of Romania that was changing while I was there was its work to integrate more fully into the European Union. They hadn't quite adopted all what one might call EU values yet, and they were still trying to absorb EU funding to improve things like infrastructure, and to democratize further. The government was very pro-American and very friendly toward us, but the security services still were running fairly strong with more of a cold war mentality. And so that contradiction played out every now and then in our work. So I'll just give you a couple of examples. First, even though we were in a pro-American, friendly, EU-member country, we were still told to assume that everything's bugged: our computers, work phones, and even home phones. You might expect such a situation serving in Russia or other countries, but you wouldn't necessarily expect it in 2008 in an EU country, especially one that's friendly toward the U.S..

Q: I was in Romania from 2002 to 2005 and it was the same situation. Romania was on track for the EU and NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], but we were advised that we need to be careful about what we say, and realize that Romania had not completely separated itself from its old habits of eavesdropping. I did wonder if Romania's post-communist security apparatus was still penetrated by Russia?

RUKEN: I think my suspicions were consistent with yours. I also perceived a notable, but probably pretty small, pro-Russian segment of the population, especially among older people, who still spoke Russian and harkened back to those days when the Soviet Union was the protector. And even though Ceaușescu wasn't really as closely aligned with the Soviet Union as other Eastern Bloc states, he implemented a very strong Stalinist system. I think some people just felt more secure under that, because at least they knew where their loaves of bread were coming from. They had jobs, and they didn't face all the uncertainty that free market capitalism brought, especially if they were older and used to the old way of doing things. There were definitely such strains in society.

But going back to the Securitate, they had a lot of people still working for them, a fairly sizable budget I think, and so every now and then they would sort of register their presence with us. As I've mentioned, my portfolio was human rights, and religious freedom. I also covered Transylvania, a large mountainous region comprising the center and northwest of the country. It is home to a lot of ethnic Hungarians and Germans. And

there was a small but disproportionately loud separatist movement of ethnic Hungarian Romanians who really wanted to join, or rejoin, I should say, Hungary. If you like old maps, there's a wonderful map museum on the outskirts of Bucharest. It's in an old mansion.They had old maps of Romania's borders in different years. Through the first half of the 20th century, you could see the country enlarge and shrink according to who had conquered it, and the size of the enlargement and shrinkage was sometimes enormous. And there were these small separatist-minded groups still out there.

What I wanted to do was just to go meet with one such group, not to lend it any support, but to gauge the extent to which they had an organized plan for the future, and also to hear about their human rights complaints. They wanted to meet with us, and we agreed as long as they promised not to publicize the meeting. We did not want the meeting to be misinterpreted as an endorsement of their aims. Of course, what happens? They tell the press in some small town somewhere that this meeting is going to happen. And of course, we then get a call from someone who says they're in the Romanian government. Actually, my assistant, Rodica, actually took the call. The voice on the other line says, "we understand you are going to meet with this group. And we also noticed that Mr. Ruken," —me—"is a noted photographer, and he takes lots of pictures of people, and he posts them on his social media account."

Q: Which account was it back then?

RUKEN: It was Flickr. Of course this had nothing to do with anything. They were just flagging that they were keeping an eye on me. It was just petty intimidation, minor league, but I had to report it up to the Front Office. But they sent a memo out warning everyone to check the contents of their social media accounts, to avoid any sort of vulnerabilities or embarrassment or whatever. I know other people elsewhere have gone through far worse intimidation, but still, you wouldn't expect it in this particular country. I mean, Romania is not North Korea, Belarus, or China.

Q: One quick question about your trip to Transylvania and talking to minorities. Did that include Roma or Gypsies?

RUKEN: Yes, definitely. We funded some programs for some Roma NGOs on civil society strengthening, citizenship, and legal defense, if I remember correctly. I met with a lot of Roma groups all through the country, more so in Bucharest, but also out in the provinces and smaller cities. They were very willing to work with us, and very appreciative of our support. They were great partners. As an ethnicity, as I've alluded to before, they don't get on well with the Romanians, and the Romanians don't get on well with them. And there's a lot of reasons for that, but I think it's mostly rooted in prejudice and the sense of feeling disenfranchised and disillusioned with one's prospects in that country.

Romania has the largest number of Roma in Europe. When I was there, the country's population overall was 22 million, Roma were about 10 percent, and scattered throughout much of the country, with of course a large number in Bucharest. They were the poorest

rung of society. Poverty that you don't see too much elsewhere in Europe. Shanty towns, old crumbling concrete buildings, just completely unkept and not maintained, multiple families living in substandard housing, freezing in the winter time, no heat, stifling in the summer, these types of conditions. And we felt like we wanted to really help these people out as best we could.

Q: Sure. That was my experience as well. Often marginalized, often at the edges of cities. Not even well connected to the local economy, and marginalized in just about every way.

RUKEN: And segregated too. Out on the outskirts of town, you would see housing projects or shanty towns full of Roma families. I would rarely see a Roma family living in the center of town in a nice house or apartment. Here and there, on the outskirts of town, you would find a few Roma living in really large mansions, very gaudy and sort of plastic looking. The rumors were that these people were involved in organized criminality and drug trafficking, or perhaps human smuggling. Was that prejudice or was that true? To be honest, I don't really know. But this was not our role to investigate why so-and-so has a large house.

Q: Yes. I also went out to the provinces and would periodically see these unusual hamlets where mansions sat cheek-by-jowl constructed in a variety of styles all pasted together. Often they were two or three stories high and had little observation rooms or widows' walks at the top. I understood from my local staff that the owners competed with one another for the most lavish domicile.

RUKEN: They were certainly noticeable. I just thought overall that Romania was a fascinating country from a sociological standpoint. I think almost every European country is interesting. And of course, they vary in their degree of being homogenous versus not, but Romania was not at all homogenous, and it was interesting learning about all these different ethnic groups and religious groups and what they're trying to accomplish, and where they come from. For me, because I had never served in Europe before, it was a total breath of fresh air, and also exciting to see the country try to integrate into the European Union. You could actually see progress and the tension between old and new ways of doing things.

I can’t recall living in a place where, by the end of the two or three year tour, things are way, way different from the beginning of my time there. In other countries, some things would improve, other things would get worse, and it was an up and down process. Romania, in my opinion, clearly had changed after three years, and for the better. In 2011 when we left, it had become more integrated, they had made lots and lots of infrastructural improvements as well, and the economy was growing. I think there was more recognition of prejudice and discrimination being major problems that needed constant remedies. It was really interesting and encouraging to see those changes.

Q: Just one question, as you're talking about changes: while I was there, and I think during the whole period of Romania's application to join the EU, a lot of Romanians who were seeking employment went to various countries in Europe, a lot to Italy. There's still

a connection between Italians and Romanians, and maybe the language connection is part of that. Was that at all important in your work, in sort of recognizing the extent of the Romanian diaspora and the remittances coming to the economy and that kind of thing?

RUKEN: It was definitely noticeable, but it wasn't something that I specifically reported on. And you're right, Italy was the main place where they would go. Driving around Romania, you could see which towns had people working abroad and which towns didn't. And even house by house. You could tell by the roofs—how new they looked—and by the size and condition of the house. Was it freshly painted stucco or wooden clapboards nailed together? And of course, like a lot of places, emigration out is the release valve for pent up pressures. I think the government quietly encouraged it, and I think they offered tax breaks for people who would send money back. But on a day to day basis, no, it didn't affect my work.

Ironically, it affected our free time more. Because of the strong links to Italy, we could fly discount carriers to almost any major Italian city. Whenever we would embark on a posting abroad, we would make a list of the neighboring countries we wanted to visit. Naturally, that's part of the allure of the career. But in many cases, getting to the neighboring countries is really expensive and/or time consuming. I had always wanted to go see Ukraine, especially Odessa. But the price of an airline ticket to Odessa was about three times the price in dollars per person as a ticket to Venice. And we had not been to Venice. So how can I justify spending 300 percent more on a vacation when my salary was not all that high, to see Odessa instead of Venice? We went to Italy multiple times because of these links, often in the winter, just to escape the gloomy Romanian winter and muddy spring. These links existed because of the outward emigration. And I never made it to Ukraine. Maybe someday I'll get there, but not in the near future.

Q: It's a common experience when you're assigned to a relatively developing country that you can get to the metropole of the former colonial power, whatever that is, very inexpensively, but trying to go to almost any other city becomes almost prohibitively expensive.

RUKEN: Right. When we served in Senegal, which was at the end of my career, going to Paris was way, way cheaper and quicker than going to Ghana. And Ghana is another place I've always wanted to see. But how can I possibly justify these multi-leg flights, at a far higher cost than a 4 hour jaunt to Paris? With an entire family it becomes much harder just to justify it, economically.

Q: And just one last thing about this, that kind of situation sometimes merits additional pay for the remoteness. You're so far out and it takes so long to get anywhere that you received a little bit of extra pay to account for that. That happened to me in Armenia, where the only connection was to Vienna, Austria.

RUKEN: Right. One of the life lessons I learned from all of this is that airline routes are not necessarily what you think they should be based on geography.

Q: The only other thing I'd mention about this remoteness and the limited amount of flights is medical issues. If you have anything more, in a lot of these places, if you have anything more than a simple dental procedure, you have to fly out to wherever the medical evacuation location is, and can be a very long and painful issue, especially if you need urgent care.

RUKEN: Right. Thankfully I didn't have an emergency issue, but I was evacuated from Romania on a medevac once because the healthcare there was very subpar, and I had a couple different problems that weren't being solved in country. And in one case, they didn't medevac me, and I was really unhappy. In retrospect, I should have just medevaced myself instead of suffering. But in the other case, they did medevac me up to London, and the doctor there was able to get to the bottom of the issue and fix it. And I'll never forget that trip. I had never been to London, and just walking around the city was really fun.

But among the possible hardships, if I had to rank in my career the problems that caused me the most stress, health care was definitely up there. Maybe the top stressor was working under difficult people. But in a lot of the places I served, the medical care wasn't good, and so there wasn't that much of a safety net beneath that of the embassy doctor. That caused a lot of stress through the course of my career. Thankfully, I've never had a life threatening disease, but I've had a lot of other things the next level down that have caused me pain or illness, and it was definitely stressful not being able to get good quality care quickly.

Q: In talking about human rights, I also wanted to ask about media/press freedom. Was there a robust free press?

RUKEN: I think the press was mostly free there, in some ways. That's not to say it was high quality. It wasn't. Each press outlet was connected to a political party, and so the newspapers would be supported by, and support a particular set of politicians. The thing that was refreshing about Romania was, at least back then, it was still very much a newspaper society. You didn't read everything online. You went out and bought a newspaper.

In the political section LES office there were stacks, and I mean stacks, of newspapers. If anybody had lit a match in there, there would have been a conflagration along the lines of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. I would go in whenever I could to their office, flop onto a couch and start reading some of the articles. The articles weren't high level—they were almost like tabloids, but at least it was worth seeing what they were reporting. And for whatever reasons, the Romanian newspapers followed a sort of London tabloid model, and so on page three, there would always be a large photo of a woman in a bikini—or without one. I'm not saying this is good or the way it should be, I'm just saying this was the situation. My assistant, Rodica, the spunky human rights activist, would just toss a newspaper my way, and say things like, "take a look at that bitch on page three." I was having back issues at this time, so I would be laying on their couch to read and rest my

back. I'd be laughing with Rodica and thinking to myself, "I can't believe I'm getting paid to do this."

Seriously, though, reading the newspapers was important to understand what the political parties were thinking, as the newspapers were often their mouthpieces. And the political class in Romania was very much a wealthy, dysfunctional extended family who constantly attacked one another. When they weren't attacking, they were attending parties, doing fashion shoots and posing for photos themselves. So reading the newspapers was very entertaining. And I don't care what people say today, you have to read the newspapers, whether online or in print, to at least get some sort of a window on what's going on there. The price we all pay for those subscriptions was worth it, 100 percent. And anybody who thinks otherwise, in my opinion, is plain wrong. They don't understand what we do.

Q: Same experience. I was a public diplomacy officer. We often relied on newspapers to show us what, if any, interest Romanians had in culture, sport, everything that we worked on with them. There were elites, but they were hard to contact. Undoubtedly they were post-communist apparatchiks who had gotten their hands on some productive assets. They probably did not want contact with the U.S. embassy. It was unfortunate because there were few people or organizations that had accumulated enough income to be ready to support a cultural or educational activity with the embassy.

RUKEN: Right, exactly. But I should say that while we were there, there were some serious politicians and young people who were interested in moving the country forward, and serious about what they were doing. And we met with them often and found it very helpful to hear their views. But there were also people who were just using politics as a vehicle to enrich themselves or just increase their popularity.

Some of it was quite comical. There was this magazine, I can't remember the name of it off the top of my head, but it was a glossy magazine that would come out every so often with all the parties, who was seen where, what dress they were wearing—sometimes a goofy looking sailor's outfit revealing cleavage. It almost seemed like a Saturday Night Live parody of Romanian politics. It was always entertaining to read these magazines.

Q: That was similar to cultural and educational activities. We conducted training for people who were beginning to establish an arbitration process with a training program for certification. Arbitration had never existed before. And these were very serious people. They had had an education in Romanian law, but they were after major changes that would improve the entire justice system. And they were a delight to work with because you could tell they were genuine.

RUKEN: Yes. I worked with several such people. They were serious, full of energy, and very moral and ethical in their beliefs, and not corrupt. They were Romanian patriots, but not overly nationalistic. They really wanted the country to become a Western European style country, at least in terms of its governance and some of its values. I mean that in a

positive way. It was very enjoyable and inspirational to work with those people and remind myself that politics was not just a self-aggrandizing show.

Q: Exactly. Well, I've spoken way too much, so please go ahead, if there are other anecdotes you recall that are illustrative of your experience.

RUKEN: I have just a couple of observations. Beneath the tough veneer, Romanians, especially in the countryside, are very generous, in my opinion. They are welcoming and warm, inviting you into their homes. I got invited a few times into homes; I didn't necessarily want to drink the hard liquor that they offered me, especially in the morning, so I tried to sort of get around that by pouring some out when they weren't looking. some out the window when they weren't looking.

Also, there was a developing middle class there that, in my opinion, was very much like the U.S. and Canadian middle classes, where you can talk about the same things and relate to each other in a way that you really can't if you're in a country with a gigantic and completely impoverished underclass with only a few wealthy individuals on top. The Romanians' relationships with us were not so transactional, in contrast to other places I've lived in.

In many of my other postings, there existed a huge gulf between ourselves and our local employees, both at home and at work. Not so in Romania. For example, domestic employees in Romania tended to be people in the lower or middle classes who had the same sort of realistic aspirations and goals that anybody in the U.S. might have. And so there was a connection there that I think didn't exist in other countries, for us at least. That connection made the people a bit easier to relate to, in my view. Friendships were friendships, and they weren't always based on what we could do for that person. The very kind lady who was helping us in the house, doing the cooking and taking care of our kids while we were at work—her goal was to become an elementary school teacher herself. She was using this job to save money so she could go get a teaching credential at a school and then work in that field. And that's what she did.

There were some minor misunderstandings, however, and they usually resulted from Romanians' desire to please us Americans. Whenever we would go visit people in the countryside for a reporting trip, they often would give us a gift as a token of appreciation. We would donate these gifts to the embassy. political section of the embassy. I don't know why this was the case, but Romania had the craziest gifts I've ever received. Once we visited a priest in a church in a small village in the north, he gave me a giant model, about the size of a small desktop computer, of his church, made entirely out of toothpicks! It was a work of art. It must have taken forever to put together. But the toothpicks were so sharp that I couldn't pick them up without bleeding. And then in the car we were wondering how were we going to transport this anywhere? It's made of toothpicks and I don't want to touch it because it hurt!

Another time, the mayor of a mid-sized town gave us this rectangular glass brick containing on the inside a carved glass sculpture of his town's city hall. It was very cool,

but it weighed a ton. Maybe 30 pounds to pick up? We were afraid to drop it — and what if it shattered?

One time we went to a local elementary and middle school in a small Transylvanian town. We had heard that the teachers in the school were having some problems, and I wanted to see how the different groups in the school got along. We set up the visit so that we could talk to the administrators and maybe some teachers. The students were young and we didn't want to bother them. We asked the administrators not to give us "the Ceaușescu treatment." Nicolae Ceaușescu was the dictator of Romania from '65 to '89. Whenever he visited any place in the country, people would do these choreographed dances for him and clap a stiff, rhythmic manner. I call it the communist clap. And the rhythmic communist clap is meant to show respect, but none of the people doing the clapping looked as if they meant it. They did it because they had to, and it was mostly for show.

So we asked the administrators to let the kids stay in their classrooms and let us visit the teachers on their breaks, so as not to be too disruptive. And lo and behold, upon our arrival, we are greeted with a parade, and then the kids appeared dressed in traditional Transylvanian costumes and began a choreographed dance. The teacher leading the performance was a Saturday Night Live parody of what the stereotype would be of a mean Eastern European woman. She would bark at the kids and yell at them, and the kids just looked terrified. I was terrified too–I did not want her to start picking on me. I felt so bad, and it was all because of my visit. The teachers did talk to me later, but I think they may have been cautious about what they said. So what was intended to be a pleasant, low impact visit turned into just a formulaic exercise in fear, similar to during Ceausescu's time. The students were afraid of the teacher. I was afraid of the teacher. The teachers were afraid to speak out. Everyone was afraid. I suppose it was educational–this might have been how it felt when Ceaucescu visited.

And remember the anecdote I told you earlier, about our driver not wanting to stay in our hotel because it smelled like communism?

Q: Yes, please continue.

RUKEN: There was another aspect to it that I forgot to mention. After our driver left and we continued to check into the old communist hotel, I noticed a giant terrarium in the lobby. This giant terrarium held two huge snakes—maybe boas or pythons. We proceed past the snakes to the reception desk to check in. It's typical communist era customer service. They required me to leave my driver's license and passport with them, as collateral for the remote control to the air conditioning and TV set. How often do diplomats—or anyone, for that matter—steal air conditioning remotes? Well, several months later, we returned to the same hotel. We noticed there was only one snake in the terrarium instead of two snakes. I went to check in at the front desk, and turned over my IDs, and then asked "what happened to the other snake?" The receptionist said, "we don't know. It just disappeared." And I said, "does that mean it could be under my bed?" And she just was silent and gave me a little grin. Looking back, I really enjoyed that

exchange. This is not something you experience at the Holiday Inn Express. It didn't have anything to do with my job, but it was a fun memory.

