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Labor Series

AMBASSADOR BEN S. STEPHANSKY

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INTERVIEW

Q: This is Jim Shea. We are at the home of Ambassador Ben Stephansky, who served for a good many years in ARA, which of course is the Latin American Bureau of the Department of State. Ben was our Labor Attaché for five years in Mexico, then went on to serve as a Deputy Assistant Secretary. . .

STEPHANSKY: . . . actually from Mexico I went up to be the Labor Advisor for the hemisphere of Latin America for about two years, before I went out as Ambassador to Bolivia.

How do you normally start [the interview], Jim?

Q: Can you give us a brief background sketch of your life prior to the State Department?

STEPHANSKY: Prior to the State Department, in a way I suppose I had some advantage coming into the labor field not given to everybody, I taught at the University of Chicago from about 1947 to about 1952 during which time I served as Consultant to the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Foreign Affairs, Phil Kaiser. He became Assistant Secretary in 1948 as I remember and succeeded Dave Morse, who had earlier gone to Geneva to be the Secretary General of the ILO. I should also add that my academic work towards my doctorate was all in the field of economics and labor and by the time I entered the Foreign Service as a Foreign Service Reserve Officer I had done all my course work for my doctorate. There had been the usual interruption that we all had because of the [Second World] War and I had only my Ph.D. thesis to complete which I had started and was continuing to do and did get to finish at the University of Chicago during the time that I was there.

I was at Chicago actively teaching, I think that I have indicated, for about five to six years. And it was while there and serving as Consultant that I really got the bug about the Foreign Service. There was a Labor Attaché Conference, it may have been the very first one, in 1950 for the Hemisphere and Phil took me along to Havana, where the conference was being held. Since the time that I was born in Russia and was brought across when I was about a year and a half old, I had never been out of the country until I went to Havana if you call that being out of the country. When I got there, I found that any number of people whom I had known in other aspects of their careers were Labor Attachés. I am thinking particularly of Ed Vallon, whom I got to know very well before he went into the Foreign Service. He was Labor Attach in Argentina, as I remember. There were a number of others as well and I really got ignited by the idea of possibly going overseas. It didn't happen until 1952, when it was Phil who said, "Now look, you've done enough mischief up here in Washington as a Consultant. Why don't you see what mischief you can do out in the field?" I said, "Well, fine." So we started to look around for a possible post. I took leave for a year and got somebody to substitute for me at Chicago, where by the way I was also teaching not only in the college but also in the Industrial-Relations School there. It was easy enough to get a substitute to fill in for me for a year's leave and that was what it was intended to be, a year's leave of absence. Well, the place where I really wanted to go was Israel at that time, but as I recall it was Sidney Hillman's son-in-law, who was serving in Czechoslovakia around that time. . . I forget his name. Do you remember his name?

Q: I believe that his name was Milton Fried.

STEPHANSKY: That's right. It was Milton Fried. Milton had been serving in Czechoslovakia and there was a good deal of disorder in Czechoslovakia. I think he was being shot at at that time. They wanted to get him out quickly so they put him into Israel. So the one place that we had slotted to fit my interest was filled. Here I was with a year's leave of absence already arranged, with a substitute for a year and at that particular

moment in 1952 with no place to go. They thought about Vienna, but interestingly enough, it was suggested to me that Vienna was not a good place because Vienna was still surrounded virtually by Soviet military and it was suggested, somewhere in the State Department, that if I got picked up for one reason or another since I was born in Russia, I could be held who knows for how long. I was still as far as Russian law was concerned a Soviet citizen.

So it just happened then that Mexico opened up. I didn't want to go to Mexico and Ruth Hughes, who was, I think, sort of a long time Mexican Desk Officer in the State Department . . . I think that she shared that from a different point of view. I don't think that she wanted me to go to Mexico. Mexico was a rather preferred post, I learned later, and neither she nor someone else who was the next above her wanted me to go, because they had somebody else in mind. Well, finally, whatever it was was tipped in my favor of going to Mexico. I drove down there and learned a little Spanish on the way down. I didn't speak a word of Spanish until I got to Mexico. I am happy to say that within about a year, largely because I traveled around the first year almost exclusively with labor leaders, I learned a lot of Spanish. I had a teacher -- in those years we had to pay for our own language lessons -- but I finagled a half hour early in the morning from the Embassy, and I paid for the other half hour. That went on for about a year. I had a wonderful teacher. I will never forget her suggestion to me to make sure that I listened carefully on these trips I was taking with the labor leaders. She by the way was the mother-in-law of the Secretary-General of the Musicians Union in Mexico. Her daughter was a fine pianist. She had taught a good deal of Spanish and English at Mexico City College and for a period of time in California, and she had little tricks as to how to learn the language. One was to listen very hard to conversations and be sure to pick up words that are of interest. Anyway, I listened a great deal and I picked up a lot of vocabulary. I got to learn later what she called, "palabrotas." That was colorful "labor speak." I remember coming back and telling her, "Here I've got some new words for you" and I would repeat them and she would blush red and she would say, "Oh, those aren't nice words." But I learned a lot of Spanish and within a year or so I was making speeches in Spanish and by the time I left in five years I was scoring bilingual. I loved the language. That was the process by which I got into Latin America. Do you have any questions?