Q: I had the same experience: old hotels that had the pretension of being five stars were barely above acceptable. You go in and there's a bad smell, and then the lights don't work, the elevator doesn't work, or there's some major problem, or they don't have much food at all in the little restaurant, and it's just like restaurants in the Ceaușescu era. They're doing the best they can, but no one is investing in these old Soviet properties. The only way I managed to do school visits was by sending my Romanian staff out to choose a school that would welcome a visit from the U.S. embassy. We had to make sure – in advance – that the students wouldn't be frightened by a visit from the American Embassy.

RUKEN: We tried to preview with the school what our visit would be like, but they just didn't stick to it.

Oh I'd like to share one other brief hotel story. I just love hotels—they are theatres of the absurd. There was a human rights conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, organized by our embassy there. This was about Roma rights in Eastern and Central Europe. Very good conference. They had us stay at this beautiful old world hotel on this elegant pedestrian street in Bratislava. The hotel was gorgeous, with a wood paneled lobby, old newspapers in wooden holders, leather chairs, tea, and a glowing fire in the fireplace. I love old hotels like that. I check in and the bellhop leads me to the room, which was one of the most beautiful I've ever stayed in. Antiques, fine carpeting, nice smelling soaps, the works. The bellhop turns on the TV. But rather than a screen welcoming me with a list of available channels, it's showing a hard core porn movie, with several people piled on top of each other. Wow—I didn't know that was possible. It was definitely one of my stranger check-in experiences, right up there with the missing snake.

Q: That was a common experience for me as well, twelve channels, three are pornography.

RUKEN: Right. I wondered, is this what people want, at nice hotels in Eastern Europe? This never happened to me at the Best Western, but it added to the cultural experience. I just hope nobody was trafficked for the porn, and that they found that snake in Romania.

Q: At least this was no longer the era when you'd get the knock on the door at midnight from this woman who wants to party.

RUKEN: Yes, I was warned about the knock on the door, but I never got one. Not in Romania, not on business trips to Slovakia or to Russia either. I guess they thought I wasn't that important.

But all that aside, what's amazing is how isolated Eastern Europe still felt sometimes. We still had internet and AFN [American Forces Network] and could email easily. Imagine though a harsh Romanian winter with none of that, when your heater is barely functioning and the snow keeps coming down. And I thought of this a lot during my tour

there—what the place must have felt like in 1985, for example, before things started loosening up. It must have felt so isolating. And even to fly back home, those diplomats in the 1980s had to fly somewhere to get to Western Europe and then proceed home from there. It must have been so much harder than anything we went through in the 2000s.

Q: Sure, yeah. And in cases like that, typically, the small diplomatic community will simply create events that they can all share around, in the British embassy, French embassy, and so on.

RUKEN: Yes, that would have helped. Our neighbors, who were also American diplomats, were really good entertainers. They would have people over, and these parties would be centered around American events like the Super Bowl or a big college football game. It was a nice community there. But I did gain greater respect for our predecessors who were serving out in some of these places under conditions that were way worse, in my opinion, and much more isolating.

Q: Okay, so if that takes you through Romania, obviously you're now thinking about your next tour and your family considerations and so on. What's going through your mind about where you want to go next?

RUKEN: I had been interested in doing refugee work for quite some time. It had such a clear humanitarian component, and I liked the fact that the refugee workers were on the ground trying to make a difference. I knew people in PRM [Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration], and I had bid one of their positions previously without success. This time around I bid a PRM job in Nairobi, Kenya. I didn't get it, but they offered me Amman, Jordan instead. Amman wasn't originally on our radar, but my wife and I had a few conversations, did some research, and concluded Jordan would work. My wife would apply for a teaching job at the international school, which had a pretty good reputation. Living in Amman seemed like it would be fairly easy, with a warm, dry climate, decent enough housing and short commute times. So we took the job and went out to Jordan from 2011 to 2014.

Q: All right, now, how did it work out? Were there any security concerns, either terrorist or criminal or anything like that that you got your briefing on? Was your wife able to find work?

RUKEN: Well, let me answer your question about spousal employment first. My wife did get a job teaching at the American International School in Amman, and she taught full time at their middle school. That was very fulfilling for her. Our kids liked it well enough. The campus was very close to our apartment, so we all had short commute times and a good quality of life.

Now, there were security concerns in Jordan. It's a difficult neighborhood in the geopolitical sense. King Abdullah, who is American and British-educated, has a pretty good sense of humor. He used to joke that Jordan was “between Iraq and a hard place”—the hard place being Israel. But there were other nearby hard places, too: Syria, Lebanon,

and Iran not too far off. We arrived right after the Syrian civil war had broken out. This was during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, and refugees were flowing across the Syrian-Jordanian border. And Jordan's a small country, six point five or seven million people at the time. Virtually overnight, they had to absorb about 700,000 refugees coming in. So that's an additional 10 percent of the population. The national population in Jordan, as people may know, is a delicate balance of what they call East Bankers, people who have lived east of the Jordan River since the creation of the country, and former West Bankers, who essentially are Palestinian refugees who came over in successive waves after the 1948 creation of Israel. The Palestinians call the 1948 war the *Nakba*, the disaster. And then again, in 1967 after the Six Day War, even more Palestinians came over into Jordan from the West Bank. Jordan actually had controlled the West Bank until 1967, but without going into all the history, the main point is that Jordan was a fragile balance of different groups of people, who all pledged allegiance to the king and the monarchy. And so to suddenly have an extra six or seven hundred thousand people streaming in almost overnight, come in almost overnight — that's a potentially destabilizing situation. Aside from the economic ramifications, the Jordanians were very concerned with security as a result of all of this influx, as well as the security situation pertaining to the Islamist groups already operating in Jordan.

How did that influence us? We would take the normal precautions of trying to make sure we're not getting followed, and varying our routes to work, which was very easy for me to do. There would also be drills at the embassy. And there were many times where the sirens would go off and we would hear, "this is not a drill. Duck and cover." And we'd go under the desk until we get the all clear. There were a few occasional mornings where we would get text messages that simply said, "don't come to work today. We're investigating a threat. Work from home." That didn't happen often, but it did happen. And in my three years there, we were never attacked, but there were plenty of times when we thought we might be, and sometimes there was weaponry stationed outside the embassy to protect us just in case.

Because of my role as refugee coordinator, I was given an office at IOM's building, International Organization for Migration, because they were the implementers of our refugee resettlement program. So I had a second office across town in a different building. This made it easy to vary my daily schedule. I could go to IOM first, then to the embassy in the afternoon, or the opposite. Occasionally I'd go to IOM all day and not even come into the embassy. There were multiple ways I could simply juggle all this around to where I was in no pattern at all that anybody could decipher. As a result, I felt safer.

On the other hand, the commutes to and from IOM put me in traffic more often than the average embassy officer. There were a couple times where drivers would yell stuff at me, like "get out of here" –maybe they thought I was Israeli, or maybe they just knew I was American because of our license plates. This was exceedingly rare. There was one time when I felt genuinely scared. I was driving on a city highway with a lot of traffic, but it was moving. I was looking at my phone at the GPS map to figure out where to exit. Amman didn't have a lot of street signs back then, and there were no landmarks–it's a

city of white and beige cubes. A taxi driver in front of me starts slowing down in traffic and comes to a complete halt in the middle lane of the highway, and I'm stuck behind him so I have to stop too. The taxi driver exits his car and walks to my window, with an angry look on his face. Cars were zooming by me on both sides, so I couldn't get in a different lane. I was stuck. Then he starts yelling at me for being on my phone while I was driving because I was looking at my map. He obviously saw me in his rear view mirror. What kind of driver stops in the middle of an expressway and gets out of his car for something like this? I wasn't driving erratically and there was no accident. Not only did he scare me, but he's also endangering us both as we are stopped on a busy highway in a middle lane. I yelled back at him something to the effect of "get in your car and get out of here."

Q: And just a very quick comparison, both times I was in Costa Rica in the 80s and then in the 2000s, they didn't name their streets either, other than a few main ones, because it was a small country and everyone knew the topography. They would just say, "oh yeah, my house is four blocks away from what used to be the airfield, turn right at the tree."

RUKEN: Right. Same thing. They just didn't name the streets. When you're new there, it's especially hard to find your way.

Q: Eventually you figured it out. I actually talked to the ambassador about this, and suggested that she actually talk to one of the ministers and say, "this is lovely tradition that you have, but if you have a major natural disaster and are trying to get to people, that kind of description is not going to work for anybody coming into your country who wants to provide emergency assistance," and she decided that wasn't top of her list.

RUKEN: Right, yes. I know they have other priorities, but it's a good idea. Overall though, both the Embassy and the American International school had good security, so we felt pretty safe.

Interestingly, Amman had a different school called, I think, the "American School." It was a lower quality school right off the freeway, and they had a giant State Department seal with the American Eagle right above their front entrance. The school had no affiliation with the Embassy. I think they just put the seal there to impress prospective Jordanian families. I actually liked the fact that the American seal was up there, because if one of these nihilist, violent Islamist terrorist groups was going to hit a school, they might get fooled and go after that one instead of ours. Our school didn't have any titles or labels on it. Fortunately, nothing happened at either school, thank goodness. But our RSO [regional security officer] never would have approved of how that other school handled their own marketing and visibility.

Q: Right. Absolutely. All right, then let's follow you into your job. Where did you fit in the embassy and where did you fit with IOM?

RUKEN: We had, within the Political Section, a refugee sub- section, with two refugee coordinators, of equal rank. My job was to oversee our refugee admissions program to the U.S. and all the different contractor groups that we worked with, the primary one being

IOM, to ensure that the pipeline of refugees was flowing properly. I had to ensure they were being screened properly, that we were meeting our targeted numbers, and that we could identify new populations for possible resettlement based on UN [United Nations] recommendations. Whereas I handled refugee admissions to the U.S., my colleague oversaw refugee assistance programs. He would coordinate with the Jordanian government to help build the refugee camps to house the Syrians and make sure that those camps were safe and properly funded and supplied. Although we would back each other up where possible, the jobs were quite different.

My job was regional. Even though I reported to the Political Counselor, my reviewing officers were in Washington. My region was Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and the Gulf states. With the exception of Libya, I went to all these places —and it was great. About halfway into my tour, PRM suggested I trade Turkey and Lebanon to somebody else and take on Russia and Ukraine and, believe it or not, Malta. The opportunity to actually cover Russia was something that also interested me a lot, so I enthusiastically embraced the change. And so it really kept the portfolio stimulating the entire three years. I never once got bored the entire tour. And I get bored kind of easily, I'm restless.

Q: Now, you're running these programs, but talk a little bit about the refugee situation in Jordan. Who were they? Who were the ones we were accepting, and so on?

RUKEN: We were just starting to pave the way to accept Syrians into our resettlement program, but the civil war in Syria was too fresh at that point to actually resettle anyone. where we had not yet decided to accept large numbers. The refugees we were resettling from Jordan were mostly Iraqis. A lot of these people worked for us after we invaded Iraq, and others were just victims of Saddam Hussein's regime or the sectarian violence that followed his overthrow. They had to flee for their own safety, due to their religious identity or ethnic identity or political views, or a combination thereof. And so they came over to Jordan, which was very welcoming to refugees, at least in controlled numbers. Lebanon. Turkey and Egypt also had large Iraqi refugee populations, and later on, huge Syrian populations too.

Our government was the one which invaded Iraq, so I think there was this sentiment that we had to make it right. And we tried to do so in such a way that the people we were letting into the U.S. had gone through the strictest possible security regimen of any immigrant into the U.S.. And this is what Americans don't understand about the refugee program, and a lot of members of Congress don't understand it either. If you get into the U.S. through the refugee resettlement program, you've gone through more screening, in terms of security, than just about anybody else who has come into the U.S., including legal immigrants.

And so my role was to make sure that this program remained efficient and clean, with no corruption and no weak links. The efficiency part was really challenging because it was a long, bureaucratic process with multiple steps and deadlines. Sometimes the refugee's medical clearance would expire and you'd have to start over from near the beginning.

PRM used to have this chart which you would unroll like a scroll. It outlined all the steps to resettlement. I used to joke that it was as long as the Dead Sea Scrolls, or maybe the Bayeux Tapestry in Normandy. It would just unroll forever. But if your medical check expired after six months of validity but you hadn't yet been interviewed, you'd have to start over and make a new medical appointment. So you could get stuck in a loop. It was like that old board game Candy Land. You're about to reach your destination, and then through bad luck you draw the card that sends you back to the beginning. IOM and I worked together to manage this and ensure things kept moving forward. It wasn't easy.

IOM was our chief implementer, and they conducted, or at least organized, a lot of the security checks and interviews and medical checks. They had interview rooms where traveling DHS [Department of Homeland Security] teams would sit for a few weeks and interview refugee applicants. This was also the case in the different countries I mentioned. There was a political element to the work as well; I had to work with different governments to ensure they were supportive of our efforts. At the same time, I had to work with the UN refugee service, UNHCR, to ensure they were referring sufficient numbers of refugees to our resettlement program. The people at IOM, UNHCR and the other NGOs I worked with were all wonderful and extremely committed.

Q: Now, you were talking about tens, if not hundreds of thousands of refugees. How were they housed? Did we have any concern about that?

RUKEN: Some of them would be housed in refugee camps which UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] would build, but that we would help fund And then other refugees would just live in urban centers like anyone else. They simply obtained some sort of permit to live in the country and they would find their own housing with their own money, or funds given to them by the UN or whatever charitable organization. It's a mistake to think that all refugees are poor—they are not. Many of the refugees from Syria and Iraq were middle class, and some were even upper class, like doctors and lawyers. In our apartment building in Jordan, we had Iraqi refugees living in the ground level apartment and they drove a Mercedes. They had to leave for their safety, and they were able to rent a really nice apartment in Amman. Eventually wanted to return to Iraq. Not all refugees are a suck on the local economy. Many of them, indeed, are poor and do require assistance given by the host government, so that can be costly. It just depends on the situation. And some of them would crowd into smaller cities and towns and force rents go up, which the local population would resent. But others would contribute to the economy by renting an otherwise vacant building, or by starting a business that would provide a useful service. It's hard to pinpoint their overall impact on the host country. It varies by situation.

Q: Okay, now, you described how long and difficult the application to the U.S. was. What were the numbers? Because obviously congress sets a ceiling, also sets it sometimes by country. What are you dealing with in terms of actual numbers?

RUKEN: I don't remember exactly off the top of my head, but I think the ceilings in those years were around 80,000 to 100,000 worldwide, of which Africa and the Middle East

were the two largest areas. We were expected to process and resettle tens of thousands a year. The number from our region may have been 20 or 30 thousand but I don't remember exactly.

Q: Yeah okay. And then IOM has a large role in resettlement and so on. How did you interact with them? In other words, sort of what was a daily routine for you?

RUKEN: I was the representative of the U.S. government at IOM, which we funded in Jordan. Their entire building existed only for the purpose of refugee processing. It was an eight or nine story building that had formerly served as a hotel, which meant, strangely enough, that every office had its own bathroom. The bathroom to office ratio in this building was the highest in the world.

I would work with the head of the resettlement operation in Amman and his various deputies. We would constantly troubleshoot, forecast numbers, and make sure that each section had the resources needed to do their jobs using the criteria that IOM and PRM had developed for them. If I saw something that didn't seem right, I'd go back to the head of the operation and he would try and fix it. Similarly, if he saw something he would bring it to my attention, and we would work together if he couldn’t fix it on his own. The man I worked with was extremely competent and intelligent, very hands on, and a great guy to work with. We developed a close working relationship where we trusted each other, and his colleagues too.

I'm happy to say I got along with everybody at IOM. My mode of operation was, if there's a problem, you have got to come and tell me, I'm on your side. I want to help you solve the problem. I'll be your advocate, but don't cover it up. I'm not a yeller or a screamer, and I'm calm under pressure. So there were days where they would tell me some bad news, but they never held back. And this allowed me to work smoothly over there and report to PRM what those problems were.

For example, one time we figured out that a couple of IOM employees were involved in a scheme to cheat refugees out of money by falsely promising to speed up their case processing. PRM sent the head of the resettlement program out to see what was going on. This was fairly early in my tour. He was satisfied that IOM and us were addressing this together.

I never thought fraud was common or prominent, but sometimes you do uncover these kinds of problems. And at other times, there would be problems with the staff. Whenever you have a hundred and fifty people working together, there are going to be some problems. One time—and this is an interesting cultural story — there were two IOM employees, both Jordanian, from different tribes. As I recall, one guy said something inappropriate to the girlfriend of the other guy—or something similar. I don't remember that part of it well. But they got into a physical altercation at the office, and the guy who was the aggressor with the woman got beaten up really badly by the other guy. The one who was doing the beating, though, had a record for being kind of violent and for being well connected within his tribe. This guy apparently based the head of the other guy off

of a wall at the office. The guy who got beaten up had to go to the hospital. IOM wanted to fire the guy who beat up the other. However, IOM's HQ had this long process where they had to do an independent investigation before any action could be taken.

Well, when these types of altercations happen, the tribal elders settle it, not the Jordanian courts and not the employers. And so what happened was the guy who did the beating had to pay the family of the victim. His family had to pay the victim's family something like 30,000 or 40,000 dollars. That would wipe the slate clean and end the process of retaliation. And so the victim's family received the money, and then spent it on constructing the second floor of their house. Now, if IOM were to fire the violent guy, that would negate the payout already made. The victim's family would have to give back the money—but they already spent it. This would lead to further trouble between the two families. As I recall the victim didn't even want the perpetrator fired because it would complicate things further. And so even though IOM Jordan, IOM Geneva HQ, and the U.S. government have become involved in all of this, the resolution really needed to come from the tribes, in their old school way. It's interesting to me how the justice system and HR systems work in these different societies.

The IOM building was unique in other ways. As I mentioned, I had an office with a bathroom, which included a bathtub and shower. I never used that part of it—I was afraid of what creepy crawlies might have been living in there. And frankly, why would I need to suddenly shower in the middle of the workday? The building also had a really nice view of Amman. It was up on a hill, which was great unless it snowed, because then you had to climb the hill because the city didn't plow the snow. Next to my office was a kitchen. It wasn't just a place to store food, you could actually cook in there too. Unbelievably, the kitchen came with a waitress who would serve food and drinks to the executive floor, where my office was located. I could order a lunch or a drink and she would just bring it to me—how spoiled! And there's more. The room next to us had an aquarium too. So I could gaze into an aquarium, use my own bathroom, and order food that would be served to me. Meanwhile at the Embassy I had a cubicle in a windowless room shared with three other people. I liked my office mates at the Embassy, but I didn't tell them about the aquarium or the waitress at IOM.

Q: That's wonderful. I want to turn for a moment to your field work, to checking on how the refugee sites were doing, were they at least materially functioning for camp residents.

RUKEN: Yes, it was certainly odd to be working in all this relative luxury and head out to work in refugee camps. My PRM colleague in Amman was instrumental in getting the Zaatri refugee camp built. The really cool thing about these refugee coordinator jobs is you wear so many different hats. My colleague was almost like a real estate developer. He had to help pick out a site out for future camps, and oversee, to some extent, the building process. We would tour around the eastern part of the country and say, okay, the Jordanians are going to need to house 50,000 people. This plot of land is slanted. That one lacks access to water. How are we going to do that without hurting an aquifer? Is this plot of land too close to the Syrian border? You're not supposed to place a refugee camp

close to an international border, because that could encourage border raids and other violence, compromising safety.

The field work was really interesting. The U.S. military had use of a base up in northern Jordan, and they would send out teams to the border and observe refugees crossing in from Syria. I accompanied them for a three month period during the tour. We could hear the artillery and see smoke in the distance as battles continued to rage in Syria. And as refugees came over, we would interview them about their experiences in Syria and crossing over to Jordan. Soon afterward they would be transported to the refugee camps for safety. Most of the other field work I did in other countries during this tour involved working with IOM, UNHCR and various NGOs to ensure our refugee resettlement processing was working correctly, and to fix it when it was not. Observation was also a major component, as we had to help determine with the UN which refugee populations might work for our resettlement program, and which sites on the ground would be conducive for DHS to conduct refugee interviews, which were required as part of our resettlement program.

That latter part was very challenging logistically, because DHS would not go to places that were deemed unsafe for U.S. government employees. The RSOs helped make this determination. In some cases we had to improvise, because UNHCR and PRM already had agreed to resettle a targeted number of people from a given area. Identifying some sort of improvised solution would be on me. Of course, I would consult with the UN and IOM about various locations, and many or most times they would be the one to suggest a way to get the refugees to a safe place for DHS to interview them. But I had to endorse whatever idea we came up with and persuade PRM, the Embassy RSO and Front Office, and of course DHS to sign up. In some instances IOM actually set up bussing and transportation systems to get the refugees to somewhere where both they and DHS felt safe, and then back to where the refugees were sleeping at night. Sometimes we even moved them from one camp to the other—even to one country from another. Sometimes we would house them after the interviews. In Istanbul, for example, we'd arrange for them to stay, and sometimes temporarily live, in hotels. I felt as if I had become a hotel inspector, or a TripAdvisor writer for PRM. This job had so much variety. There was never a boring day, and that's why I really loved the work.

Q: Now, when you say refugee camp, are these tent cities? Or is there anything a little bit more permanent? What was the average experience there?

RUKEN: By and large, they tended to be tent cities. There were some camps where the UN would be able to replace the tents with trailers, white trailers. And there were other camps where, because they had been there for so long, they morphed into ramshackle cities. Sometimes, when the host government permitted it, UNHCR would even distribute building materials to the refugees so they could construct their own shelters by themselves. You're a refugee, you land here, UNHCR will give you a starter kit, and you build your own house. So what the camps actually looked like varied greatly, by location.

The toughest camps in terms of living conditions were the tent camps. The better camps were those where the refugees would be able to build their own homes, and then even start small businesses within the camps. There were camps in Africa, which I visited during my next tour, which were really more like small cities with main streets with restaurants and clothing stores and service industries. The Zaatari camp in Jordan, once up and running, had become the world's third largest refugee camp, and the largest one in the world outside of Kenya. That camp had over 100,000 people in it. And Zaatri had a main street with traffic and vehicles and shops and little restaurant stands, food stalls, and grocery stores.

Refugees, like I said before, they're not all poor, and they're anything but helpless. These people, by the very fact that they decided to pick up and leave their country and go somewhere else, meant that they had a lot of energy and agency. It takes guts. And so, rarely will they just sit there and do nothing at these camps. The problems happen when they're bored and there's nothing for them to do, especially for young men. But if people can start a business, or if they have some sort of capital at their disposal, they'll make use of it and do something, rather than just sit there.

Q: Now, speaking of all these services and so on, were you able, or were any of the donors able to offer basic education and basic medical care and so on?

RUKEN: Different countries would offer different things. Some of the European countries would offer to build schools. Other countries, like Turkey, the UAE [United Arab Emirates] and Morocco, built hospitals and medical clinics. With the different donations of different countries over time, these camps started to resemble functioning, or at least somewhat functioning, cities with the same services as one would find in an organic city.

Q: You mentioned you have other countries also, you mentioned Istanbul and so on. How much time did you spend there, and what were the major activities related to those separate countries?

RUKEN: It would depend a little bit on the situation in the country, but basically, in any country, I would visit the processing site where we would conduct the refugee resettlement interviews. My goal was to ensure the entire system was proceeding smoothly, and to fix any problems. I would visit the camps or urban locations where refugees lived, to see what conditions were like and to make any recommendations. If we needed to go find a new site for interviews or a new hotel for the refugees to stay at, or if there was some problem to address, we would address that problem. I would visit the host government officials in each country to thank them for their cooperation and obtain their feedback. It was important to make sure they were satisfied with the way things were going. And sometimes I'd visit the refugees themselves and ask them, "how's it going for you here? What services are you able to access? What can't you access?" And sometimes I would do group presentations to the refugees, to explain how our resettlement system worked. Sometimes they got mad in response, because processing was taking too long. I'd deal at certain occasions with a hostile crowd every now and then. But I felt that all

these people, if you're just honest with them and don't over promise anything, they respect it, and you can diffuse the hostility. I also could diffuse the hostility by expressing empathy and telling them, "I understand why you're mad. I'm really sorry this is taking so long. If I were in your situation, I'd be totally mad too. And we're doing our best."

Most of my time was spent with the various NGO and international organization patterns we would fund to implement our resettlement program. Those would be UNHCR, IOM, the International Catholic Migration Committee, and many other smaller ones. I should say the people who worked at all of these places were absolutely wonderful. Kind, humanitarian, generous and energetic people. Of all nationalities. Hardly any jerks at all— I can't even remember any. So dealing with people was so nice and easy.

Sometimes my work had a significant impact on the course of events. For example, after the violence in Libya in which Gaddafi was overthrown and killed, some Libyans had to leave the country as they were from tribes now perceived as hostile by the new government. We discussed with the UN in Tunisia whether we should be resettling some of these people because they could not stay in Tunisia, because of fears for their safety. Tunisia had a semi open border with Libya. And if they returned to Libya, they thought they would be killed.

I could not enroll such groups into our resettlement program on my own, of course. I would obtain the information, interview people, and then go back to HQ, to PRM, and say, "there are X number of Libyan asylum seekers in Tunisia. The UN is saying X, Y, and Z about these people not being able to go back." Now, we're not going to resettle anybody who's perpetrated violence. So my role would be to inform PRM in Washington about whether or what parts of the refugee population could be resettled without likely flunking the security tests, and then PRM would have to decide whether to proceed with entering these people into our refugee program or not. If they were entered, then we would run a series of checks and DHS would eventually come out and interview them.

Q: Now, as all this is going on, you're in the field, you're operating, you have your general instructions about all of the things you're supposed to do. Do you get to reply to heads of office, heads of bureaus on how to change or improve policy?

RUKEN: No, that's more for Washington. I was not a policymaker, but rather an implementer. I could certainly offer input to Washington, to PRM, as to what parts of our processes are working or not working, and recommend changes accordingly. While we are constrained by law on a lot of things, there often is wriggle room—for example, where we interview the person, as opposed to whether we interview them or not. We didn't necessarily have to interview them near where they were staying. We just had to make sure we interviewed them somewhere.

I also had the opportunity to talk to Washington policy makers who would come out and visit. I met the DHS Secretary, who then was Janet Napolitano, in Jordan. I met with congressional delegations in Turkey and, during my next tour, in Kenya. I talked to them about our program, and why it works, and so forth. I had plenty of opportunities to talk to

people. Rather than openly advocate for this or that, I would instead show them how effective our program was—how we were cautious and careful at the same time. The congressmen and women seemed very appreciative—I never got a sense they weren't supportive. During this period we had bipartisan support for the refugee resettlement program. The Republicans ended that in 2016. Hundreds of thousands of refugees have suffered since then, as a direct result.

Here's an illustration of how my role in the process worked. Let's suppose DHS was not willing to go to a certain place, either due to safety or cost concerns. I then would convince PRM to propose to DHS a different interview site, providing logistical and financial assessments of how this might work. One time, we—meaning IOM technically—bused a large group of Iraqi refugees from Syria, where they were staying but inaccessible to DHS, to Beirut, where they could be interviewed by DHS. Later, in my next tour, we flew large numbers of Somali refugees from a refugee camp in Kenya rife with security issues to another camp on the opposite side of the country that was safe for DHS. Of course this isn't free, and IOM and the UN can't pay for all of it. So I would have to lay all that out for Washington to decide what was feasible and what wasn't. The operations officers at IOM and UNHCR were uniformly excellent, so they were very adept at thinking creatively and out of the box. And knowing we could expand the parameters, I became a more creative problem solver too. There was never an instance where I didn't feel comfortable bouncing an idea off someone in the field. No one was ever disrespectful or would quickly dismiss an idea. Everything was duly considered. I really liked that kind of cooperative, collegial thinking.

On the other hand, sometimes I would disagree with PRM over certain issues. Although it was always civil and friendly, I would try and push them further than they wanted to be pushed. One time, I was on a temporary trip (TDY) to Saudi Arabia to meet with UNHCR. Afterward, one of the UNHCR participants in the meeting, a woman, came to me and very quietly said (and I'm paraphrasing), I'm afraid if I stay in this country, I'm going to get killed, because I'm working for the UN and this is a gigantic women's prison. I also have a white boyfriend here, and I'm afraid for my safety. Can you please help me and get me out of this country? I presented her case to PRM HQ. We the refugee coordinators do have the authority to personally recommend someone for the U.S. resettlement program, but we have to demonstrate that each case is in the U.S. national interest. In this case, the person in question was a UNHCR worker, which made it a bit complicated. And in this case, there wasn't a strong reason aside from simply trying to help a person in need. I made the strongest case I could, but PRM said no. And so I had to tell this poor woman we could not help her. I encouraged her to try to get to a third country and apply to UNHCR there, anywhere, as an asylum seeker. It was really hard because the woman was begging me for help, and I wanted to help her. But PRM did not budge and we just had to agree to disagree. If they didn't approve, I could not proceed, and it made no sense for me to harm my working relations with PRM over just one case I ultimately couldn't control anyway. But I still feel bad that I couldn't persuade them to enroll her in our resettlement program.

I also disagreed with PRM about our Cultural Orientation program. After a refugee is approved for resettlement to the U.S., but before they actually fly there, one of our implementing partners —IOM, or an NGO— will give them a short course of a few days called Cultural Orientation. It's about what to expect in the U.S. and how to acclimate to American culture. It's taught by employees of our implementing partners, who sometimes are Americans themselves.. Well, I felt that this program sometimes didn't go far enough in what it was really teaching. I thought it was too focused on questions like how to flush a toilet, because some people don't know how, or how to work a microwave — too much on those kinds of things, and not enough on what sort of behaviors you're going to encounter in the U.S. and how you might want to present yourself.

Even back then, although the refugee program had bipartisan support, we know there was some resistance against immigrants. And we all know that immigrants who come into a town and look different, dress differently, and behave differently, might generate backlash from local officials and populations. It might not be happening so much in New York City or Chicago, but in the smaller cities or towns that were previously more homogenous, relatively large numbers of newly arrived refugees could generate friction. This might sound controversial, but I thought our orientation program should have been targeted more at people from conservative or traditional cultures, as in the Middle East, in order to explain that certain cultural practices may have to change if you want to integrate. Women, for example, covering themselves completely, including their faces. While legal, this is not necessarily going to help you in the town that you're resettled in. In fact it's going to separate you more from the local population. Anyway that's what I wanted to tell the refugees. And PRM was not entirely comfortable with taking Cultural Orientation down that path, to discuss issues like integration and assimilation.

And in some cases, PRM would actually cancel cultural orientation if we needed to rush refugees to the U.S. to make numerical deadlines, which I didn't like at all. So if we were in a hurry or behind on flights to the U.S., there would be cancellations or shortening of cultural orientation classes. I didn't like that. Of course, PRM had the final word and I'm only the implementer. And there were times where I respectfully made my opinion known. But you also have to pick your battles, and I wasn't willing to go to the mat over this because I knew that ultimately it was beyond my control.

Q: The only other question I had was, you listed a whole variety of things that you did, and you did mention that refugees were beginning to come across from Syria, but that you did have some activity in assisting them, but I'm not sure exactly what that was.

RUKEN: We weren't assisting them crossing. That's something we don't get involved in at all. The U.S. military group I mentioned before was there to assist the Jordanians and international community with providing humanitarian assistance once the refugees crossed into Jordan. For the most part, it was interviewing refugees and observing what was going on along the border, and where possible, learning more about what was going on in Syria. For about three months, I accompanied this group of U.S. military to the border. They had translators who could understand the different dialects, and we would

just talk to the refugees about what they needed. As I mentioned this was in coordination with the Jordanians. They were completely supportive.

There were other interesting aspects of the tour. One, we were able to go to Israel a lot for sightseeing. This was an interesting release valve for the family living in a conservative Muslim society. Don't get me wrong–we liked Jordan, but it was nice to go to Israel from time to time. Back then the politics weren't as toxic, and it was an era of relative peace, though the storm clouds were building, without a doubt. Visiting Israel gave us the perspective of both sides on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. That was really interesting on a personal level.

It was interesting to see how refugees were treated in the different countries where I worked. Egypt, for example, treated people way differently than Turkey or Jordan. The same thing was true with visits to Lebanon. And staying in Lebanon, of course, was much different too, because security requirements in Lebanon were much stricter than anywhere else. I couldn't leave our Embassy compound without armed escorts.

When I went to Beirut. I would meet with the UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees], because they do refugee referrals to our resettlement program for those who have sought asylum in Lebanon. At the time, they were mostly Iraqis and also an increasing number of Syrians because of the Syrian civil war. The security situation in Lebanon was somewhat tricky because, in contrast to a lot of the other places that I had to work, U.S. personnel on TDY [temporary duty] and others posted there had to coordinate with the RSO [regional security officer] to leave the Embassy compound at any time. You only could leave a certain number of times per week, as I recall. A lot of my meetings were in the main part of the city, not up on the hill where our embassy is located. And so this was a big logistical challenge—and it was just to conduct the normal course of business.

Q: Now tell me a moment, which offices were your key counterparts or your key interlocutors?

RUKEN: UNHCR, also the International Catholic Migration Commission–ICMC. And also IOM. Those were the three most important in Lebanon.

Q: Were they more or less safe?

RUKEN: Well, their staff members weren't getting kidnapped or harmed. Presumably though, the security teams from those organizations felt that they could operate and do work there without fear of being kidnapped, or shot at, or suicide bombed, or whatever, and so they moved around quite freely for the most part. If you know Beirut, there are certain neighborhoods that you just can't go into, especially on the south side of the city, because those are under the control of Hezbollah. Unless you have a specific reason for being there and know somebody who will let you in, you just don't go. You don't just show up in your vehicle, no matter what organization you're from.

But the international organizations' security procedures weren't nearly as restrictive as ours were at the time. And that was a challenge for us. If I wanted to meet someone for dinner to conduct business and have a more relaxed conversation, that would mean keeping the RSO out, keeping the driver out, keeping anybody else related to security out, and they would have to keep an eye on me. It was just a hassle for everybody, to be honest. And at the embassy up on a hill overlooking town, we had a small guest house, the equivalent of a two star hotel, but with cheap soap and a toilet flush that sounded like the space shuttle. The views were wonderful–Beirut spilling out below into the Mediterranean with those wonderful sunsets. And I would feel frustrated to be stuck there when down in the city, my colleagues and friends would go out together for dinner and conversation, without much worry. But I suppose I understood our concerns, and no RSO wanted to be the one who relaxed the policy and then something bad happened. So I understand where they're coming from as well.

Q: One other question: while you're there, are you also dealing with Lebanon government officials?

RUKEN: A little bit, yes. The Lebanese government wanted us to resettle some of the refugees there, but I deferred to the embassy on how closely we would work with Lebanese government officials and whether those meetings would be helpful or not for us. I don't recall meeting very often with anyone from the government.

Q: And were you able to actually process any refugees on site in Lebanon, or did they have to be flown out to Amman or other places?

RUKEN: No, for the most part, we were able to process them on or near the embassy compound. Often, DHS interviewed them at the other sites overseen by the international organizations. For example, in Amman, DHS would come and interview the refugees at the International Organization for Migration on site. Similarly, in Istanbul, DHS would interview them at the International Catholic Migration Commission office,because ICMC had interview rooms and good security. In Lebanon, it was much harder to find a spot where DHS was willing to come and interview. So we staged the interviews at the embassy itself, which, of course, had its own set of security issues. A lot of this work happened on weekends. This was to ensure the DHS work did not interfere with the Embassy's normal weekday operations. And so we had to get buy-in from our own embassy staff to ensure that the work could happen. A lot of my work was communicating and negotiating with the political section and the front office, the ambassador, and DCM [deputy chief of mission] at the embassy in Lebanon, to ensure that they were comfortable with what we were trying to do. It was an extra step to make those interviews happen.