Q: Ben, could you tell us a little something about the CTM, the Mexican Trade Union Confederation?

STEPHANSKY: It was then, as it is now, with a lot of differences of course, the predominate sector of the labor movement. It was almost the exclusive one. I mean there were a number of smaller labor centers and I think partly Mexican politics seemed to dictate that you just didn't want to have one large labor center without some semblance of competition that they could utilize to sort of keep the CTM moderate. The CTM actually was formed, as I remember my history, in 1934 by Lazaro Cardenas as the labor sector of the PRI Before that it was the CROM, which was the big labor movement. The CROM was the so-called regional labor movement of Mexico and the term "regional" is very interesting. It really had anarchistic, anarcho-syndicalist antecedents and there were

several [similar] movements in Latin America, the Argentine movement and the Chilean movement particularly -- these were the two larger ones. The Chilean was the Chilean regional labor movement and the Argentine was the Argentine regional [labor movement] and the Mexican was the Mexican regional [labor movement]. This was part of the ideological expression that at some given dramatic moment there would come the revolution, the anarchistic revolution, when world labor would take over, striking at the same time. It was the great "general strike" that would eventually come to rule the world. I don't think that anybody particularly believed it at that time, but certainly the whole notion of a kind of an international brotherhood was reflected in that terminology.

The leader of the CROM was Luis Morones, a wonderful and interesting guy, who met his fate because he had a strong movement (and as a matter of fact he had very close relations with Samuel Gompers of the AFL) and it was the movement that joined the Revolution in 1913. The Mexican Revolution broke out in 1910. The CROM organized what were known as the Red Battalions that participated in the Revolution and really became the predominant labor and political movement for the next decade and a half. Then it fell into bad times. Morones became too ambitious and I think he was done away with by those who were emerging as new political leaders like Calles and Obregon. During the 1920s there was a period of continued instability following the Revolution. Carranza was assassinated. He was the President under whom Mexico's constitution was adopted in 1919. Obregon was assassinated and Moroes was suspected and that began the decline of the CROM. It is a long and interesting story but I shouldn't go into it other than the fact that this was a period when CROM disappeared and disappeared partly or maybe largely because Morones had presidential ambitions and they didn't work out and the other political figures did away with him. I don't mean physically, but he became a minor figure.

The important "second revolution" in a sense that occurred in Mexico was with Lazaro Cardenas, the great President who is still revered as one of the great popular figures in Mexican history. He wanted to get rid of the remnants of the CROM for a new era of stability. Furthermore, he was quite worried about Vicente Lombardo Toledano, who was a Marxist, Communist. . . I don't know if he was a Communist in the traditional or orthodox sense, but he was the man who was reaching for power with a labor base. Lazaro Cardenas then virtually handpicked five leaders; they were called the "five little wolves," los cinco lobitos, of whom Fidel Valasquez was one. Two others were the Sanchez-Madariaga brothers. That made three. There were a fourth and a fifth. The fifth died fairly soon afterwards, but all together these five with Fidel Valasquez -- the three main ones were the Sanchez-Madariaga brothers and Fidel -- they formed the CTM The CTM in its earliest structure was immediately incorporated as the labor sector of the new political party that Lazaro Cardenas established. The new political party was the Mexican Revolutionary Party. It was Partido Revolucionario de Mexico at that time. Later on it was changed to PRI, Partido Revolucionario Institucional, but that didn't change the relationship. The CTM became in a formalistic sense the labor sector of the major political party, which also had a peasant sector, sector campesino; there was a sector popular, which was sort of middle-class, intelligentsia, and businessmen of various kinds

who felt that they wanted to affiliate to that sector popular. The federal government workers formed their own Federacion de Trabajadores al Servicio del Estado. It did not affiliate with the CTM, but it was a brother movement and very close to it. They both together mainly constituted the labor sector at that time.