The ironic thing about Lebanon is, at the time I was doing this, the Syrian civil war had broken out, and Lebanon was far safer than Syria. And as we may remember, Syria back then was interfering pervasively in Lebanon's affairs. We had several thousand Iraqi refugees who had been referred to our resettlement program by the UN, but who remained stranded in Syria—they couldn't get out because of the fighting there. We could

not go into Syria and do refugee interviews because it was way too dangerous. We had already closed up our embassy in Damascus. But these Iraqi refugees were fearing for their lives for several different reasons. The Syrian Civil War was extremely complex, and depending on where the refugees were, different groups controlled those areas, some of which would be sort of friendlier to the refugees than other groups.

Without going into all the intricacies and complexities of the Syrian civil war, we had to figure out what to do with these refugees if they were to remain eligible for our resettlement program. And of course, lives were at stake here. And so with IOM taking the lead, we developed a plan with IOM to put thousands of refugees on buses to get them out of different parts of Syria, then over land to Beirut, where we could interview them. They would stay in Lebanon before heading to the U.S. If they failed to qualify for resettlement to the U.S., they would stay in Lebanon and wait out the Syrian war. This was an incredibly complex operation because it involved both the governments of Syria and Lebanon as well as areas that might not be under the government's control in Syria. It took a lot of time, a lot of brainstorming, to figure out things like what would happen if the bus got stopped somewhere—especially at the Syria-Lebanon border. Who would be the person to board the bus and check documents. What if someone didn't have their documents? What about the rest of the passengers? Those kinds of issues all had to be worked out beforehand. It was a lot more complex than going Greyhound from Tucson over to LA [Los Angeles].

Q: What were the principal reasons that people were accepted as having a reasonable fear of persecution? Was it just political? Was it ethnic? Were there other issues?

RUKEN: Well, it was political, ethnic, and religious. A lot of people fled Iraq because they had worked or connected in some way to us, and they were in areas where they didn't feel safe anymore. But it wasn't always that situation. Once in Syria, many Iraqis had a fear of persecution due to their own religion, ethnicity or tribal affiliation. And in some cases they were simply in a battle zone that they wanted to escape. Now, it's not our job to rescue people in battle zones, but if these people already had been identified by UNHCR as eligible for resettlement to the U.S., we wanted to find a way to get them interviewed and give them a fair shot. Remember a lot of these people work for us in Iraq, at a risk to their lives. So we felt a moral imperative to do our best to get them out of harm's way and resettle them if they met all our eligibility criteria.

Q: Were there any other smaller groups, for example, women who were in fear of their lives due to domestic violence, or LGBT people, that kind of thing?

RUKEN: Yes, those were smaller in numbers, but they existed too.

Q: Okay, I just wanted to check on some of the people and the criteria that you were using. But please go ahead.

RUKEN: What I liked a lot about this work was that we were doing things that had an immediate impact on people's lives. You could really see it when they thanked you or

became upset when things weren't moving fast enough. There's a lot on the line, and of course, that makes it a little more stressful, but at the end of the day, you often feel good about what you accomplished. If nobody else really cared or recognized it outside of PRM, it didn't matter. Because you still know inside your own brain what you got done. And I think my PRM colleagues in the field and in Washington felt the same way. I worked with a very high caliber of people.

Q: Absolutely, you can immediately see the results of your work.

RUKEN: Right. And we could measure it quantitatively. In many other State Department jobs, the actual impact is more difficult to measure. You can count the number of cables you've written, for example, but figuring out the actual impact of what you wrote is much harder. Whereas to count the number of refugees resettled—that's a solid, indisputable number. Either you get through the program or not, and you get through it for multiple reasons. It's not like I got these people through, no. My job was to make sure the system operated in a functional, efficient and effective way. And if I could do that, you would see the numbers of refugees processed and resettled increase. I just found it very concrete and satisfying in that regard, because you could really see what you were doing.

Q: Were there any other aspects of going to Lebanon that you recall that are telling or salient?

RUKEN: A couple interesting tidbits. Lebanon is a fairly well developed country if we're talking about economics and infrastructure. Beirut is a forest of high rises, but we imagine it as war-torn, due to those 1970s images of pockmarked neighborhoods from the civil war, and, of course, that horrible bomb that exploded at the port a few years back. But the reality is that Beirut was a pretty vibrant place with a fairly large middle class, restaurants, and shopping. That was sort of eye opening, once you're on the ground there and actually see it.

Contrast that with the absurdities. The place is completely sectarian, with neighborhoods controlled by different groups that clearly don't like each other. Whenever I would go into Lebanon, I'd fly in, as driving was not an option. For those of us who had traveled to Israel for work, as I had, we would need two passports because Lebanon and Israel don't have diplomatic relations. If I had an Israeli stamp in my passport, then Lebanon would not let me in. You have to make sure that you bring the right one to the airport. The airport was in a Hezbollah controlled part of town. But what was really strange was that the airport was very glitzy inside. It looked like any modern European airport. And inside the airport you would hear techno music. One time there was a sports car for sale on the terminal floor, with ladies in short dresses and high heels, giving you brochures to persuade you to buy the car. Right here in this Hezbollah-controlled area. It was weird.

There would always be a security officer at the immigration desk to stamp your passport. After a while, I think he started to recognize me. He would closely examine my passport looking for an Israel stamp. I think he suspected that I had multiple visits to Israel, because of the nature of my work. So he would look for that stamp, and he never could

find it because it just wasn't there. It was in my other passport. And I would say things like "you know there's no Israeli stamp in there," to gently needle him. And he would angrily stamp that thing and rudely shove it back to me. And rather than be offended by the rudeness, I enjoyed it! Of course, I was always very careful to bring the correct passport.

The flight from Amman to Beirut, only a couple hundred miles, was one of the stranger flights I've ever taken. You come in high over Mount Lebanon, a snowcapped mountain, and corkscrew down into Beirut to land. The entire flight, if you just flew in a straight line, would probably be under 40 minutes. But most of the flight was just going up and around mountains and corkscrewing down, which took 90 minutes. You couldn't fly over Israeli airspace at the time. Then, when the Syrian civil war really heated up, passenger planes couldn't fly over Syria either, and that pretty much cut off a direct pathway from Amman to Beirut. So instead the pilots would fly down toward Cairo, Egypt, to avoid Israel and Syria, and then take a right turn out into the Med [Mediterranean Sea], then another sharp right to fly up the coast to Lebanon, and then a final right to descend down to Beirut. It seemed so silly to have to do all this, but that's the nature of the region.

Q: Okay, roughly speaking, how many people left Lebanon while you were there?

RUKEN: I don't have the numbers right in front of me, but I would estimate, based on my memory, maybe one or two thousand, but not much more. I had Lebanon as part of my resettlement portfolio for just under two years, and then they switched me to Russia and Ukraine, as I had mentioned before, and gave Lebanon to another refugee coordinator. The numbers in the region I covered were growing too high to be able to give sufficient attention to all of these countries, and they wanted to sort of even it out about halfway into my tour, so that each of the refugee coordinators had responsibility for roughly the same numbers of people who we would try to resettle to the U.S. Also, I think by that time, I had a little bit of a reputation as being somebody who could solve problems. I was happy with the proposed trade off because I like trying new things. It was surprising how close Moscow is to the Middle East. It's due north of Amman and only a three hour flight, with no time change. It was almost as easy to get to Moscow as it was to travel to Turkey or Beirut.

Q: Interesting. Okay, yeah. But then, are there any other aspects of working in Amman that you still need to go over?

RUKEN: I don't think so. I fit in pretty well there. The political counselor there and the other officers were very good. I made some great friends. The political counselor trusted me, and she let me do our work, didn't try to interfere, and expressed appreciation for us being able to get things done on our own, with no drama. I had already picked up on this earlier in my career, but the ability just to get things done and not bother somebody with having to fix problems or put out fires is extremely valued as you go higher up. The political counselor had her own huge workload, and a demanding Front Office, and she needed focus elsewhere. I also worked with a total of four wonderful desk officers in Washington, kind, competent people with whom I've maintained friendships right up to

this very day. Truly great people. The people who are drawn to this type of work are awesome.

Q: Now, you mentioned how much you liked this job, at least in part because you could see the results. Did that also translate into a good evaluation because so often good evaluations are the ones that actually cite specifics?

RUKEN: Yes. I was able to come up with a very concrete set of numbers to use as accomplishments. That part was easy. On the other hand, PRM [Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration] refugee coordinator jobs, as a lot of other jobs, are sort of "out of the box" jobs. A former colleague of mine earlier in my career once drew a box on a piece of paper and said "some jobs are in the box, and some are out of the box. In the box, they tell you how great you are. You will have their attention. You will get promoted in a timely fashion, and everything's great." He went on, "whereas if you have jobs outside of the box, it does not matter how great you do, few people will pay attention. It's not on their radar. That's the way it goes. And so you will not get promoted as fast, and you will not necessarily get the recognition you think you should have. You have to come to terms with taking the job out of the box."

Well by this time, I realized that I like out of the box jobs better than the inside the box jobs. Refugee coordinator jobs are different. You're doing a lot of different things, and there is way more travel. Sometimes you have to beg, persuade, and cajole people, whether host governments or your own embassy people, to do things. Sometimes you have to get a little animated with DHS. And your HQ [headquarters] is in Washington, not the embassy. Sometimes the ambassador will back you up, sometimes not. Anyway, there were lots of different variables involved. Through most of the second half of my career, I did out of the box jobs.

I absolutely loved doing refugee coordinator jobs, I actually did three of them consecutively. And then later I worked in the intelligence bureau of the State Department. And then lastly, a very odd job in AF [Bureau of African Affairs], covering a country different from where I lived, and having to travel there to supervise LES [locally employed staff] with no Americans present. Definitely out of the box.

I learned during my career that if you're going out of the box, you can have really satisfying jobs depending on what your personality is, but there's a cost to it, and you have to be honest with yourself about that cost. You have to be prepared for not getting the same recognition as someone who stays in the box.

Here's a short story to illustrate this. I had a friend from A-100 [basic foreign service officer training course] who went to a small African country for his first tour. While there, he found this village that was spread across two hilltops bisected by a deep river valley. On one hill lived all the villagers. Over on the other hill was the market. If you're a villager and you want to sell your goods at the market, you have to switch back down a hill, cross a river, and then switch back up the other hill to arrive at the market. Each year people would die making the trek. They'd slip and fall in the river and drown. My friend

identified a funding source somewhere and was able to get a small pedestrian bridge built spanning the river. As a result, the trip from the homes to the market was made safe. He told me, "at the end of the day, when that bridge was opened, I felt really good about the work I was doing." So he writes all this up in a cable and sends it to State Department HQ. He may have well dropped it into a black hole. Nobody in Washington responded, and there was no appreciation at all. I don't think he was angry, because he told me this story with a grin on his face.

So his next tour is at the OPS Center [Operations Center] in Washington, a common stop for officers after their first tour or two abroad. He devises a way to improve the phone connection on the calls. For example, when the Secretary of State needs to be connected by a phone to a foreign leader, my friend found a way to get them to answer after one ring instead of two. And he said the day he did that, everybody was slapping him on his back, and he got an award for doing this. He was back inside the box.

Q: Did you ever get an award for any of your refugee work?

RUKEN: I think I got a group award when I was refugee coordinator in Kenya. But I did get recognition within the PRM bureau for my competence and commitment, and I appreciated that. I believed they were satisfied with my performance because they gave me three consecutive refugee jobs, each job in a better location than the previous. I assume that if they weren't satisfied, they would not have given me those jobs or the positive evaluations. I had good relationships with the supervisors, so I was not worried about that part of it. The system, to me, is very flawed when it comes to awards. I've been to places where awards are given out as if you have a right to them on a rotating basis, and other places where they won't give awards no matter what you do.

Q: What about promotion? Was your work in refugee affairs promotable?

RUKEN: People told me those jobs are not jobs that get you promoted. I did not get promoted after my refugee work. One time someone at PRM asked me, "are you sure you want this job? Are you sure this is good for you?" Well, I'm much more concerned with happiness than climbing a ladder. The 02 [rank] in the foreign service is a sweet spot where there are lots of job openings that are really interesting. When you get to 01 [rank], the out of the box jobs tend to be fewer in number. When you get to the senior foreign service, fewer still.

As I mentioned before, there are people who want to climb up the ladder as quickly as possible, and there are other people who want to prioritize other things, and I am firmly in the camp of the other things. I wanted to ensure I was happy in the job and my family was happy where we lived, and that we were all together in the same place. Would I have liked quicker promotions? For ego purposes, of course. Who doesn't want that? But I made sure I was as happy as possible with the jobs.

Q: Okay, so you spent a fair amount of time in Refugee Affairs, but at some point you're beginning to think of going elsewhere, taking a different kind of job. When does that happen?

RUKEN: That didn't happen, really, until my third refugee coordinated coordinator tour. I was evacuated–well, my family was evacuated out of Istanbul, and I had to curtail to reunite with them because I didn't want to be separated for what would have been almost three full years. By the time that happened, I had just begun my third straight refugee coordinator tour.

Q: And what year was that?

RUKEN: That was in 2017. I had to cut short the third one, and it was just time to do something different. There were no other refugee coordinator jobs that were even open at the time, if I recall correctly. And the third time around, things are starting to get more familiar than you want them to be. I was also missing more time than was good because I had to travel back to the U.S. a couple of times to deal with family and health matters, which made the travel aspect of the job more difficult. So it was one of those things where you just knew it was time to move on to something else. And so when I came back to Washington after spending about a year in Istanbul, I got an intel job at INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research]. I'm skipping ahead now, but that's the chronology of how things worked out.

Q: Sure. Well then, if you're about done with the tour in Amman, how are you thinking at the end of that tour about where you're going next?

RUKEN: Well, I knew there would be a refugee coordinator position open in Nairobi, Kenya. I had applied previously for that position, and they gave me Amman instead. Three years later, I knew Nairobi would be open, so I went for it again. This time they gave it to me. It was a step up in some ways. The resettlement numbers were higher, and while Jordan was a pleasant place to live, Kenya was more exciting, and with a fantastic school for my teacher wife and two sons. We had never lived in Sub Saharan Africa.

Q: And when did you arrive there?

RUKEN: This was fall of 2014. I was in Amman from 2011 to 2014.

Q: Once again, when you arrive, what is your security situation?

RUKEN: Kenya, actually Nairobi, at that point was rated "critical" in both crime and terrorism. Those are the two most serious rankings on our Diplomatic Security Service four-level scale. So it was actually pretty challenging from a security standpoint. We had to get used to doing some things a bit differently, living in a house with a very high wall, with barbed wire on top of the wall, an electric fence on top of the barbed wire, and a twenty four hour, seven day a week guard station. Our safe area was up on the second floor, which had a couple of layers of security. First we had this iron cage, which looked

like a jail cell, that we had to lock up when we went to bed at night. This door separated the upstairs from the downstairs. This was to prevent anyone who has broken into the home from getting upstairs while the door was locked. And then on top of that, we had the usual safe room—a hard, heavy, bolted door in our master bedroom. There were home invasions during that time, with people with AK-47s going into homes to commit crimes. Fortunately, no American embassy homes were hit while we were there, but there was a case where a home got attacked and a woman was raped in her home a few blocks away.

From the terrorism standpoint, we arrived a few months after the WestGate Mall attack in which a terrorist group took over a shopping mall, a very modern, western-type mall, and held people hostage. The mall eventually was set on fire. I think about sixty people were killed. I know an American who was in the mall at the time and had to hide in a meat locker in a grocery store with his young kids. So terrorism was not something to be taken lightly, and although nothing ever happened to us, I didn't exactly feel safe there, to be honest. You couldn't really walk around certain places and feel relaxed about it.

Nairobi is also a city of relatively few targets, and so if you compare it to the city I served in next, Istanbul, which also had terrorism issues, Nairobi seemed more dangerous, at least subjectively. The reason is that Istanbul is a monstrously big city of fifteen million people, with hundreds of places where people—not just locals but Westerners too—congregate. Istanbul has hundreds of potential targets for terrorists, so that actually makes it far less likely you will be the unlucky one, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Whereas in Nairobi there weren't many targets where Westerners were at any given time— just mainly just the U.S Embassy, the UN compound across the street, a western focused outdoor shopping mall about a mile away, and perhaps the international school. The sense was that if something bad was going to happen—targeted at Westerners — it would happen at one of the four places I just mentioned. And that is somewhat of an uncomfortable feeling to have.

When we went to that mall, for example, we would go about our business efficiently and then leave. It was too bad because it was actually a very pleasant mall with a high quality outdoor food court, with comfortable places to hang out if you just want to be around people. At the U.S. Embassy, we'd enter through the front gate and go into our office, but not hang around the gardens near the front gate. The UN compound, I think, was a little better, in that it was sprawling and somewhat disjointed. There were office buildings in one part and a fitness center in an entirely different section to which we belonged. Overall, the security situation in Nairobi didn't feel great.

Q: One quick comment as you were speaking, my very first tour was Jamaica in 1984 as a vice consul in the visa section. All the kinds of security for your home that you described, I had in Jamaica.

RUKEN: Oh, wow. So you know what that feels like.

Q: The security was principally for crime. The back patio of the townhouse-style apartment was essentially a jail cell that protected against entry. My bedroom was a "safe room" with an extra heavy door. Around the house was a wire fence and a guard sat in front of the door.