There were three very important national unions at that time, the Miners, the Textile Workers and the Railroad Workers. The Textile Workers and the Miners came in with the CTM as part of a very powerful federation. The Textile Workers stayed with the CTM They were one of the pioneer movements by the way. There were many strikes prior to the Revolution of 1910. The most important ones were the Textile Workers' strikes and the Miners Union's strikes and they sort of signaled the oncoming Revolution. This was in the early 1900s between 1906 and 1907 and 1910. Subsequently the Miners and the Railroad Workers were made independent unions. Again, I think it was partly that these were two very powerful unions. Better separate them so that the CTM doesn't become the full monopoly of labor power. There was very much that kind of play in the picture at all times. The CTM therefore was born essentially out of the "second revolution" -- you can put that in quotes -- whereas the CROM, its predecessor, was born out of the "first revolution." Both labor centrals, the CROM as the first one and the CTM as the second central, formed the stream of Mexico's modern labor history. It was important to get to know this history, and I found I could catch up. There's a good deal of literature on it. They were both really creatures of what was called the Mexican Revolution, which one had to come to understand.

The Mexican Revolution for many, many years was Mexico's nationalism in the modern era. This was throwing off the feudal past and in a rather disorderly way at times installing basic reforms. During the 1920s there were the Cristero movements in which the Church was badly punished. It was the great landholder and while the 1910 Revolution really dispossessed the Church of all of its landholdings, it really took Lazaro Cardenas to nail down a program of land reform by restoring an ancient indigenous communal institution, which was the ejido. The ejido was the great peasant movement of the Revolution, ejido being a kind of cooperative. The land belonged to the Government. Peasants who needed land would acquire what they needed. They lived and operated as a cooperative. Much of the life of these cooperatives was dictated by the kinds of products that were being produced, grains in the middle of the [country] and corn, of course. Mexico used to be self-sufficient in grains and corn and other similar products in the heartland of Mexico. Then there was the grand ejido of Yucatan, where what was produced were the henequen plants and the rope fiber. It was Cardenas' prize ejido.

These ejidos were very close to the labor movement. One of the other land reforms that Cardenas advanced was what were called the peqeños proprietarios. They broke up the big haciendas, the large land holdings of the church, and a good deal of the land was given not only to the peasants through the ejidos but also in the form of associations of peqeños proprietarios, relatively small but still consequential parcels of land that the asociacions ran and managed. They became a very important part of the agricultural changes that were taking place in Mexico. The CTM therefore was the blue collar sector

of workers, the basic industrial workers, the more "revolutionary" if you please, because as industries were expropriated in mining, and in railroads, where there had been foreign ownership and therefore a good deal of nationalism came into the picture. The petroleum industry was expropriated in 1937 and as more oil was discovered the Oil Workers Union became a very powerful one. The main unions in the CTM were as time went on in all industries, petroleum, textiles, transportation, and over the road transportation.

I remember the story of how the over the road transportation came into being. It was a fascinating story. There is extensive road transportation in Mexico. Mexico, by the way, -- one has to be impressed with it, if you have been in other countries, especially as I served later in Bolivia. -- was a great road builder, which means they had a lot of highway transportation besides the railroads. It is an integrated country basically by highways. Later on of course the railroads north and south on the West Coast and the East were part of the network, but the roads are about the best I have seen any place in Latin America. This network of roads meant that there was an over the road transport union. Its headquarters were in Guadalajara. It started out essentially as a center for the treatment of venereal disease. Truck drivers moving around in Mexico encountered venereal disease and recognized the importance of treatment and hygiene. The union pioneered in educating workers about venereal disease. It became a very important union and made a basic contribution. I remember that in all the travels that I did there was always respect for the transportistas. Is there anything else I should tell you about? I'm going on too long, aren't I? I won't do so much history next.

Q: Ben, to conclude the historical part, can you tell us a little bit about Lombardo Toledano?

STEPHANSKY: He is an interesting example of the way in which the major predominant political party of Mexico dealt with its potential enemies or its potential competitors. In some cases the PRI confronted them directly, like the PAN in the more conservative north. There was in 1952 when I first arrived the aftermath of a very heated election earlier in 1951. The Federation of Popular Parties, Federacion de Partidos Populares, had almost won in the Federal District. One of the interesting observations I made on the first trips that I took was that the CTM had a group of people going out to help disarm the country. They called it, "depistolazar al pais." There had been a good deal of violence.

The strategy was different for Lombardo Toledano, whose left wing ideology appealed to people who wanted to be more revolutionary than the Mexican Revolutionary Party, which, the more it established itself, began to develop the more conservative character of a stable institution. Well, the way they handled Lombardo Toledano was essentially to co-opt him. They let him organize a party which he called the Partido Popular and he published a newspaper. Both of those were subsidized by the Government. Lombardo Toledano, the great radical, was subsidized and, as it were, domesticated. For Mexico, during the time I was there and I think for some time before, Lombardo was not a real competitor to the Mexican Revolution. Perhaps with the way in which they co-opted him, he was sort of a lightning rod. Every once in a while he would seem to be voicing some

vigorous opposition, but I think that he often held back, particularly in the newspaper that he ran, and the varying tones of that newspaper essentially represented the degree to which he was being played and was willing to play. He wanted of course always to appear to be an independent revolutionary.