RUKEN: Very similar with us. Nairobi has two rainy seasons, and during these rainy seasons, giant slugs would climb the walls and set off the house alarms, often in the middle of the night after a rain. So at three a.m., the slugs would climb, trip the wire, the alarm would go off, sirens going, the lights flashing into our bedrooms, all this noise. I had two fairly young kids at the time, and it was a little bit stressful. We knew it was probably due to the slugs, but we didn't know for sure. And of course, the first time that happened, you're not sure at all. But each time, the RSO, per their procedures, would send somebody out, ring our doorbell and see if we were okay. It was a nice thing to do, and I appreciated it. But it usually took the person twenty minutes, maybe more, to arrive at our house. By the time his short visit ended and we're drifting back off, we would be about 1-2 hours short of sleep, with our wake-up alarm due to go off in just an hour or so. It was a bit of an annoyance, but better safe than sorry of course. I felt safer with the security than without it.

Q: For your job, were you located in the embassy, or was it a separate building as in Amman?

RUKEN: Similar to Amman, I was located in the embassy, and had a nice office with my refugee team there. The office structure was a bit different. In Amman, I had a PRM colleague of equal rank to me, and then we shared an LES. In Nairobi, I had an EFM—an eligible family member—working for me full time just on refugee admissions. We also had an Office Management Specialist (OMS) also working full time for us. And then there was a PRM refugee coordinator one grade down who worked on refugee assistance. I was her supervisor. So I was leading a team, which required that I be at the embassy a little bit more often than in Amman. But they were all good and we worked well together. The NGO that did our refugee processing was Church World Service (CWS), as opposed to IOM in Amman. The CWS office was located much farther across town, and I didn't have an office there as I did in Amman. With traffic in Nairobi being much worse, we couldn't really drive ourselves because we'd lose too much time each day, so I'd set up drivers back and forth and go less frequently—just one or two times per week. It was still a nice setup. And the people at CWS were awesome, equally good as those I already described in Amman. Very competent and fun to be around. I made a lot of friends there too, just as I had in Amman.

Q: Absolutely. Who were the principal refugees in Kenya?

RUKEN: It was mostly Somalis and Sudanese, the latter being mostly South Sudanese. Believe it or not, there were also some Iraqis who made their way down to sub-Saharan Africa. And then there were assorted other groups, but Somalis and Sudanese comprised the vast majority.

Q: Okay, and I imagine then the Somalis were in the southern part of Kenya, and the Sudanese more in the north or northwest?

RUKEN: Well, actually, because Somalia is immediately north/northeast of Kenya, there were two large refugee camps. One is called the Dadaab, which has been historically the largest refugee camp in the world, and that's in northeast Kenya. And then Kakuma camp — back then the third largest refugee camp in the world — was located in northwest Kenya.

Q: Wow. I mean, you're talking, at this point, millions of refugees. What role did you play?

RUKEN: I think the overall number of refugees in Kenya was well over a million, or maybe even over two million if you also count refugees living in urban centers. My role, like in Jordan, was to facilitate resettlement. That at times meant identifying refugee populations within those camps that the UN thought might be appropriate and eligible for resettlement, but it also meant facilitating DHS interviews at the camps. This latter part was not as easy as it sounds. Dadaab camp, that large camp in northeast Kenya, was off limits for most of my tour because of armed groups operating within the camps, including Al Shabaab, a U.S recognized terrorist group. So we could not go into those camps under normal circumstances and interview refugees for resettlement. We had to find some other solution.

Well, harking back to some of the lessons I had learned in Jordan, CWS, IOM and I figured out a way to fly the refugees from Dadaab camp to Kakuma camp, where DHS could go and do interviews. The refugees they interviewed would either stay at that camp or go back to Dadaab and await the final decision and final resettlement. We needed permission from the Kenyan government to do this for each and every individual, and of course the individuals needed to say yes to this. Then we had to find airplanes and pilots, schedule flights, and find places in the already crowded Kakuma camp for the new arrivals to sleep and acquire food. And we had to do this without upsetting the refugees already in Kakuma camp.

As you can imagine, this required a lot of logistics. Setting up an "air bridge" isn't straightforward or easy. And of course, Somalia's refugees were from different ethnic groups and tribal affiliations that did not get on well in Somalia, so we had to keep that in mind. Plus the fact that the camps in Kenya all had their own demographics and resource constraints. You can't just fly a bunch of people from one refugee camp, stick them in another, and expect everybody already there to welcome them with open arms. The refugees already there want to ensure their own resources aren't put into jeopardy. So, those kinds of things have to be taken into account, as well as a basket of safety issues: the safety of the flights, the safety of the pilots, the safety of the refugees, and so on. Both these camps are isolated and the nearest mid-sized towns were far away. Kakuma especially had limited sleeping and eating arrangements for international staff. It got to be quite complex, but we had excellent people on the ground to help us out, especially at IOM, Church World Service, and UNHCR.

I should add that for us, just getting to Kakuma camp from Nairobi was hard. One option was to reserve a spot on an old, battered, beat up UN plane that left at an ungodly hour in the morning, for a pretty bumpy flight. very bumpy flight. About halfway into the flight the plane would cross over Mount Kenya, and the air pressure would always throw the airplane askew. Sometimes it would be a roller coaster drop, or a tilt sideways, but I always dreaded it. And the air pressure on the plane wasn't good, so your ears would on the descent and landing.

The other option to get to Kakuma was to take a small commercial flight to a town about two hours away called Lokichogio, which is near the South Sudanese border with Kenya. However the highway in between the camp and that town had security issues. As a result, we would have to arrange with the Kenyan government for a police caravan to transport us from the airport to the camp—or vice versa. I think this was because of banditry. The area felt a bit like the Wild West. So taking this flight required a lot of work and logistics to make it happen. There were days when I woke up feeling I didn't want to make the trip. I knew it was going to be a difficult, unpleasant day–a difficult two days if you stay overnight in Kakuma. My colleague and deputy in the refugee section had to go to Kakuma more often than me to look after assistance issues. And while there she sometimes would get sick—mainly food poisoning. That's dreadful when it's 100 degrees and there are flies everywhere.

Q: Wow. I mean, couldn't you take your own food, like an MRE [meal ready to eat] or something?

RUKEN: I did. Learning from her issues and hearing what other people advised, I would not eat the food up there. I would either take a bag of crackers and a banana and eat that, or I wouldn't eat at all. By the end of a long day, if you eat crackers, you're feeling run down and tired, but I'd rather that way than be sick to my stomach.

Q: What were the outcomes, as far as you could measure them, in terms of your work?

RUKEN: Well, we resettled record numbers of refugees for that region, compared to prior years. I think my first year there, or it might have been my second, I honestly don't remember, but one of the two years we set the record for most refugees resettled out of that part of Africa. PRM was happy about that. I should emphasize that this was a program that both Republicans and Democrats in Congress supported — not the political issue that it is today. The bipartisan support was wrecked mostly by one side, in my opinion, and now it's gone. It's a real shame, not just for the refugees, but for the country, because these people contribute a lot economically to the places where they resettle. They're not there to mooch off of a welfare system. They're there to restart their lives, to restart their careers. Many of these people are professionals in white collar, service and manufacturing professions, highly energized and motivated, and want to work hard and make something of their lives. They're not in the U.S. to live off some dole.

Anyway, we resettled in the upper 20,000s, I think, our second year, or first year there. Maybe our numbers even approached 30,000. These were the biggest numbers outside of Asia, I believe. That would be the main accomplishment. And nobody got hurt. DHS was able to do their work. There were no incidents that I recall of corruption, or any threat to the integrity of any aspect of the program. It didn't always go smoothly, it never does, and it was a lot of hard work, but it was very fulfilling.

Q: Okay. For your family, then?

RUKEN: I think it was great for them. My wife taught full time at the International School of Kenya (ISK), which was one of the largest and most prestigious international schools on the African continent. She loved it there. It was a really great place, a huge, pretty campus. High caliber students and decent behavior overall. They really have an outdoor ethic there. Every year, the students do a school trip for about a week. One year, everybody climbed Mount Kenya, the second highest mountain in Africa and over 15,000 feet tall. A school trip like that would never happen in the U.S. And then the second year, they did this other outdoor survivalist trip in a very rugged part of the country as well. There was definitely an outdoorsy tradition there. They had an outdoor swimming pool where the students took their swimming lessons as part of their PE [physical education] program. And I think the pool wasn't heated. Nairobi is at 6,500 feet above sea level so at night, it's quite cool. Our home had neither AC [air conditioning] nor heat. If you had PE in the morning, maybe it would be 60 or 65 degrees, and you had to take an icy plunge.

It was academically a very good school, nice facility, green, spacious campus. Very good experience for both of my kids. My older son was a high school student there. My younger son was in elementary school. All kids have complaints about this or that teacher, but I think they really enjoyed being part of that community.

In terms of the family activities, the main things were the amazing safaris in Kenya. The whole experience of a safari is unforgettable. Some of the camps are really posh, but not all. And getting out there can involve eight hours on bumpy roads or a plane so small that you can't believe it's actually going to fly. Dirt landing strips too. But that was part of the adventure.

And while on the game drives, there really is nothing between you and those animals. You have to sign a waiver as you begin your safari saying you will not hold the camp responsible for the death of your or your family members. The guides will warn you not to take even one step onto the ground while out on a game drive. That lion thirty yards away will perceive that you're an enemy, so if you take a step out of the vehicle, it may very well charge you and kill you. attack you and it may kill you. So the safaris were exciting and we really enjoyed them.

Q: Then are there other aspects of the job that you want to relate to?

RUKEN: Overall, it was a great job, very challenging, as in Jordan. I covered multiple countries, including South Africa, so I would go down there quite often. I covered

Somalia, but could not enter that country. I covered Ethiopia and went there about three or four times a year. Ethiopia is a fascinating country. Not an easy place to do work or travel around, but a fascinating place with very interesting people. I also went to Zimbabwe and Zambia a couple times, and Malawi once or twice. Also Uganda. My region was very large. All of these countries have some similarities in their cultures and some significant differences, including in their level of economic development as well. Really fascinating travels, which I will always remember fondly.

I should note that the poverty one sees there was much worse than any poverty I've seen elsewhere, with the possible exception of the Philippines. And the relationships I formed with locals seemed a bit more transactional than elsewhere. Meaning that a lot of people want and expect you to help them, and that is their priority and objective in forming a relationship with you. I get it, it's understandable, but it makes it harder to develop close friendships that don't have some transactional element in them. And so living in Brazil and Mexico, living in Europe, I felt it was a bit easier to get to know people in a genuine way. In Kenya some people called it "the Kenyan angle", because Kenyans were always angling for something.

Q: I understand. And it's true, certainly in Jamaica, where everyone wanted a visa.

RUKEN: In Africa, I think it was more immediate than obtaining a visa. The sense was “I need money. I need whatever you have right now, today, whatever you will give me I will happily accept.” Sometimes it would be a request for work. We had multiple people ask— even demand—that we put them to work for us immediately, so they could obtain cash. But often it would just be straight out requests for money, medical issues, housing assistance, education funding, whatever, and you simply could not give everybody money who asked. Because it would never end.

There's also sort of the ethical question of, if I give this person money in exchange for nothing, what message do they get from this? Yes we are generous, but what happens next? We saw that when you give someone money, you will get swarmed with more requests. Maybe not immediately, but it will happen. People talk to each other, and they know who is getting what.

In other instances, if you give somebody money or some sort of economic assistance, it may not satisfy them and they will push for more. They will perceive you as being wealthy and generous, and this will eventually lead to a cascade of requests that you will have to cut off, sooner or later. And this can result in more resentment than if you had not helped them in the first place. I can give you a pretty good example. Our embassy-assigned house had a large and complex garden, which needed tending. And so we hired a gardener. He took care of the plot and did a decent job. This was a full time job, by the way. He didn’t actually work forty hours a week on the garden, but we hired him on a full time basis so we could help him out and ensure the property was well-maintained.

One day, toward the end of our tour, he said he was sick. He was diagnosed with cancer. He was a young man in his early 30s. He showed us a scrap of paper with doctors scribbles written on it that we couldn't make heads or tails of, but he did have a cough, was very thin, and had no record of lying to us before. So we believed him. He said he needed cancer treatment or he would die. And so we agreed to pay for his cancer treatment. We paid for 100 percent of his cancer treatment. The treatment didn't work. He died, or at least we were told he had died, several weeks after beginning the treatment. His surviving wife called us and asked for money to help her to get back on her feet and establish her own small business. We gave her money to cover the funeral expenses, severance for her husband—he had only worked about a year for us—and extra money that she could use to start her business. This was far and above the equivalent of what his severance pay would have been had he quit his job or left. She perceived the amount we gave as an insult, maybe not understanding that we had just paid all this money for his treatment, which wasn't cheap. And she got really mad and actually began threatening us that if we didn't give her more money, we would burn in hell and there would be retribution. And I had to go to the security office and report all this, that this person is now threatening me for more money. I don't know if this was part of a pressure campaign for more money or she was genuinely mad, but I felt like she was taking advantage of us when we had tried to do everything to save her husband.

We asked the other household help, "what do you guys think? We don't want to insult them or come across as cruel" And they wouldn't give us guidance — or couldn't. They would just say "pay whatever you can or want." This experience to me was an extreme example of trying to do someone right and help them out, and then you wind up not doing enough, and then everything becomes conflictual instead.

Things like that were quite frustrating and challenging. I'm not saying we were in the right or the wrong. I honestly still don't really know if we should have done more, but it seemed right given the circumstances. We had another case of somebody I casually knew at the Embassy—an LES—asking me for money on the side. Usually you don't have LES asking you for money, but this person asked me to pay for his brother's surgery. This was after the incident with the gardener. And I told him I was really sorry but could not help. If I were to give to this LES how many more people would come and ask me for assistance? Word would get out, so when does it stop?

Q: Yeah. I understand. Okay, then this is Kenya, and you're still doing refugee work, but you're not tired of it yet, because one more tour?

RUKEN: We had decided we would either spend four years in Kenya to get my older son through high school, or two years in Kenya and two somewhere else. Three years wouldn't work because of this timing of high school. And we—mainly I—didn't feel all that comfortable spending four years in Kenya because of the security issues. There were several terrorist attacks while we were there. They weren't targeted at Americans, but rather Kenyans, including a really horrible school massacre up in the north that killed about a hundred and fifty students. There was a PRM opening in Istanbul, Turkey, and they knew I was interested in it and offered it to me. Ironically, despite being worried

about security in Nairobi, a bunch of things happened in Istanbul during our first months there that led the U.S. Consulate to evacuate family members back to the U.S. There's the irony—we leave Kenya to feel more safe, and then my family gets evacuated.

Q: Then describe what the problems were in terms of security in Istanbul.

RUKEN: Right before we got there, there was a coup attempt against Erdogan that killed about two hundred people, with a lot of fighting in Istanbul. That was well known, this was in the summer of 2016 just before our arrival. What might have been lesser known, at least worldwide, was that Erdogan had been allowing ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] to establish a presence in the country, mainly as a transit point or an R and R [rest and recuperation] point in between the Middle East and elsewhere. At least this was my understanding of the situation. There were multiple attacks — suicide bombings and shootings — aimed at places where westerners visited: the main airport, a nightclub, a soccer stadium, the main pedestrian shopping street in town, and some other places, but those are the ones that I remember most vividly. And there was concern that ISIS was going to target westerners, possibly even Americans. And that's when Diplomatic Security decided to evacuate our families from Istanbul. This was only a few months into our tour. I stayed because I was one of the employees they viewed as necessary to stay. I personally didn't feel unsafe, because I kind of viewed things a little bit differently myself, but I didn't want to be separated from my family, and I didn't want them to go through the chaos and uncertainty of getting evacuated and having to wait it out in the United States. This was during the school year.

Unfortunately the evacuation dragged out almost six months, and by that time my kids wouldn't have been able to finish the grade they started in Istanbul. They would have had to have either skipped a year, or repeated a year in school. My older son was a junior in high school, so this was his crucial year to get good grades and start thinking about college choices. You don't want that year screwed up. One day my younger son, who was ten at the time, got on the phone from the U.S. to speak to me and began crying. He said "I don't want to go back to Istanbul. They have car bombs there." He had loved it there before the evacuation, but now he was saying he didn't want to go back to a place with car bombs. And frankly, there were car bombs, so how am I supposed to dispute that? I couldn't deny there were car bombs, and it was entirely possible that there would be car bombs targeting us. So he was right. And of course, I missed all three of them terribly, and I didn't want to be separated for what, at that point, would have been an extra two and a half years until I finished my tour. So, I made arrangements with PRM to curtail. We agreed that I would finish the first year up until the beginning of summer 2017, which I did. Afterward, I did a bridge assignment in Washington until I found a different assignment at the Main State building. Overall, I was in Istanbul for about nine months of what should have been a three year tour.

Q: During that time, just briefly, who are your principal clients? In other words, refugees, from which country?

RUKEN: At that time, it was mostly Iraqis, with some Syrians as well. There were lots of Syrians in Turkey, millions, but we weren't resettling them in large numbers at that time. We were resettling them in small numbers and trying to ramp up our program there. As elsewhere, this was a really interesting job, and I really liked Istanbul. But working as a Refugee Coordinator for the third straight tour wasn't as interesting as the first or second tours. And I had the added stress of not having my family there, not knowing when exactly we could reunite again due to some lingering uncertainties over the curtailment process at Main State. There was also the stress of worrying about them trying to figure things out in Washington, such as where to live and attend school. To have to do that suddenly in the middle of the school year was really stressful for them.

And so the nine or ten months I spent in Istanbul weren't nearly as fulfilling from a work and personal perspective as the prior two tours in Jordan and Kenya. Istanbul is a great city. It's one of my favorite places in the world. A world class city with just as much to do as in London or Paris, but much larger and a little rougher in certain areas, in my opinion. I was very sad that this couldn't have worked out for all of us together. But these things happen to most people in the Foreign Service at one point or another, so we figured it was just our turn. If you're doing a twenty five to thirty year career, most of it overseas, you're usually going to have one thing that gets totally messed up. That realization didn't make the experience less stressful for us, but we knew it came with the territory. And up to that point, we had been on a long winning streak, with really positive tours one after the other.

Q: At that point, were you beginning to think of maybe going back for a tour in the U.S?