When he was perhaps most active was during World War II. He moved up and down the hemisphere and because the Soviet Union and the U.S. were allies, he was going to country after country and using the alliance as a way in which to attract for the future a following that was more radical than what liberals would have liked that following to be. As a matter of fact Serafino Romualdi was doing a good deal of debating with him in the hemisphere at that time. Serafino, as you know, later became the representative of the AFL in Latin America. Lombardo Toledano was policed by Serafino effectively. Of course you couldn't find a more vigorous, harder, tougher articulate anti-Communist than Serafino. So he went after Lombardo and they never formed a relationship. I think he could have had a relationship. I think that Lombardo was always looking to have some kind of relationship, but Serafino wouldn't have it. So Lombardo was not a factor in the labor field or in the political field during the time that I was there, and I think that was the time that saw the decline of Lombardo and what he represented, which was to graft a Marxist ideology on an indigenous, populist potential for revolution, not only in Mexico but in other places.

Q: Thank you, Ben. Could you tell us a little bit about the ambiente at the Embassy when you got there. Who was the Ambassador, the DCM, and the Political Counselor? What kind of a briefing did you get? Did you consider it to be adequate?

STEPHANSKY: There may never be such a thing as an adequate briefing. The character of the Embassy was pretty much in part dictated by the times. We were in the Cold War. And dictated in part by the vagaries of U.S. politics. When I first got there, the Ambassador was a former well-known mayor of New York.

Q: I believe his name was Bill O'Dwyer.

STEPHANSKY: Yes, and Bill was a lovable guy, but I got there in the summer of 1952, which was the year that Eisenhower was elected and therefore Bill had to leave. In the relatively short time we had together, we spent a good deal of time chatting, having coffee out in the streets here and there, and he, of course, was simply waiting to be succeeded. He was succeeded by Ambassador Francis White. Francis White, may he rest in peace, was a very conservative man. He came out of Baltimore, the Baltimore Hunt Club, and during the 1920s he was, if my recollection is correct, the top man for Latin American Affairs in the State Department. After the election of FDR, he left and he became a leader in the Foreign Bondholders Association with obvious interest in U.S. investment in Latin America. Francis White came back with Dwight Eisenhower and was made Ambassador to Mexico. He brought with him a man, Jack Cates, who was a lawyer, and what he wanted Jack to do -- it drove him to desperation virtually -- was to reopen any number of cases which he felt had not been properly settled during the period of the Revolution.

There were still claims going back to 1910-20 involving property rights and other unsettled claims by American business, which he became aware of from his activity in the Bondholders Association. Well, Jack Cates eventually did not get to be used as he wanted largely because Jack, I think, persuaded him that it was not really the wise thing to do in Mexico at that particular stage. This was after all the Mexico in which nationalization of petroleum and other industries had taken place, which had been supported by a number of important American spokesmen, notably Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening. Mexico was very nationalistic and any suggestion that you were going to open up thirty-year-old cases was an anathema to them. So Jack Cates' job sort of diminished. He later headed a Rockefeller Latin American institute in New York.

Francis White was of the old school. When he presented his credentials, he wore a brown corduroy suit and yellow spats. I remember Bill Culbertson, who was the DCM at that time and had wanted very much to be the Ambassador and who retired shortly after Francis White was appointed. Bill, the man from Maryland, I remember him coming back from the credentials ceremony and kind of shaking his head. He said, "Gee, that uniform! He's put diplomacy back about 50 years."

Francis White had some other rather less likable attributes. The Canadians had at the time that he came a Chargé, who -- I won't mention his name -- according to protocol, had come to make his call on our new ambassador. After that he [the Canadian Charge] came to see me briefly. We had become fairly close friends. And I remember him looking quite shaken. I said, "What's the matter?" He said, "Well, I've got to tell you something," and he closed the doors. He said, "You know, I came to pay my respects and we began to talk the usual small talk. Where have you been? What have you done?" The Canadian had said, "I served in New York with the United Nations and also in Washington. And he remarked, 'So you have been in New York and Mexico! Well, he said to me,'" according to the Canadian, Francis White said to him,"'You know, I'm from Baltimore, half way between the niggers and the Jews.' "