RUKEN: Once the Istanbul tour was clearly not going to work out, I definitely felt like we would go back to the States. Our original plan was not to do tours in the U.S. We liked being overseas, but when my kids went into an American school during the evacuation and did reasonably well, we kind of felt that we needed to decompress a bit. We had been through some challenging experiences and had just spent five years in posts that were danger pay due to terrorism and/or critical crime and/or both. So the thought of staying in the U.S. for a few years became more attractive.

While I was still in Istanbul, they looked for a place to rent. We knew there was one area of Arlington, Virginia that we really liked, because we had friends there and knew the schools a bit. So they looked around but could not find a place to rent. Everything was either taken or way too small for what we needed. Not that we needed something big, but we did want more than a cramped two bedroom for four of us, especially given my sons' ages..

So, we found a place that was for sale. We had no plans to buy a place, but we found a unit in South Arlington for sale. We liked it and bought it. It worked out fine. The kids liked their schools well enough and my wife got a job at the same middle school our younger son was now attending. It all worked out in the end, but there was this rough, bumpy period of several months where our lives had been upended. Many officers have

been through this before. I'm not saying what we went through was new or unique in any way, nor for many people reading this. But when you're going through it, it's still rough.

Q: Where did you work when you first arrived?

RUKEN: When I first arrived, PRM offered me a bridge assignment of three months. I had to read and assess evaluation reports for how NGOs were performing. I did that for a few months. It was nice of them to give me the work, and it was good to learn about how we evaluate our partners' performances. Maybe not something I'd want to do in the long term, but fine for the short term. And then I got a job in the State Department's Intelligence Bureau (INR) which is a member of the broader U.S. intelligence community that includes the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, and others.. The initials INR stand for the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. My first portfolio there was as an Iraq analyst. I joined up with another veteran Iraq analyst who was a civil servant there—a brilliant, thoughtful and kind person. It was a pretty soft landing for me, and a good landing because it provided the opportunity to learn a whole bunch of new things. I didn't really want to work as a desk officer in an in-the-box job. And this was a mildly out of the box job, I would say.

Q: Was it a desk job, or were you in the 24-hour watch group in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research?

RUKEN: It was not a watch job. It was a desk job, in that I would do intelligence analysis for policymakers and for people higher up in the intel world. This would be about issues ongoing in Iraq, which was still a top foreign policy priority back then. We would work with the policy (non-intel) Iraq desk in the Near East Bureau and give briefings to them, and attend their meetings. We had a really nice, close relationship with them. And so for me personally, this was a very good job because I really got to learn how parts of the intel community worked. I liked working with the intel community and going over to the CIA and DIA [Defense Intelligence Agency] and NSA [National Security Administration] and all these places to learn about the work they do, and to interact with them on their assessments and exercises. It was really interesting. And the people were super nice, very thoughtful and very analytical. Those parts of it were great.

The office culture in INR was a bit different. I was the only FSO in that office, along with the office director. But the other men and women were all civil servants, super smart people, most of them with PhDs, and extremely knowledgeable about their subject matters. The atmosphere was much quieter. At the embassies, I was used to barging into people's offices, asking how it was going, and having a chat. The open door policy was everywhere overseas. Whereas at INR, it was very quiet, you could hear a pin drop, and everyone closed their doors to read, think and write. And my office didn't have a window or any natural light. At first I was a little sad and lonely because it wasn't as jocular or outgoing as I was expecting. And so that took a little bit of an adjustment. But just about everyone was nice, and they made me feel welcome.

Q: I guess I can't ask you any questions, because it's all highly classified.

RUKEN: Well, most of the reporting we did was classified. We were looking at the things you would expect us to look at, in terms of the political stability of Iraq, the different groups operating, how anti-American sentiment in Iraq, threats to state stability, issues like that. I don't think I'm giving away the farm because anybody with an ounce of common sense would realize that those are the kinds of topics we and all intel agencies around the world look at.

I thought the office was well run. There was a good exchange of ideas. I was there during the first Trump administration. Some of the ideas that would percolate down to us from the policymakers were not ideas that I thought necessarily were wise ideas in terms of things we ought to be doing. And so in communicating with them, we needed to come up with the evidence and arguments as to why those ideas might not be good ones to actually implement. But to their credit, the people who came to us with those ideas came to listen —at least that's the impression they gave. I can't speak for the current Trump administration, because I'm not in it. It does seem a lot different now but I'm not on the ground. But back then they listened to us, and so at least we had the discussion. Now, all that said, sometimes you get tired of being in a position to have to explain why someone else's ideas won't work. Maybe it's better to have some good ideas, and we can tell you why they're good. That got a little frustrating and tiring.

And here's another challenge the analysts had to face. If you have reports from the field to read through, sometimes those reports contradict each other. One set of reports might be based on interviews with people out in the field that event A is likely to happen, and then a second stack of reports might suggest that event A is not going to happen. Sources from both sides would be credible. And under limited time, it would be hard to figure out which outcome was more likely. Furthermore the event in question may be a life or death matter—for example, the likelihood of an attack against our overseas interests. So this type of task can be very challenging, very difficult, and it comes with a high degree of uncertainty.

One thing I really liked was that we were able to couch our language by stating our degree of confidence in our own assessments. meaning, we could write that we had high, medium or low confidence in our assessment. I never felt any pressure to go out and make a bold statement just in order to attract attention. The caveats seemed useful to me because they indicated how much weight you as a policymaker should put into the assessment. So, I liked the products INR put out, even though I found the process challenging and sometimes frustrating.

Q: Did it come with any travel or attendance at conferences?

RUKEN: Conferences, yes. Travel to the region, no, I didn't get out to Iraq. I wanted to go, but I volunteered to switch my portfolio about halfway into my tour, and it didn't make sense to go to Iraq knowing I'd be focusing on a different country soon. Aside from several dozen conferences at various think tanks and research institutes in Washington, my only trips outside the capital were two annual conferences at the University of

Mississippi. These were part recruiting fairs for USG agencies and part workshops held for the students who were majoring in intelligence analysis. A good friend of mine was the director of the intel program at the university and asked if I could attend representing the State Department, and INR was happy to send me. I should note that attending the various round tables and talks at the Washington think tanks was very helpful because it provided the opportunity to hear what journalists, analysts and researchers were saying about whatever subject on hand. I made some friendships with some people at some different places, which proved to be valuable both professionally and personally. I appreciated the opportunities to get out of the office to hear others' thoughts.

Q: How did your portfolio change?

RUKEN: About midway through, I realized that there was a better way I could contribute to the office. At the time there were two Iraq analysts, me and the civil service colleague I mentioned before. He was a spectacular analyst and a brilliant guy. He'd been doing this a long time though was still young. Had his PhD in Iraqi studies, spoke a good deal of Arabic. He was a great teammate—inclusive, helpful and kind. I felt that I, as the newcomer, was not contributing at a level that I felt comfortable with. He was contributing the bulk, and I was contributing just around the edges. The analogy I told myself was, what good am I doing playing right field when Babe Ruth is already there? I could assist the Babe every now and then, but I would help the team more if I moved over to center to contribute more, and let the Babe do his thing as always.

Center field happened to be open, because the person who was covering part of North Africa was leaving her position. This was at a time when the Algerians were trying to oust their dictator, and they were out in the streets. Meanwhile the Tunisians were up in arms about their economy having tanked, with rumors that the most successful Arab state emerging from the Arab revolutions in 2011 was about to collapse. Nearby, Morocco was a little more stable, but it still had an Islamist insurgency and a King clearly with less gravitas than his father. So these three countries, which comprise the region we call the Maghreb, were in need of an analyst at INR, so I thought it made more sense for me to volunteer to fill that gap than to be the other Iraq analyst.

I was confident that my colleague and friend who worked on Iraq would understand my request to move, and not be offended. I think he understood. As it turned out, I was totally happy with the switch. It gave me a chance to do more things, and because there was less intel-related reporting coming out of those countries, I didn't have the conundrum of information overload like I described before. So I could add much more value by using whatever intel was available, then going out to research open sources to add to my knowledge. By that I mean reading the local media, talking to experts in Washington about these countries to hear what they thought, and to reach out to other experts around the country as well. This played to my own research strengths better, based on my experience as a Ph.D. Student and my own preference to go broad - three countries — rather than deep on just one. That's just me. Everybody had their own preferences, and I’m grateful that INR had the flexibility and willingness to allow this to happen.

Q: Once again, without straying into confidential materials, was there anything else unique about taking the second portfolio?

RUKEN: Well, I think that the second portfolio forced me to get outside the building more. If you have a lot of resources and assets in the field, you're going to get a mountain of reporting coming in. If you have less in the field, you'll get less reporting. So in the second case you've got to go supplement that somehow, right? I still had to do my analysis and make assessments that would be of some use to decisionmakers. I felt confident I could fill in those missing gaps by reading media reports, meeting with academics, think tank analysts, activists, historians, businesspeople, whomever. I reached out to some of the best academics in the country, who wrote on Algeria and Tunisia and Morocco. I'd go to the different think tanks in Washington and attend talks from their experts. None of this was undercover—the existence of my job wasn't classified or anything. I just couldn't share the material from the reports I wrote with them.

We also hosted some conferences at State where we'd host a round table inside the State Department with assorted experts on the country in question. This provided a more well rounded sort of view about what might be happening. Now, would I assess the likelihood of something happening with the same confidence level as somebody with stacks of intel reports directly from the field? Probably not. So it remained a challenging job, but really interesting, and it allowed me to study these three countries and try and figure things out. To me it was an exciting proposition.

Q: Ok, you've had these two years, you've made a fair amount of friends or colleagues in INR, were any of those useful for planning or getting your next tour?

RUKEN: Well, my supervisors recommended me for the positions I was bidding, and I think I had good relations with everybody in that office. I had two very different supervisors, but they were both very kind people to me and both very supportive. In terms of bidding my final posting the PRM recommendations might have carried more weight because I was pursuing a job in Africa and a lot of my refugee-related work was in Africa. I think as I applied for higher level jobs, the people doing the hiring were looking not just at recommendations but also at career trajectory, to determine if I had a proven track record at accomplishing what I had set out to do. At least that's what I hope they were looking at.

After being in Washington for slightly over two years, I yearned to get out to the field. I know two years sounds like a short time period for most people, but I joined the Foreign Service more for the overseas work than for the domestic postings. And the position I got after finishing at INR seemed like a good match.

Q: Okay, the handshake ends up being, I'm sorry, to where?

RUKEN: The handshake was to Dakar Senegal, but here's the rub. The job 100 percent focused on Guinea-Bissau, which is the small former Portuguese colony just to the south

of Senegal. It is one of the five poorest countries in the world, and riven by problems. If you could think of a problem, then Guinea Bissau probably had it: drug trafficking, political instability, military coups, lack of economic development, corruption, widespread poverty, low nutrition, climate change problems, and a low life expectancy. However it wasn't all bad. The different ethnic groups and religions tended to get along pretty well there, and people were friendly toward each other and toward outsiders. Unlike so many parts of Africa, there was no threat of ethnic bloodshed. It was a fascinating tour and an interesting end to my career and to my family's time in the Foreign Service. By the end of the tour, we were ready to return to the United States, start something different, and relax for a while!

Q: Good. Can you explain how or why the position had this unique arrangement where you are living in Senegal but being physically present in Guinea Bissau?

RUKEN: Yes. Our embassy to Senegal is also our embassy to Guinea Bissau. The ambassador is separately accredited to both countries. We didn't have an embassy building that we could use in Guinea Bissau. It was badly damaged in the civil war in Guinea Bissau in 1998 to 1999 and eventually razed. We still owned the property, but over the years, the security situation in the country and the high cost of building a new facility precluded us from constructing a new embassy. I thought we could have built an embassy on the ground there, with Americans there full time, but there would have been a lot of understandable constraints and in the end there was not much support in Washington for such an undertaking, even though our Front Office was pressing for it.

So, while based in Dakar, I headed a team of three Americans based in Dakar and approximately twelve or thirteen locally engaged staff in Guinea-Bissau. We had an unusual situation which didn't exist in many other places: no resident American officials in the country, but LES [locally engaged staff] still going to work in a building every day. And they would do the same things that LES do worldwide. I would commute down there about one week every month or two, depending on a number of different factors. While there I would supervise them, conduct meetings with the host government, do political reporting, public diplomacy, and a smattering of Consular and Management-related tasks every now and then as well. But most of the work I did there fell into political and economic reporting, with a healthy dose of public diplomacy.

Q: Where did the LES work if we didn't have an embassy?

RUKEN: There was an office building where we rented a suite. We shared the building with other entities. There was an NGO in the building and another Western European consul. To get down there I would fly—the flight was about 45 minutes, plus the usual travel time to and from airports on both sides.

In many ways this was the capstone of my career. There were so many different things that I was able to do during this tour. To be the only American doing it at the time was very cool, and Guinea-Bissau was an exotic, fascinating place. Because there was no American community there, and hardly any American-owned businesses, I was probably

the primary expert on Guinea-Bissau in the entire U.S government. Our Defense Attache, DEA [Drug Enforcement Administration], FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation], and USAID all had interests in that country, and some had programs there. The Ambassador had a very broad overview because he would travel down whenever possible and he was interested in what was going on. So I felt valued in that regard, that I was able to bring expertise to the table that other Americans could use. In that sense, it was a very fulfilling job.

Q: Now, in Guinea Bissau, is Portuguese still the lingua franca or what language do you use there?

RUKEN: You use Portuguese. It's spoken by the elite. It's not necessarily spoken very much by the common person there, though they might speak some. There are a number of different tribal languages spoken, but *kriol* is the most common language. It's a mix of tribal languages and Portuguese. When necessary, I would have a translator with me if the person I was meeting with didn't speak much Portuguese and only spoke *Kriol*. I could understand it a little bit, but I couldn't speak it.

Q: And then, what were the principal concerns that you and the other agencies were following?

RUKEN: Well, first I should note that other agencies would go with me from time to time, so sometimes I simply focused on their particular issues as pertaining to their programming or objectives. There were many concerns: political instability, narco trafficking, weak borders, professionalization of the armed forces, corruption, democratization, elections, democratic backsliding, food security, public health, and economic development. As I used to joke with my colleagues, that was just Monday morning!

A valid question anyone might ask might be, so what? Who cares about a tiny and remote country like Guinea Bissau? Well, the country is in a very interesting geostrategic place on the map. Unlike Senegal, its terrain is jungle. Because they don't have a lot of money, and because the Portuguese did not invest in infrastructure as colonial masters, the state patchwork is weak, and their borders are highly porous. The neighboring Sahel region has a lot of insurgent groups, political instability and security issues. So our concern was that bad actors could take advantage of Guinea Bissau's weak borders and move people, weapons or drugs up into the Sahelian countries. International criminal organizations certainly are known to move drugs from Guinea Bissau up toward Europe, especially cocaine. We know that South American drug groups have established beachheads in Guinea Bissau and sometimes use this archipelago of islands in Guinea Bissau, called the *Bijagós* islands, to transport drugs from South America up to Europe. Drug trafficking interests can distort the functioning of the government, because people are bought off. So there is a weakening of government institutions due to corruption and payoffs. This makes it more susceptible to other problems, including the possible transport of weapons and bad actors to the countries of the Sahel.

This is the strategic argument, anyway. It is worth noting that Guinea Bissau is not a particularly violent country. It does not have shootouts or narco terror. You can walk around and it feels fairly safe, but underneath there is tension and uncertainty. And also political instability and the threat of coups, which remained an underlying concern throughout my tour, even though some American officials played it down.

Guinea Bissau is also part of the global and Africa-wide strategic competition taking place between the U.S and China, and to a lesser extent Russia. Each was trying to increase its influence across Africa. China was and still is interested in building a large port just south of the capital as part of their Belt and Road Initiative. China had also built government buildings, the main stadium in the country, hospitals, and other structures. And so as far as influence in international arenas like the United Nations, China was thought to carry a lot of weight. So we thought it important to maintain our influence in Guinea Bissau—in a positive manner—so they would support us on measures at the UN or other international arenas. Of course the Bissau Guinean leadership did not want to think of their country as an arena for competition between larger powers. No country wants to think of itself that way. But that doesn't mean they weren't willing to play the cards they had been dealt, so to speak.

Q: Interesting. Is it principally – now you, you mentioned China wants a port. If I remember right, there's some oil off of Bissau but is that still of interest to people? Is there enough oil out there to make it interesting?

RUKEN: The Bissau Guineans thought there was oil out there, but while I was there, they weren't sure of its location and hadn't tapped into it. There were other natural resource issues they had to deal with. For example, as you go deeper into the interior, the infrastructure is more dilapidated and the land harder to patrol. And so the illegal cutting and export of timber was also of concern—and perhaps of greater interest than the exploration of oil.

More than anything, it's an agricultural economy. Breaking down the agricultural sector, at least four-fifths is dedicated to cashew growing and export. The country also has tourist potential but it remains underdeveloped. But its offshore islands are beautiful, the water warm, and the pace of life relaxing. The capital, which is simply called Bissau, only has about 400,000 to 500,000 people. It actually feels a lot smaller. For people who like to go off the beaten track, it's a cool place to visit. It could have a lot more in terms of eco-resorts or an infrastructure that could better cater to tourists, but the leadership has to stabilize the country politically and combat the reputation as being a drug trafficking haven in order to attract more tourists.

Q: Has anyone tried to develop agriculture any further beyond cashews?

RUKEN: They used to have a peanut industry, and also some rice growing. USAID [Agency for International Development] had previously—unfortunately, I have to use the past tense—had begun a project in Guinean Bissau to help farmers introduce different seedlings into the soil. That project was underway when the Trump administration

decimated USAID. I don't know specifically if the projects in Guinea Bissau dried up, but I suspect they did.

Q: Then in Dakar, did you also have responsibilities there?

RUKEN: My responsibilities in Dakar were mainly to keep people properly briefed on what was going on in Guinea Bissau. That would include the Ambassador and the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission], and various section and agency heads, and of course Washington, through phone calls, emails and cables. I also coordinated with public diplomacy on identifying and helping them execute programming in Guinea Bissau.

Another major responsibility was to coordinate with the various section and agency heads to facilitate their projects in Guinea-Bissau. We had a separate country team for Guinea Bissau, so I would lead off those meetings by briefing everybody on events and developments down there. And then, as any country team would do, we'd go around the table and the different agencies would talk about their interests and projects in Guinea Bissau. So broadly speaking, all of my work in Dakar was based on these activities and objectives.

Q: Yeah. Then the other thing that you had mentioned in your notes was the need to move our locally employed staff to a new location?

RUKEN: When our Ambassador arrived at the post—which was not too long after my arrival—he determined, and I agreed, that the office hosting our staff in Guinea Bissau was very inadequate to their needs. It was too small, moldy, and not the quality of facilities we should have.

The prior front office apparently hadn't been all that supportive of looking for a new space, but this ambassador was supportive of it. So we embarked on a search for just a new office to move them. That was an interesting process to learn about and engage with, as I hadn't done anything like that in my career. Very management and security-related. Working with the Management Office and the RSO, we had to figure out what type of office setup would work, how much it would cost, and how we could negotiate a lease. Spatial considerations, travel, transportation, security, all of it. Many sections and departments in the bureaucracy needed to participate in order to identify and approve of an available space, which is a long, difficult process. For me there was a steep learning curve involved. By the time my tour was complete, we had identified a new space, but we were a long way from moving in to it. We were able to negotiate a short term lease that would buy us time to find the funding for a longer term lease and for renovation of the new space. It was a standalone building in need of renovation to bring it up to our standards.

Q: Then, from what you mentioned—just getting the funds and the resources for the new office—was backstopping in Washington helpful for you? Was anybody reading your cables or consulting with you about what was going on in Guinea-Bissau?

RUKEN: The Bureau was helpful, and our Ambassador was especially helpful. He really pushed hard, and he made a very strong case for the need for this office. He would travel to Washington from time to time too, whereas I wasn't going to Washington at all. And he and the management folks at the embassy knew—much more than I ever did—how the bureaucracy works and where to push. Whereas I was better positioned to make the case of how it affected the morale in the field, because I could see how people were impacted by having to share a very cramped space.

Having a bigger space would also send a positive message to the host government. The Bissau Guineans were pushing us hard to open up a new embassy in Bissau itself, rather than continue to use the one in Dakar. While opening a separate embassy in Bissau wasn't possible, for the reasons I have already mentioned, at least getting a new, bigger space would be perceived by the host government as a step in the right direction.

Q: In Dakar. What was the security situation? Did you feel relatively safe? How did the regional security officer brief you?

RUKEN: I'd say in Dakar I felt relatively safe, but not entirely so. I think Dakar is either high or critical for crime on that RSO ranking list. Most of the crime is petty in nature. But it's not petty when it's happening to you. There were muggings. Once my family and I were robbed while walking on a beach. This was, believe it or not, on a Sunday morning at about eleven AM, so not a time you would be worried. A guy with a machete came up to us in a threatening manner and made us give him our phones and cash. He was not violent but certainly the threat of violence was there. Stupidly, we were on a relatively isolated beach we thought was safe, so there was nobody around at the time.

That was early in our tour. A couple of years later, two guys on a motorbike grabbed at my wife's money belt and dragged her down as she was walking a few blocks from our home. She was scuffed up, nothing major, thank goodness. But this kind of stuff happened a lot, and you as an American stand out. Regardless of your physical appearance, they know you are not a local. Most of the population is struggling to get by, and most are honest people, but there is definitely a criminal element that operates in Dakar.

That said, we never walked out of our house fearing that we were going to get shot or killed, which could happen in a place like Rio, but we did walk out of our house knowing that we could possibly have a problem. We could mitigate it by going out in groups or, better still, not carrying anything of high value. I gave up carrying my wallet. I would just carry my driver's license and maybe some cash in my pocket. It wasn't a good idea to carry a camera, which was too bad because I love photography. If you carried a smartphone, it was better to keep it hidden in your pocket.phone, just keep it in your pocket.

Q: Did you have children there? I've lost track.

RUKEN: By that time, my eldest son was in college in the Washington, DC area, and my youngest son was in high school at the International School of Dakar (ISD). We lived walking distance from there. Very nice school, in a pleasant and welcoming environment. My wife worked there and liked it a lot. In addition to our school, there is also an International French school in town, but I had heard the standards weren't as high, and there were far fewer classes in English.

Q: And your son was okay with it?

RUKEN: He went to ISD and liked it overall. His cohort was only about sixty students in the graduating class. So he went through his entire four years of high school with only sixty people in his grade at any given time. So he got to know a lot of people, everybody really, so that part of it was pretty nice. He could walk to school from where we lived, and that was a bonus too. He sometimes would take the school bus if it was really hot—which was much of the year. But there's not a ton to do in Dakar if you're a high school age kid, as you're limited to going to cafes or to friends' houses. Toward the end of our tour, they opened up a movie theater which was walking distance from our home. But all that said, he was living in a major West African city, so that alone was an eye opening experience, at least to some extent.

Q: Now, you were there for four years, are there other things about the tour that I haven't asked you that are salient for you?

I think a couple things, yes. There were very few Americans in Guinea-Bissau, so the level of access that this position had was amazing in terms of meeting high level officials—similar to what I described in the Philippines. I met the President, Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and many other cabinet officials multiple times. And traveling around Guinea-Bissau was a bit like time travel. There was a 1950's or early '60s vibe to the place, at least that's my perception of it. And this felt like genuine Africa, not some international city with a bunch of expats. And despite all of Guinea Bissau's problems, it was still fairly safe. Crime was low and people were nice, and you just felt like you were harkening back to a different era.

As a result of all of this, I really looked forward to going there. It was a way to have a unique experience that exists less and less these days. I love to travel, and travel is one of the main reasons I joined the Foreign Service.

I'd like to emphasize that the people in country were super nice. The LES staff were among the nicest staff I've ever worked with, so that was a pleasure. The issues we dealt with were critical issues to the country, so there was no fluff. I felt more connected to this country than I would in larger places.

Another interesting aspect was having to work with two different ambassadors really closely. They had radically different styles. I had very different relationships with each one. Each relationship had its positives and its negatives. And it was interesting to see how they internalized the information that I was trying to give them. This made me

appreciate both strengths and weaknesses of leadership, and how much those strengths and weaknesses can influence the messaging that Washington gets, and then how our policy might result from that.

Q: Did we have anything like an American corner or any kind of public diplomacy presence beyond the locally employed staff?

RUKEN: We did have an American corner. It was a classroom in a teacher's college. We went there often for programming, to meet people, to give speeches, participate in round tables, training sessions, and have other outside speakers come in. The Public Diplomacy section in Dakar was very active in brainstorming, scheduling and conducting programming. We had some great Public Diplomacy officers during my tour who had intense interest in Guinea-Bissau. I really appreciated that. Their programming was mainly focused on the hearts and minds approach, to show the local population that we were committed to assisting the country, and to try and instill some of our values to some extent there. We also had a lot of programming focusing on capacity building, to strengthen civil society in Guinea Bissau.

We had, for example, a very popular girls basketball program there in which we had one of the WNBA [Women's National Basketball Association] stars—or a former WNBA star—go down and lead seminars and training programs with young girls who wanted to play basketball. This was great for health and well being, and also to instill the value of women and playing sports and teamwork and striving for something that you might not easily be able to reach.

Another interesting program sought to encourage people to start small businesses and to become more entrepreneurial. We would listen to them describe their own challenges in trying to run a business in a place where the rule of law is weak. These were enlightening conversations. We had a professor from the University of California run this program.

Q: Now you mentioned, while you were there, USAID had some activity. Sometimes, just going out with them can be a really valuable experience. Did any of your people, did you or your eligible family members go out with them?

RUKEN: USAID, with the ambassador's encouragement, became more involved in programming during my tour. As I mentioned earlier, they eventually started a program aimed at helping Bissau Guineans diversify agriculturally. I went out with them on some of the scouting runs before the program started, and it was immensely interesting and helpful to see the conditions in the countryside and learn how USAID could help. The two other American eligible family member staff who worked with me also went down to Bissau frequently and did their own reporting trips. They were so important to our success. I should elaborate on this, because it was perhaps the key aspect to how we functioned as a team.

Our post had an employee professional associate program, known by the acronym EPAP. We were able to hire two full time professional employees who were spouses of other

people in the embassy. These were meaty, full time positions. I was really fortunate. I had an amazing string of people who worked with me. When I first came there, there were two women working in EPAP positions who were both very good. They each brought different strengths to the table. They both left after one year because the tours of their spouses ended. So then I hired two other people to come in and succeed them. Two women replaced by two guys—it just worked out that way. These guys were both amazing, again with different strengths that were complementary. And then one of them left because his wife's tour in a different section ended. So I hired a new arrival to bring us back up to full strength. He, too, was highly talented. So I had the good fortune to work with five very talented people.

There were many times I felt as if our team was simply three FSOs working together. Most of the five I mentioned were extremely adventurous in terms of their willingness to go out into the far flung corners of Guinea-Bissau to do reporting and contact work, and the one who wasn't able to travel as much still contributed in many significant ways. It wasn't a situation where I had to push anyone to do anything. If anything, it was almost the opposite—sometimes I had to hold them back occasionally—I didn't want anyone lost in the jungle or eaten by bugs. I'd much rather have the problem of constraining somebody than having to push them to do something.

What made it such a fun tour is that we just went out and did it. Contact work, meetings in the boondocks, village and farm visits, speeches, road trips, island visits, the works. It was at once ambitious and exhausting, and we didn’t just sit around the hotel or the air conditioned office. I loved this part of the job, and the fact that the EPAP’s were as enthusiastic as I was—or more so. They deserve tons of credit. I also should give myself a little credit, at least in that I worked hard to recruit good people and build a section with high morale and motivated employees. I was really pleased with how it turned out. It was a good atmosphere working with all of them, including the two women who were already in the positions when I arrived.

I also instituted a practice where I insisted any serious job applicant contact the person they'd be replacing independent of me, so that the two could talk together. I was confident that the outgoing employee would recommend the position and speak highly of our chemistry, and I felt such a conversation had way more credibility to the potential newcomer than if I were on the telephone line. And if that outgoing employee had any qualms about our section, I was fine with them expressing it because at least the incoming employee would know and there'd be no surprises. I think this approach worked, because every employee who came in got off to a reasonably fast start and was well motivated to contribute. They weren't spouses just looking for work at the embassy so they could avoid boredom or collect a paycheck. These were people who really wanted to do the work we were doing.

I also appreciated that the EPAP employees were able to bring strengths to the table that I didn't have. One guy had a lot of prior professional experience in Human Resources. He would visit Bissau and observe that an employee was struggling, counsel them on it, train them, report back to me, and contribute to the evaluation process. I didn't have time for a

lot of that myself, and this guy was really very empathetic. Another employee was really good at organizing and hosting events down there, and bringing people together. He would host parties with the LES and other outsiders coming in. He was exceedingly well organized. I had no desire to do that myself, and he undertook many initiatives to expand our contact base. Another person was good at matters pertaining to agriculture. She would visit rural areas and do reporting on agricultural issues. I didn't have that background. Another EPAP was an excellent briefer with a lot of prior experience, so he took over some of the briefing duties from me, which allowed me to focus on other things. Another woman was an excellent writer and could write the congressionally mandated reports like the Human Rights report far more efficiently than I could. I could go on and on, but the point is clear—these people were terrific.

And there were no turf wars between any of them, because I ensured that there were enough responsibilities to go around. If two people wanted to focus on the same topic, I'd either have them both work together or simply expand the topic so that each had a big task in front of them. The pie is not limited in size, I would say, and everyone could have as many slices as they want. To the Front Office, sometimes it seemed a little bit chaotic because there were no hard boundaries, but I think they appreciated that if one person wasn't there, someone else could back that person up just as effectively. This was a lesson I took from the ball hog situation in Romania, which we talked about earlier.

I wanted to keep the office a bit informal too—mildly chaotic and humorous, just to keep things loose and fun. I didn't want a regimented office structure or rigidly defined portfolios, although there were portfolios. There were a couple of times where the Front Office would ask, who is working on this, and the answer would be all of us. I wanted it this way because the work could be stressful, the front office could be difficult, and Guinea-Bissau was a very challenging place at times. We were a small unit, so good camaraderie and fun were essential. It worked out well in that people spoke highly of the section and there was no drama.

Returning to your question about USAID, one of the Front Office's initiatives was to expand USAID's presence in Guinea Bissau. USAID had programming there twenty years ago, and we wanted them to return. A little effort in that country could have a real impact. It could show the Bissau-Guinean people and government that while the Chinese were building stadiums and government offices, we were there investing in people and their futures.

The program USAID ultimately designed focused on agricultural diversification. Our team linked USAID with some NGOs [non-governmental organizations] already on the ground. They would go out together to visit these villages to see what crops people were growing, what they were eating, and how they were sourcing their water. These villages were very isolated. To get there, you would be on bumpy dirt roads that would flood in the rainy season. Some of them had no electricity or running water.

By the time my tour was winding down, USAID had started a project valued at about a million dollars. It involved starting a seed lab to teach farmers how to grow different

things other than just cashews. Like I said, I don't know the current status of this program after USAID was dismantled. The program would have made a difference, and the government seemed to value it a lot. Let's remember too that at the same time we were trying to increase our involvement and influence in the country, the Chinese and the Russians were doing the same thing. The argument about whether our foreign aid is wise or not, that can be a valid discussion. But I'm firmly in the camp of providing foreign assistance, as long as it's well thought out and not wasteful. It provides huge benefits to the local population and to our country as well.

Q: Did we also provide any exchange programs for the Guinea-Bissau population?

RUKEN: We had American academics coming over to Guinea Bissau doing all sorts of different things, lectures and programs in various fields of interest. The entrepreneurial program I mentioned earlier was led by a professor who would come out and teach Bissau-Guinean students about business practices. There were programs in which we sent Bissau Guinean professors and university administrators to the U.S. to meet their American counterparts and discuss best practices and opportunities for collaboration. We also sent members of civil society organizations and the local government to the U.S. for programs to combat trafficking in persons. I don't think we did any direct student exchange programs. Part of the problem was that a lot of Bissau students don't speak English, and they had to qualify for a visa and find a way to pay for a university in the U.S.—all hard to arrange. And I don't think any American universities had active programs in Bissau, due to concerns over political stability and security.

Q: Did you get the impression that the Guinea Bissau government was concerned about deforestation or other forms of ecological degradation since the Chinese are famous for wanting nothing other than to exploit minerals and leave nothing behind?

RUKEN: I did get the sense the government was concerned about environmental matters, especially about rising sea levels, which is a major threat because Guinea-Bissau is a low lying country. Rising sea levels destroy their crops. Guinea-Bissau used to have rice crops, and some have already been destroyed by the onslaught of salt water.

We would meet with government officials, and they would say the right things about the importance of combating climate change, but I didn't see a whole heck of a lot of coordination during my time there. It was hard to conclude that this was a lack of political will, however, because the country is so resource starved in terms of money. It may have been that they had the political will to act but lacked the resources to do much.

Q: Are there anecdotes from your tour there that illustrate some of the things you've been talking about?

RUKEN: Traveling around amply illustrated a lot of the infrastructural challenges and isolation of the country. We would take the usual Toyota SUVs out on their muddy roads. Suddenly the driver would take a sharp turn between two hedges of corn stalks and follow some dirt path. We would be wondering where we were and where were we

going? Forget Google Maps—you just had to know your way around or stop and ask random people walking on the road. We carried trackers that sent a signal to security officers in Washington, so that if we became stranded or simply disappeared, they would know something was wrong. Fortunately that never happened, but there were times we definitely felt as if we had dropped off the grid.

The same feeling of disorientation occurred on boats, too. Once we rented some speedboats and went out to the Bijagos archipelago. Their most populated island has just a small hamlet on it, and it's very far from the mainland. Ninety minutes from the mainland on a very fast speedboat, with no natural landmarks around. One time, in the middle of the sea, the engine suddenly conked out. The waves weren't huge but it was still wavy. The captain got it going again. But there was no land in sight at all, and I was happy we weren't out there bobbing up and down for very long. When I returned to Senegal, I asked the RSO [Regional Security Officer] what would have happened if they couldn't get the engine started? He said eventually they would have found a helicopter, but I'm glad it didn't come to that.

Because Bissau, the capital, is a relatively small and isolated place, the international community there is tight. You could go out to lunch with most of the other ambassadors on the ground, and you would often see people you knew just while you were out for a walk. I had a very good friend in the Portuguese embassy, and we went out for meals all the time. I really appreciated his friendship. I knew if there was ever a problem, I could just walk over to his house and get help. The Brazilians also told me just to drop by any time I needed anything. The German Officer who maintained an office in Bissau was also a close friend, a very thoughtful person, and I always enjoyed listening to his views about what was going on. It's a much more old school, throwback kind of a place.

Sometimes during my Foreign Service career I lamented the modern high tech era we were in, the abundance of emails and texting, for example. Well Guinea Bissau was the closest thing to time travel that I have ever experienced, and I felt richer as a result. Of course that's easy for me to say—I still got to sleep in air conditioning and could text or call my wife most every night.

Let me quickly paint a scene. Bissau had this great, grand Art Deco movie theater right on the main street downtown. Unfortunately, the roof collapsed during the civil war and now it's just a ruin. But you can see where the marquee was, and you see the script writing on the side. A couple of blocks down the street, they've got this old, beautiful Catholic Church on the main drag. And a row of buildings with grand, colonial style facades facing the choppy grey-green sea. Many buildings are decrepit and a mix of peeling paint and mold. They'll eventually get fixed, because there is a program to renovate the town center. Walking around felt a lot like time travel, and the opportunity to do this on a sleepy Sunday before the work week started was something I'll always cherish. I took plenty of walks in 95 degree heat and humidity, but it was still a special feeling to be able to walk in places like Bissau town and just watch people.

Q: Then, okay, that sort of describes what the feeling was like when you went there. Were there any consular issues that cropped up because you were also officially the consular rep?