Now that's the kind of climate that emanated from our leadership at that particular time. Francis White became a very unloved man at that time, not so much because of that sort of thing. He was a difficult person. He had a great deal of difficulty with his wife, who, I think, had some emotional difficulties, which were quite severe. He served about three years. One of the first things he did when he came to Mexico was to take down Bill O'Dwyer's photo. At the U.S. Embassy in Mexico there had been the custom that former ambassadors' pictures are strung up where you could walk along and see what array of ambassadorial talent had served in the past. Well, he took down Bill O'Dwyer's picture and said something about corruption. That got everybody annoyed. I remember when Francis White's successor, Bobby Hill, was appointed. Bobby Hill was collared by Lyndon Johnson before he left Washington, who said, "I know what happened down there with that picture and the first thing I want you do" -- and Bobby Hill did it -- "is to put that picture right back up."

It didn't bother Bill [O'Dwyer]. He was having other troubles. He was being divorced then by his young wife and was wondering what he was going to do next. We were sitting outside having coffee. I had been walking down the street, and he grabbed me. He said, "You know that in a few days I'm going to be leaving. Come on, have a cup of coffee." So I sat down with him and he said, "I'm waiting to meet a friend." Well, in about 15 minutes a priest came by. He had come down from New York and wanted to talk to Bill. Bill made it clear that I would not be part of that conversation. I was getting up to go when the priest, looking hard at Bill, said, "Bill, are you a good Catholic?" Well, Bill just reared back and roared. After a minute or two of heavy laughter, he said, "Father, hell no, I'm not a good Catholic. The rules are too tough." That was Bill. A great guy. I can understand, by the way, that a big city mayor, who understands minority groups and who has lived in an ambience of different cultures and different groups, can often make a good ambassador, as Bill made during the time that he was in Mexico. I think a big city mayor of that kind is a source of talent. Keep that in mind when you become President.

Q: I followed O'Dwyer's career with great interest. I'm originally from Connecticut and I also spent many years in Latin America. I know that he started off studying to be a priest in Salamanca, Spain, and he left that and then when he went from Ireland to New York and worked in the subways, he did speak fluent Spanish. How did. . .

STEPHANSKY: Let me just break in to say that later on Dick Rubottom was Assistant Secretary [of State] and he asked me if I saw Bill. I said, "Well, I saw him initially. I didn't see him afterwards, and he said, "Well, if you do, tell Bill that I was in Grenada, where he and I were together, and I was just thinking about him." I thought that was a very sweet thing for Rubottom to have me tell Bill O'Dwyer when and if I saw him. I never got to pass that message along to him.

Q: How did Ambassador Francis White look on you as the Labor Attaché?

STEPHANSKY: Well, that's a good question. I remember asking Ed Vallon whom I had known years before, "Ed, what is it like when you work in an embassy?" I'd had no experience whatever getting into an embassy. He said, "Well, it's like any other office, Ben, except that in the labor field, you're always going to be looked upon as a little bit queer, especially by the conventional side of the Foreign Service, which had not then as yet been very familiar with the labor function." I'm talking now about 1952. There had been maybe one or two labor attachés. The first one was in Chile, as I remember -- Horowitz. Was that right?

Q. *In Chile Dan Horowitz was first assigned there in 1943 and at the same time John Fishburn was in Buenos Aires.*

STEPHANSKY: We didn't have much experience.

Q: We certainly didn't. Then of course we had Sam Berger in London in 1945.

STEPHANSKY: Sammy was not a Labor Attaché so much. (Sammy was my teacher at Wisconsin by the way.) Sammy was Averell Harriman's Labor Advisor, but for all intents and purposes he was what a Labor Attaché would be. As it turned out when the Labor Government won right after the War and Churchill lost the election, there was only one man who knew that labor movement and that was Sammy. He knew it well and he knew it intimately because of the work he was doing. Some of his work was to try to persuade the Brits not to be very sensitive about the fact that an American private in the Army was making five times what a high level civil servant was making. These are the types of problems that Sammy used to tell me about. So, to come back to the point, it was a relatively new field after all and Ed Vallon was reflecting that. He was saying, "You know, in my experience, Ben, you're going to be looked upon just a little bit as the kind of guy who is playing on the wrong side of the street. You are going to be regarded as a little odd, so don't do the kinds of things that will make you look even worse. In other words, be aware of the fact that you are in an ambience where misunderstandings can very readily arise about what it is you are doing and who you are and what your function is.

I recall that when Francis White went to present his credentials with all that array of diplomatic attire that I described a minute or so ago, he was picking out the people who should accompany him. I was really in some respects a senior officer, because I was a grade three even though I was Reserve. In the old classification that begins to be the senior class. It depends of course a great deal on whom the ambassador really wants to take along. He put together quite a retinue. (End of Side A, Tape One)

Q: Please continue with your activities. How did your fellow officers receive you?