RUKEN: I wasn't the consular officer in any official sense, but I would assist our consular section with any American citizens services work that came up in Bissau. For example, if there were an American in need of help, I'd ask some of our local contacts to assist, if I couldn't meet the person myself. There was an American priest from the U.S. east coast who founded a Catholic Church in a rural area near Bissau, and he sometimes was in contact with American travelers in the country. He was good at helping people out and sometimes could track them down if necessary. One time, at our behest, he offered to meet with a young wayward American who needed some assistance and he convinced the guy to travel back to the U.S. to get further help there. The Father was a very helpful and kind person. As for visas for travel to the U.S., we didn't issue visas in Guinea-Bissau. A Bissau Guinean would have to travel to Dakar to apply for visas at our Embassy in Senegal.

Q: Did you also engage with your regional counterparts? In other words, were there regional concerns that periodically you'd meet with other West African Foreign Service officers or DCMs and so on?

RUKEN: There were other countries who would assign diplomats to Dakar but have them cover Guinea Bissau, just like me. The difference being, I was covering Guinea Bissau full time, 100 percent, whereas a lot of these other diplomats would only cover Guinea Bissau as part of their regional duties. And so we would participate in and sometimes host what we called the friends of Guinea Bissau group, which usually took the form of a quarterly lunch and discussion. The UK probably hosted more than anyone else during my time there. We and the Brits were probably more involved in the country than the other diplomats, so would brief each other on what was going on in Guinea Bissau and analyze events. Sometimes those discussions would expand into West Africa as a whole. I should note that these other third country diplomats tended to be from European and Asian countries that were interested in Guinea-Bissau. We did not reach out that much to other African countries to discuss Guinea-Bissau, for several different reasons.

Q: Interesting. Okay, health?

RUKEN: Well, in terms of health programs, CDC [Center for Disease Control] would go down to Guinea Bissau frequently. They would offer training for disease prevention, administer vaccinations, and establish closer relationships with health care professionals in country. Guinea Bissau did not get hit by the ebola breakout several years ago, but the neighboring countries did. And of course everyone had to deal with Covid. There was a concern that, because the borders were porous, if there were to be an Ebola outbreak, or a different type of viral outbreak, the diseases would cross the border and spread into Guinea-Bissau. CDC went down there frequently. They did their own activities and just

would brief our office on their programs. That was all well and good, as it allowed us to turn our attention to helping other agencies who weren't as self sufficient down there.

Q: Working with the population on prevention and knowledge about disease transmission.

RUKEN: Yes. In addition to CDC, The Office of Overseas Security Cooperation, nominally under the Defense Attaché, would send officers down there also to offer education on HIV prevention to members of the Bissau-Guinean military. The Bissau-Guinean military is disproportionately large for the size of the country, and the number of upper level officers is also quite large. There were as many generals than there were privates. Following their Revolutionary War against Portugal in the 1970s and the Civil War of 1998-99, a lot of their fighters stayed in the military and never retired. The military was a way to eat and have a job. And there also was prestige that goes with it as well - after all, these were the people who fought to create the country. I'm not sure the HIV education was really targeted at them, but I think it was especially for the younger soldiers.

Q: Interesting. It sounds like this is the extent that we became involved in human rights.

RUKEN: Human Rights in Guinea Bissau was a tricky issue, for sure. This is where sometimes I clashed with the front office, especially during the second half of my tour. The human rights situation was worsening, and there were big signs of democratic rollback and moves toward authoritarian government on the part of the then-President. On the other hand, that same President was pro-U.S., and he seemed committed to economic development, modernization, and better governance. I thought we still needed to emphasize human rights and democratization more than we actually did, and there were policy disagreements between me and the front office at times over this set of issues. Neither Guinea-Bissau's sitting government nor the opposition sufficiently adhered to democratic values, in my opinion. I think we needed to pay more attention and call them on it.

Of course, the government was sensitive to such criticism and it would have been a point of friction. This is true for many African countries — they perceive us as lecturing them on human rights and trying to instill our own values on their societies. You've heard this story before, especially when it came to. LGBTI rights, as one example. They would simply say "our beliefs are different from yours, so don't lecture us." I get the point but I think that there were ways to agree to disagree on some issues, but still push them to some extent. But to do that, you need to be willing to use your carrots and sticks, or at least show them you have leverage. And before even getting to that point, you have to engage internally amongst yourselves—I'm talking about inside the Embassy and inside Washington—to decide on what approach works best. And I didn't always perceive there was that commitment on our side to have respectful, fully-fleshed out internal discussions. And to me, that was frustrating.

Q: Yeah, you did prepare Human Rights Reports. Were any of the other international human rights organizations talking to you?

RUKEN: A little bit, such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty. But frankly, in my view, this country wasn't on their radar enough. These organizations also had their own constraints, I think, in terms of how much attention they could pay to smaller countries. And of course, there's also the case of relativism in that a lot of the neighboring countries were far worse on human rights issues than Guinea Bissau. Coups, violent insurgencies, ethnic problems—these were more prevalent elsewhere in the region during my time covering Guinea Bissau. So we got most of our information from human rights activists operating internally, and rather quietly, in country.

Q: Was it a country of first asylum for any of the other West African country nationals?

RUKEN: Not really. It was more a country of first asylum if the government chose to take in some discredited dictator or other foreign politician who wanted to hide out or cool off in safety. It's not really a country of first asylum, in my assessment. It is a rough place to restart your life. You're not going to get much help, and you're isolated. Imagine the lifestyle you would have if you are coming from a larger capital city. There's also not much to buy there. They opened the first genuine big box grocery store when I was there. Otherwise, there were just a few small grocery stores, more like corner markets or 7-eleven type stores. No place to buy new clothes or a car. You could buy some homemade furniture. There's no movie theatre. There are about five or six restaurants in the country that we would consider good enough quality for expats. All fairly straightforward but still really good food. So If you're somebody who needs to flee your home country and you don't have a lot of resources, it's going to be rough starting in Guinea Bissau. Even if you have money, then you're going to want to go to Senegal or somewhere else where you can probably connect a bit more to the outside world and enjoy more material comforts.

Q: Yeah, sure. Well, that takes me to the end of my formal questions, but you're also approaching the end of your career in the Foreign Service. But was that what you were thinking? Were you thinking about retiring, or were you thinking about looking for another post?

RUKEN: No, we knew almost from the start of arriving in Dakar that this was going to be our last post. We were tired of moving around and there were some developments in the Foreign Service that were making it worse for us. Dakar was a four year denouement —really long!

The Guinea-Bissau post was super interesting, though. I liked many aspects of it. The front office, at times, was challenging to deal with—more so the ambassador than the DCM [Deputy Chief of Mission], actually, as the latter was very kind. That put a bit of a damper on it toward the end, but it wasn't anything personal with me. I just didn't like the way I was seeing people get treated, including myself. That made it much more challenging, but overall it was an interesting experience with a lot of issues to cover. By

the time we were done, we were all pretty exhausted and tired of moving around. It was time to call it a day.

Q: And the Washington office you wanted to go back to—

RUKEN: Ha. I had no desire whatsoever to go back to Main State or any Washington office. Some people want to become an ambassador, or a DCM. I did not. Being an ambassador would have been fascinating, but I was not willing to pay the personal costs of getting to that point. Maybe the costs change over time, but during my career, the costs were doing more DC tours, working really rough hours, and doing occasional tours separated from your family in places such as Iraq or in Afghanistan. I had already served in high crime high differential posts and put my family through plenty of challenges. I always tried to pursue jobs that were good for me in terms of challenge and interest, and in regions and countries that worked well for my family. The issue of work-life balance was extremely important to me and them. I did not want to be the dad who missed his kids birthdays or little league games, and I didn't miss any. So that strategy paid off. I think we all left with a nice sense of relief and accomplishment. Then we started a new life in June 2024.

Q: Were you also thinking of your post career activity? Were you thinking of trying to work in a refugee organization or anything like that?

RUKEN: Maybe. We left in June of 2024, and we took over ten weeks to arrive at our house. We traveled first to the West Coast, drove from Seattle to Chicago, where I'm from, then down to South Florida, where at that time we had a house. We have since sold it. By the time we arrived in Florida, it was September 2024.

I was interested in trying a lot of different things. I definitely needed to recharge the batteries first. The refugee climate is really tough nowadays so there aren't many jobs there. But I'm not wanting to work in a traditional full time job these days. I want to travel and pursue photography—I have worked on and off as a professional for many years. I currently have almost 100,000 photos from different places that need digital editing and organizing. I've started a YouTube channel (@thePhotoRoad) and also have accounts on other social media channels. I think it's healthy to try different things.

Q: In parting, then, are there recommendations you would give to the department or to people considering the Foreign Service as a job?

RUKEN: That's a great question. I think for somebody reading this who is interested in joining or about to start a career, many people talk about how important it is to know people in the Department. It's important to know this person, or that person, to be able to get the posting you want. In my opinion, the most important person to know is yourself — and of course your family. Because that's what is going to determine your long-term happiness and the contours of your career. The cool thing about the Foreign Service is that you can have a lot of different types of jobs in it. The downside is it's kind of chaotic, hard to predict, and challenging to plan out. Many times we would plan something, and

something else would happen, and we would wind up in a location and with a job we hadn’t originally targeted. But knowing yourself, what makes you tick, what you like and don't like, what's acceptable to you, and what's not — I think those serve as the guiding principles for what kind of postings you should go for. Similarly for the families, what types of places and schools are going to work for them? Where are their red lines? I'd say the biggest challenge of the entire career is to keep everyone above a minimum and sufficient level of satisfaction and happiness. If it fails for one person in your family, eventually it'll fail for everyone.

Some people want to climb the ladder and see how high they can get. That's fine and we need people like that. Other people want to just have a good time, or just make an impact wherever they are without worrying about promotions. So they might take a different career path. Some people like working in big embassies and some prefer smaller embassies or consulates. Some like working as part of a team, or individually, with or without lots of autonomy. Some like managing a lot of people, whereas others don’t. The advice I'd give somebody is to think seriously about where you fall on these questions, and then pursue your career accordingly. Of course, you're not going to know this coming in, but you're going to learn it along the way.

In my own case, as I mentioned before, I wasn't all that interested in climbing the ladder. I greatly value autonomy at my job. Even though I have enjoyed managing people, it's not something I necessarily seek out. It's not important to me to manage a hundred people in a section, whereas some people want that. I'm okay managing just one, two, or even zero. It's okay for some people to spend most of their work time at the office, and then returning home afterwards. I liked being out of the embassy, and traveling to different cities, as long as it didn’t put too much of a strain on the family.

Some people want to do hardship postings followed by really cushy places. I went for that middle ground. I avoided the cushy places, and I avoided the extreme hardships. That was our sweet spot — edgy, but still good for my family’s interests. I also decided that I didn’t want to live on compounds. I never liked that environment. I like the separation between work and time away.

The other pieces of advice would be to take care of yourself and your family on quality of life issues. For example, if you don't like your house for whatever reason, look around at the other officers’ homes. If you still think you got screwed, then complain and file a petition to change your house. Don't get stuck with a place you don't like because you're afraid to speak up and be branded a complainer. You should speak up and do what's right for you and your family, and they'll likely change it as long as your arguments are valid and you're persistent. At the same time, realize it's not going to be like living in a four bedroom house in Laguna Niguel, California. It is going to leak and smell bad at times, so you have to be realistic, too. But don't be afraid to speak up. Too many people don't speak up. That's an important piece of advice, in my opinion.

Also — and this is something I had to deal with: you have to be aware of and accept the benefits and costs of whatever decisions you make. For example, I knew that my

promotions were going to be slower because of my job selections during my career. When my name wasn't on the promotion list, and other people who I thought were inferior officers were on the list, it was frustrating. But I'm the one who made the choice to do three refugee coordinator jobs in a row. I didn't have to do that. I'm the one who went to INR [Bureau of Intelligence and Research] when maybe working the desk was more of an in-the-box kind of job. I'm the one who took the non-traditional Guinea-Bissau job when I could have just been a political counselor at a larger section supervising more people in a country that got more attention. I made those choices, so I have to live with the fact that maybe I'm going to suffer a little bit on promotions. I'm not saying those jobs robbed me of a promotion every year. Of course not. But I do think they slowed my overall rate of promotion.

So, one has to live with that. If you want to be promoted more rapidly, and you're taking jobs to get you on that path, then maybe you shouldn't feel too miserable if you're working longer hours in a giant embassy. After all, that was your choice. Just as it was my choice to work outside the box.

Q: For the department or the Foreign Service, any recommendations?

RUKEN: For the department, there were too many times during my career I felt like the front offices weren't as good as they should have been. I'm not necessarily aiming this comment at a single person. Nor every person. I just saw it as a general pattern, with exceptions of course. Some of the DCMs and ambassadors I worked with were fantastic, but many others were not.

I should also comment on political appointees for ambassador versus career FSOs appointed as ambassador. I felt that there was no difference in quality between political appointees and careerists. The best guy I worked for was a political appointee, and some of the worst people I've worked with were careerists. Although I would prefer that there be fewer political appointees, I did not notice a difference in quality myself.

I think we should instill different and better values in some of the leadership. Such as, treating everybody with equal respect across the board, always being polite and kind to your staff, and also, to a greater extent, trusting your experts. If you disagree with your experts, then have a friendly, polite disagreement with them. They know you're the boss and their disagreement does not signify disloyalty — if anything, just the opposite. I saw this with my own eyes at various points throughout my career. If somebody disagrees with you and tries to explain why their view is right and your view is wrong, you as a leader should embrace that process, even if ultimately you don't accept their recommendations. It's always better to hear both or all sides of an issue. I was just surprised at how many leaders, including ambassadors, seemed so insecure with their authority.

I always told people who worked under me, don't ever be reluctant to come into my office and say I disagree with you. You are welcome to do that, and it's fine. I actually prefer it. I don't want a bunch of yes-men or yes-women working under me. And I would

tell those I supervised, “I may disagree with you in response, but I will never, ever punish you for airing your views. Let's just disagree in private, not in public.” And lo and behold, at various times, people would come in and disagree with me, and we'd hash it out. Sometimes we even disagree strongly, but we'd talk it out, and nobody would ever leave my office feeling like they had been belittled or ignored. And I would get to hear more alternative viewpoints as a result. Instead, what I would see with Front Offices was people withholding their views out of fear it would cost them in the future. Well that's hurting everybody, including the American taxpayer, and the State Department should know that and do a better job of encouraging viewpoint diversity.

Another development I perceived over the course of my career was that the State Department forgot or lost sight of why people are overseas in the first place, and what we're supposed to be doing while overseas. The core tasks at an embassy or consulate are consular work, political and economic reporting, and public diplomacy. That's it. Everything else in my opinion is support. That's not to criticize the support roles because everybody's job is valuable and important, and every person in that job can make a valuable contribution. Their opinions need to be heard and their recommendations considered — and usually followed! But too often, especially the second half of my career, I felt like we were there to make the lives of Management, IT [Information Technology], and the Security Officers easier.

Sometimes it almost felt as if we were working to support them, to make their jobs easier. I found myself filling out an endless list of forms and requests to get things done, and the amount of government time I spent booking my own business trips and getting reimbursed was utterly ridiculous. All this admin time meant less and less time doing the political reporting, public diplomacy and consular work we are supposed to be doing overseas. It got to be very frustrating, and I know other people were frustrated too, because it was a frequent topic of discussion.

As I said, this is not to belittle anybody in management, IT, or GSO [General Services Officer] because they do extremely valuable work. But these sections all need to be properly staffed so that they can do the work, instead of kicking the work onto the other FSOs because they don't have enough people to fix the IT, streamline our requests for help, or assist us with our business travel, or whatever the case may be.

Now, if you really want to talk about inefficiency and waste, there are thousands and thousands of hours wasted every year on EERs [Employee Evaluation Reports] and the now-absurd bidding process. The length of time it takes to do your evaluations is certifiably ridiculous. The evaluations bounce back and forth among people like a ping pong ball because someone put a comma in the wrong place and other people need to sign off electronically to get that comma moved to the right place. It is absurd, ridiculous, and almost criminal. Now I sound like Elon Musk, and I don't want to ever sound like Elon Musk. But the amount of time and, by extension, taxpayer money that is wasted on producing these evaluations instead of doing things that directly benefit our country needs to be recognized and corrected.

This is equally true for our bidding process. Bidding over the course of my twenty-five years has become extraordinarily complex — and, in my view, no more transparent than before. Far too many statements of intent, essays, phone calls, recommendations from nine people instead of two or three people, and so on. I think it may be less lengthy to get a job in the private sector. And there still are way too many bids that fall through at the last minute for reasons you don't really understand or ever find out about. Although that last minute switcheroo never happened to me, I know plenty of other people who have suffered. There needs to be some genuine, deep and sincere reform about the evaluations and bidding processes — not just rearranging the wording of which boxes to tick — to make the system more efficient, transparent and fair. This is what I will miss least about leaving the State Department.

And finally, in addition to the admin work I've just noted, there's also way too much busy work in the department. There is too much time spent on cables that don't need to be written and on endless back and forth editing products. The time we spent figuring out where to put the comma or whether to capitalize is ten times the length of time that the reader will spend noticing the comma or caring the least bit about it. I'm not writing the cables for English class, I'm writing it so that people in Washington can better understand what is going on and therefore make better policy decisions. So why do we waste so much time on editing? The time we spent dickering around could be spent on writing an entire second cable. I think so many political and econ officers have lost sight on what our purpose is. It’s not to produce a beautiful product, it’s to communicate ideas efficiently.

Lastly, I also don’t understand why there needs to be twelve different congressionally mandated reports on so many different topics, since not all the issues pertain to every country. We need more leverage in either not doing some of these reports because the system wasn't working. It takes time away from getting out in the field, and doing more thoughtful reporting and analysis, in order to craft better foreign policy.

Overall, I had an interesting and varied career, and was happy with it. But these frustrations existed as well. Anyone starting out in the Foreign Service or considering a career should be aware of them.

Q: We’ll end the interview with thanks from ADST for taking part in our oral history program.

End of interview