STEPHANSKY: On the other side [of the tape] I was saying that the Ambassador when he went to present his credentials told the ICA Administrator, ICA stood for International Cooperation Agency at that time, Denny Moore. . . -- What a wonderful man, a very bright and interesting guy with long experience and an excellent agricultural economist, one of the most brilliant men we had in the Embassy. -- Well, he told Denny Moore and he told me and maybe one or two others, "I can't take you along for my presentation of credentials because you are not 'Foreign Service.' " So that is where we were placed in the scheme of things during his administration. I might say what saved me very substantially and what saved the Embassy for him was the new Deputy Chief of Mission, Bill Snow. Bill died just last year, I think. Bill was Ambassador later to Burma and Paraguay and I think to Sweden. I think Gene Martinson, one of our Labor Attachés, served with Bill. Bill was sophisticated. He was solid and Bill was the one that stood as a buffer between Ambassador White and those of us who had our work to do and Bill understood how important it was to give us the protection that we got from him.

Now, how did I relate to other people in the Embassy? That was what you were asking essentially. It is very interesting. That in part, you see, is also a function of what Mexico is like. In the Mexican political system the labor movement is right in the heart of it. The PRI, which used to be the Revolutionary Party of Mexico (PRM) and was changed to the Institutional Revolutionary Party, was highly politicized. I got to know practically every

important political figure in Mexico and remembering very well the lesson I had been taught by Ed Vallon, and which I was learning from other sources as well, I found that what I could do was not only take care of my own immediate labor function, my contacts, my labor programs, my reporting about labor and labor's vicissitudes in the history of that particular time, but I could also be a political asset to the Political Section. I am worked with our political attachés. I could hang around Los Pinos, for example, which is like hanging around the White House, because the Secretary of Labor, with whom I became very close friends, Lopez Mateos, took me there often. There I met many senators and I met every cabinet member. You can imagine that I found that I could be of service to our Political Section and as it turned out on several occasions I really was.

The economic side, since I am an economist, I found was manageable directly. Certainly I was interested in the labor force and in employment and unemployment, and I participated in two of the negotiations involving the migratory labor relations to the United States, the Bracero Program. I wasn't formally but I asked to become informally, and later it was formalized [that I would] be a part of the negotiating team on the two Bracero agreements: the one I found when I got there [and] four years later there was another one. That's the kind of thing that became quite an important attribute of my work.

One complex area of my work, which I shared with other labor attachés, was the relationship to the U.S. labor movement and its relations in turn with the international labor movement. One of the important things that happened shortly after I arrived, and I had something to do with it, involved the headquarters of the inter-American regional organization of the ICFTU, which was called the ORIT, after it was transferred from Cuba to Mexico. When the ORIT, was first organized in Latin America, there was a real donnybrook, all the details of which maybe others can tell you about who were closer to it. It was about in 1949 or 1950 or thereabouts that there was discussion of how to set up the ORIT. The ORIT's headquarters were set up in Cuba, and atypically the Cuban labor leadership also became the leadership of the ORIT. And the rest of Latin American labor, particularly Mexico, felt betrayed, because they felt they had had a commitment that at least the headquarters if not the secretary general's spot was going to be Mexican. That didn't take place. And for about two or three years thereafter Serafino Romualdi was persona non grata in Mexico because they felt that Serafino had double crossed them. I don't know that that was the case, but that's the way they felt.

The CIO unions had a representative there, Dr. Ernest Schwartz, and he was on very good terms with Mexico, and he helped fill a void because that gave us a kind of direct purchase between Mexican labor and U.S. labor. When Batista overthrew the then parliamentary government in 1952 in Cuba, it was untenable for ORIT to retain its headquarters there. They had to move and so this is how I got involved. The details are rather intricate except that it was Serafino who pushed very hard for me to say the right things to the Mexicans to soften them up, that indeed the United States' labor movement really wanted to give Mexico the headquarters, and when I first broached that, I got a lot of skepticism in Mexico. In part what Serafino was worried about was that he did not want anybody else to be telling the Mexicans, certainly not Ernest Schwartz. There was a

lot of competition between Ernest Schwartz on the CIO side [and Serafino Romualdi]. So in 1953 the headquarters was transferred to Mexico City. What that did was to give me a box seat on the labor movement of the entire hemisphere. Mexico became a vital center of the Latin American labor movement.

Q: At that time were the principal officers of ORIT Cuban?

STEPHANSKY: No, what happened at the time that the headquarters were shifted to Mexico was that the leadership also changed from Cuban to another nationality and it was a Costa Rican who became the Secretary General. That was Luis Alberto Monge, who later was President of Costa Rica. Luis came as a young man from Geneva and the ILO [He was] very bright and he took over with a good deal of flair. I must say he could never have succeeded if Fidel Valasquez had not given him all the tutelage that he really very gracefully and very graciously received from Fidel, avoiding all the kinds of booby traps that you might fall into, certainly in Mexico and rather good advice about the rest of Latin America. The number two man during that time was an Aprista from Peru named Arturo Jauregui. Arturo, I think, came directly from the Aprista labor movement. I got to know the Aprista labor movement. I got to know the Venezuelan labor movement, because its top leaders were using ORIT as exiles at that time. Perez Jimenez was the dictator in Venezuela at the time. And a number of the other movements similarly were in the picture. The Peronista movement was, by the way, born in Mexico. During the time that Mexico was on the outs with the AFL, they played host to the Peronista international, ATLAS. It was formed and organized in Mexico and with Mexico playing the gracious host to a new competitor labor movement, whom they later had to watch because they were really quite aggressive.

Well, I guess what I am saying, and I will cut this part short, what comes into the picture is a whole hemispheric perspective. There, the Peronistas are working to find a place for themselves, a lot of the smaller labor movements found that it was very useful for them to come to Mexico and find their relationships with ORIT, and with the other labor leaders. The board meetings between ORIT and the U.S. were always very fruitful in the sense that the U.S. leaders would come down and get to know something of the rest of Latin America. For a long time, Bill Schnitzler, who I think came from the Bakers Union, was the representative of the AFL-CIO.

Q: Ben, could you tell us a little bit about Don Fidel Valasquez?

STEPHANSKY: I can tell you a lot about Don Fidel. During my five years there, we became very close. Their labor movement was highly centralized, which is of course following the pattern of the politics in Mexico itself. At the same time Fidel was a fascinating person who loved two things: to travel and he loved his country. He was a virtual encyclopedia of information. He himself started as a very young man. He was a milk driver, a lechero, as they were called. Interestingly enough one of the first stories he told me was the way in which they would take the milk from the pasteurization plant and find the various places where it was reasonably safe to dilute the milk with water so that

they could get twice as much for a liter, among other little tricks they had to pull to make the grade and make a living. Fidel didn't drink. He smoked cigars. He loved Cuban cigars. When I went a couple of times to Cuba, I bought him boxes of El Nacional cigars, a very good cigar. I never liked cigars but he loved cigars and that was really his great vice. The taste for cigars was something that was almost inbred. His wife was a Cubana, Nora. A wonderful woman by the way. She and my wife became good friends.

Fidel was a long-suffering guy. In Mexico the labor leadership had to serve two masters. One is the party and one is its own membership. And how to balance those vital interests required a great deal of grace and a great deal of skill and Fidel over the years became the great master of mediating the interests of labor without selling out. There were those who believed that he was a sell out. I don't think so at all. I think that he really had to recognize the central importance of the PRI, of Mexican politics and its place as the predominant Mexican political party. I don't think that Mexico could have worked in those years if it didn't have that kind of party which was essentially set up to "bargain collectively" with the United States. We were the overwhelming power then and you needed to have total solidarity of the Mexican political leadership and Mexico's labor leadership felt that it needed to have the solidarity of labor on the one hand but in order to serve it well you had to understand where the real political power lay. Fidel knew that, knows that, I think, to this day. He's what? 95 years old now.

I saw him about two years ago. We had a nice long chat, reminisced. He's very sharp still. It was with Fidel's knowledge that I got to know most of the other labor leaders as well. He encouraged it. He never asked me anything that would suggest that I should spy for him or gossip about anybody. The other labor leaders respected him. They were quite suspicious of each other. I would say they were quite reluctant to have a close relationship with each other. I remarked, I remember, to the Miners' leader at one point, I said, "Como es que? How is it that in that meeting we attended I didn't see you guys getting together very much? You all looked toward Fidel. You all looked towards Fidel's group." He said, "Ben, es que nosotros somos muy discomfiados." They knew where the power was and they weren't about to rock the boat and they didn't have that degree of confidence in each other, because all of them sort of had a piece of Fidel and Fidel, I think, had the job of keeping them all relatively happy.

There were the beginnings of collective bargaining in Mexico. The labor legislation set basic standards, but I remember the Secretary of Labor at one point, Lopez Mateos, who later was elected President, was explaining to visitors who were coming through and they all had managed somehow to brief themselves on Mexican labor legislation, the famous labor provision in the Mexican Constitution, Section 123, which set forth in great length all the rights of labor. It was a great Magna Carta. Of course it will take years and years and years for everything to be realized. This was of course an example of the Latin American method. You legislate the world and then little by little, if you stay alive, you make your gains within the structure of those ideals. The Secretary of Labor, I remember on one occasion saying, "You are now telling me of course and I agree with you what a great charter we have in Section 123 of the Constitution, but let me tell you that

increasingly the relationship between Mexican labor and employers is more and more a matter that is taking place between the two. It is not exclusively that, but if you want to know what the law says, that's one side of it, but what it does is also to facilitate and permit that there be a greater area of understanding between labor and the employers." Now that was already beginning to happen at the time that I was there. Fidel wanted that to happen because in many respects it made his job a lot more sensible.

What always amazed me about Fidel was what an extraordinary amount of knowledge he had. He was great fun to drive with. He knew so much. Every place we went there was always an anecdote. There was always a background. There was always an interesting story to tell. The very first day, the very first trip I made with him, we got to the Capitol of the State of Mexico and he said, "You know, you are going to learn a lot about this country but what is most important about this particular place is that with the onset of the Revolution, this is the place where we no longer killed each other. We just knocked each other unconscious." What else would you like to know?

Q: Was Fidel a relatively clean fellow, because we all hear about the rampant corruption in Mexico, the mordida?

STEPHANSKY: Oh, the corruption is rampant all right, but I must confess I never was able to establish any involving Fidel. He lived a pretty good middle class life, nothing luxurious. I don't know, I could never grasp the picture from all the labor leaders. There were some that were notably quite wealthy and had big cars and casas chicas and made a big show of it and so on. Fidel never toyed around with any woman in the five years I knew him and I have never heard of any since. He was a calm man; he was about your size by the way, a great sense of humor. A man who, I say, didn't drink, loved cigars, did not womanize and I make that point because many of the other leaders, as so many of the other Mexicans, were great womanizers. To him it was no show of prestige to have any other woman on the string, not at all. He was very intelligent and while he had no formal education, nevertheless, he was quite well read and particularly in Mexican history and with a good and interesting curiosity about U.S. history. I gave him quite a few books as was the case with the Secretary of Labor, who was of course a well trained and educated man academically speaking, but both of them really were ready to learn, wanted to understand and in that sense it was for me a Godsend to have people who didn't have any strong prejudice. They let me know when they didn't like what we were doing. When, for example, in 1954 the Castille Armas takeover of Guatemala [occurred], and it was so transparent from where we were, they let me have it. And as a matter of fact this was a very critical point in the history of ORIT -- I'll come back to that -- but they just didn't like it at all and let me know. This was not a matter of any preconceived prejudice. The notion that we were going to just go in and knock off the country's government because it didn't suit us, was unacceptable.

Q: That was Arbenz, wasn't it?

STEPHANSKY: That was Arbenz. That was around the time I got to know Lazaro Cardenas. One of the first things he talked to me about was, "Hey," he says, "Why can't you" -- meaning you, your government -- "why can't the United States live with these small struggling places that are trying to find themselves and always fit them into some context. . . " -- they didn't call it the Cold War -- ". . . of conflict with the Soviet Union? It just doesn't become a powerful nation to be on the lookout and to just stamp on a small country like Guatemala, which presents no danger to anybody, and, more importantly, even if it was for a moment, we were 'dangerous' at the time of the Mexican Revolution." He says, " What I am worried about is this attitude that I see the United States expressing. I worry in retrospect that had this damned situation of the U.S.-Soviet [conflict] been around during the time of the Mexican Revolution, we would have been invaded. We would have been constantly tampered with and hassled." That's the kind of reaction you would get from Mexican labor and I felt rather privileged to be able to listen to their most candid reactions.

Q: Well, thank you very much, Ben. I hope that we will be able to continue with this in the very near future.

STEPHANSKY: Okay, there's quite a bit more but we will see and you let me know when we can and I'll see how we can fit it in. There are two or three more important episodes to cover. Let me simply say, by the way, that not only the ORIT, not only Latin American labor itself coming into view with ORIT and Atlas gave me an interesting view also of the reactions to the Peronistas, what I was witness to in Mexico was the onset of the Alliance for Progress, which I take up in my own oral history. Milton Eisenhower and I had several long talks during that particular time and the onset of the Alliance for Progress, which I saw at that particular point, I lived through it in Bolivia and, as a matter of fact, lived through the earlier part of it also when I was Labor Advisor. That was when the hemisphere was catching fire. I was on that famous trip with Nixon when he was mobbed in Venezuela and so on, so that it is interesting how the labor function could draw you in to what constitutes the vital texture of the history of a country and of the region.

End of interview